Methodology of the History of Philosophy: A Different Approach to the Philosophy of Heraclitus

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is twofold: First, it focuses on the ongoing debates concerning the methodology of the history of philosophy. Second, it demonstrates its findings on a specific case – philosophy of Heraclitus of Ephesus. The author maintains that the history of philosophy is a member of a broader set of disciplines and sciences – the historical disciplines. As such, the history of philosophy shares some obstacles and methods with those disciplines. The paper follows proposals from philosophy of historiography and tries to show how those proposals are manifested in the work of Quentin Skinner. His approach is summarized with respect to recent development and then applied to the fragments of Heraclitus of Ephesus. It is argued that politics and ethics had an important place in Heraclitus' philosophy and that it is worthwhile to try to recognize the situation in Ephesus, which is referenced by Heraclitus many times. Conclusions from this endeavor may provide some non-trivial interpretations of Heraclitus.*

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OUTSET

The primary goal of this paper is to engage in methodological discussions about the history of philosophy with special regard to the history of pre-Socratic philosophy. The first three parts of this paper will be purely theoretical and they will try to establish the method we are going to use in the last part. Our method will be based mainly on the ideas of Quentin Skinner[1] but we will discuss also his sources of inspiration and his critics. The final test of this method will be the application of this theory outside its usual field. We will try to draw attention to some specific parts and problems embodied in the philosophy of Heraclitus of Ephesus. There, outside the theory's "comfort zone", we can see whether the methodological discussion in the history of philosophy truly matters. The first three parts will help us outline the method we are going to apply to the main historical subject of this paper: Heraclitus of Ephesus, who: "*By the ambivalent and enigmatic quality of his utterance he lends himself as few authors do to the free play of interpretation*."[2]

The fourth part (4) will implement our methodological findings. We will look at the philosophy of Heraclitus

1 The latest book by Quentin Skinner which deals with the methods of history of ideas at length is Skinner 2002: *Visions of Politics. Volume 1, Regarding Method*. It contains many revisions and replies to critics who mostly take into account his *Meaning an Understanding in the History of Ideas* (1969).

2 Kahn 1979, p. 87.

of Ephesus. We will follow some of the modern interpretations and we will try to apply the previously introduced method in hope of getting some non-trivial insight into Heraclitus' philosophy. This part may not be as thorough as standard interpretations of this inspiring philosopher but it will serve as final demonstration of applicability of our method.

(1) In the first part specifically, we will discuss the current situation and the relation between the bulk of methodological studies and the diversity of historical interpretations in the history of philosophy. Are those methodological studies relevant to the everyday practice of historians? In which way? There are many different schools and traditions of interpretation, which are constantly struggling to get attention of historianspractitioners. How can we explain the multiplicity of competitive approaches and how should we stay relevant, if we are going to join the debate?

(2) The second part will inquire into the problems connected with historical context and its definition. What can we call proper historical context? How do we discover such entity and how do we verify it? There are many different contexts we can choose to follow when we are focusing on interpreting the ancient philosophers. Contextualism is usually shown as an opposing view to perennial approach to the history of philosophy. But we will try to show that there are many reasons why we cannot rely on some simple definition of historical context. Some of these reasons are immanent to all historical disciplines or sciences.

(3) The third part will introduce the line of thought, which stems from R. G. Collingwood and is prevailing especially in the philosophy of historiography. But we are going to follow its influence elsewhere – to the historian of ideas Quentin Skinner. We will discuss his method and its applicability outside his own field of interest. Skinner published his famous study almost fifty years ago (and thus we can almost consider this paper to be a part of the history of philosophy, from a certain and unkind point of view) but he is still revising his own method and his approach is still receiving attention from critics and followers.

1. THE RELEVANCE OF METHODOLOGY AND PRACTICE

There are many books and papers concerning the methodology of the history of philosophy throughout the academic sphere. It is common to discuss the importance of researching and interpreting ancient texts and its significance to our modern concept of "doing philosophy". Apart from translation issues, methodological statements and norms are called upon whenever there is need to defend or to criticize one's work in this peculiar field of human historical interest. We can often hear that there is need to revise our canon of great philosophers, to revisit our notion of what philosophy is and to look back to almost forgotten and neglected figures of our cultural heritage. The same goes for identifying various contexts we use

for placing different philosophers into our broader narratives of philosophical enterprise. The seemingly simple task of writing down the history of philosophy, of telling the true story of its past, therefore, breaks down into many different traditions and schools.

But can we really say that these profound discussions between proponents of opposing methods have real impact on how the history of philosophy (or intellectual history, history of ideas etc.) is done? Are those big volumes on interpretation, hermeneutics or historical inquiry really influential? Or does the everyday research practice render such inquiries meaningless? This is a very difficult but crucial question, partly because many of these discussions use normative and not only descriptive language, so they are claiming some strong relevance or even superiority. Also we feel that the practitioners should not be so indifferent to the methodological inquiries. But is this really true? What sort of inquiries is going on in the methodological debates and are they really relevant?

Let us briefly consider one of the examples: the call for the critique of canon. Richard Rorty,[3] as well as some French postmodernists,[4] makes this point his central requirement for original and interesting work in the history of philosophy. We have no problem to accept this view. Clearly the broadening of our philosophical canon proved to be the way to go in order to deepen our knowledge of philosophy in the past. We discovered philosophers, who were too original to be placed in their contemporary traditions, or we started to be interested in female philosophers thanks to the feminists. The same goes for nonwestern traditions of thinking we often too uncritically label as philosophy.[5] But then again, is this the result of methodological research or of simple and natural development in the given field? We can say that simply the fact, that many researchers focus on the middle ages and that a great deal of philosophers have already been discussed, leads to demand for discovering some new and previously unknown thinkers. The accumulation of knowledge may, as well as the critique, lead to an emergence of new subjects of our interest. Can we really claim that postmodern philosophy caused this development? Or shall we consider this to be some kind of paradigm shift? We may also say that the critique of canon entails not only accepting new philosophers into our necropolis of important people, but also dismissing some individuals or whole groups for the sake of an innovative interpretation. Is this negative critique really something we need?

The critique of canon is nonetheless an important step. It allows us to refresh our knowledge of the history of

3 See Rorty 1984.

4 There is a certain degree of resemblance between canon formation and, for example Foucault's conception of "les formations discursives" in "L'archéologie du savoir".

5 The inclusion of nonwestern traditions of thinking was discussed in Schneewind 2005.

philosophy and to pose new questions. We cannot determine whether changes in the practice of forming historical canon were caused by methodological discussions but, in principle, it is possible. Those discussions could have led some historians of philosophy to new discoveries, provided that they had applied this theory in the right way. For example, our possibility of introducing and interpreting a new philosopher is limited by the amount of data we have at our disposal. It is clear that the critique of canon must be accompanied by many other theories and rules we use. And exactly the methodological discussions are the right tool for steering our progress. There are many other fascinating issues connected with the problem of canon[6] but let us consider another obstacle, which may be diminishing the impact of methodological texts to the real life practice of historians of philosophy.

It is sometimes difficult to recognize how exactly we should use suggestions and methods provided to us by other philosophers. Methodological texts are written by philosophers and historians who are interested in a certain period or in a specific philosopher. They also accompany their texts by examples from their favorite field of interest and show us the potential of their approach by arriving at an original interpretation and also by criticizing different approaches of their colleagues. But there is one very big methodological obstacle common to all historical sciences. Information disintegrates in the course of time and sometimes specific methods are useful to us only to a certain degree.[7] We know this problem very well in the history of philosophy. The further into the past we go, the smaller the number of complete texts we have, up to the point where we only have fragments and sole sentences. It is also progressively more difficult to reconstruct the world those ancient philosophers lived in and to see them as a part of a community.

The amount and type of data at our disposal strictly limits our research. A historian of modern philosophy is in a rather different situation than his colleague studying ancient philosophy with respect to available evidence. It is very difficult to imagine them discussing and

6 Where does contemporary philosophy end and where does the history of philosophy begin? We can, for example, consider this question to be strongly related to the problem of the canon of the history of philosophy.

7 For example, in evolutionary biology molecular data are much safer evidence for the theory about the relation of two species then traditional morphological comparison. On the other hand, if we wish to research the fossils from prehistoric age, we must rely on morphology mostly. We cannot extract ancient DNA information therefore we cannot use a safer and more exact method. We also have lower number of subjects to study if we try to research further in the past. The relation of evolutionary biology and history is deeply covered in many studies. One of the foremost biologists Richard Lewontin published very interesting interdisciplinary study *"Facts and the Factitious in Natural Sciences"* in 1991, drawing parallels between biology and historiography. More recently there was a study by Aviezer Tucker: "Historical Science, Over- and Underdetermined: A Study of Darwin's Inference of Origins" in 2011, where he inquired into methodological similarities.

comparing their methods of interpretation and their approach to historical philosophers. Also, one of them might be interested in epistemology and the other one might be interested in ethics, therefore their focus is very different. This caveat may seem fatal to all methodological inquiries, which consider the history of philosophy to be a distinctive and unified discipline. There is no universal method in the history of philosophy and maybe in other historical disciplines. It is hard to argue against this trivial truth. A historian of an ancient Greek metaphysics may therefore believe that it is useless for him to read some methodological paper published by an expert in modern philosophy of politics.

But that is a mistake. We employ certain methods in respect to the data we have and not only in respect to the specific period, timeframe or a presumed subject. The various methods teach us to identify the relevant data for our theories about the past and how to turn these raw data into evidence. Even though some theory seems complex and demanding, it might be applicable in a specific case and it might bring us some interesting results. Some non-trivial information might have been sustained, even if the whole work of an ancient philosopher is fragmentary and mostly lost.

We can then say this is why methodological debate matters and why it is not meaningless. It can be potentially beneficial to the historians of philosophy but it must respect their everyday practice. We can analyze our method and we can evaluate its contribution. We can judge whether the method was used according to the data. We can even compare studies from different periods. A good few ongoing debates between historians of philosophy of different periods and disciplines have been very interesting so far.[8] We can also recognize and name the common mistakes we make in our interpretations or discover new tools and methods.

There are various mistakes we believe we must guard ourselves against regardless of the period we are studying. We usually agree that we should beware of anachronism.[9] We also mostly believe that we are not looking for some universal laws of historical development.[10] Another praised rule is to respect the historical context of the text or person in question. We often think that we can recognize the proper context. But are we talking about a proper context of a true person in the past or of a proper context for our own interpretation?

8 "Subjectivity as a Non-Textual Standard of Interpretation in the History of Philosophical Psychology" is a study published by J. Kaukua and V. Lähteenmäki in 2010. Their criticized and discussed early work of Quentin Skinner and proposed their own improvement of it. Then they applied it to different periods and different problems than Quentin Skinner originally proposed.

9 At least we should always be aware of using it. Works concerning anachronism may include Špelda 2009 or Leslie 1970.

10 Since "The Poverty of Historicism" by K. Popper there were many studies concerning this topic. History is not simply concerned with discovering any kind of universal laws.

2. DIFFERENT CONTEXTS IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

Context is a very vague and ambiguous word. We believe that it is something we must know and respect in order to understand ancient philosophy. We often criticize some historians of philosophy that they are ignoring the context and that it leads to a wrong interpretation. We sometimes treat context as some divine entity, which judges our statements about history to be true or false. But how can we say that our employed context is correct? What is the difference between historical context and, for example, the context of an utterance?

By context we generally mean some set of statements (information, facts etc.) we need to know in order to understand the subject of our interest or to explain what has constituted the occurrence of this subject. But even the context of an utterance is a subject of long debates in the philosophy of language and there are many different definitions of this term. For example: *"For me, a context can more accurately be described as structure built up from simple sentences that captures what is objectively relevant about the environment in which the conversation that the context pertains to takes place."*[11] Especially in the philosophy of language we can find extensive debate on the nature of context. Some of these debates start with David Kaplan[12] and they are concerned, for example, with the role of an intention of a speaker and a difference between an objective and an intentional context.[13]

But we feel that the historical context is somewhat different from the context of an utterance. We are not reconstructing the world of ancient philosophers directly by our senses or in the same way as we perceive a context during a conversation. Our task is partly historical[14] and so we need to use the right tools. Historians in general are not dealing only with texts and they are not just writing down the narratives.[15] The role of historical evidence can be given to almost any artifact or to any trace of human activity. By proclaiming any piece of data as evidence we are establishing a theory about the past. This new theory is then placed within the system of many other complex theories created in order

11 Gauker 2006, p. 162.

12 See Almog, Perry, Wettstein 1989.

13 See Bianchi 2003.

14 R. G. Collingwood does not see any substantial difference between a history and the history of philosophy. See Collingwood 1994, p. 215. We can always say that there is a strong philosophical aspect to the history of philosophy, but we must always agree that first we need to identify some data as a historical evidence for philosophical inquiry. We also progressively move various philosopher from a category of contemporary philosophers to a category of the history of philosophy, although the rules of this process may vary.

15 Hayden White proposes completely different approach. He considers all of history to be a kind of literature and he treats the process of historical inquiry as a simply linguistic enterprise. It is important to note that his "Metahistory" was subjected to many critical reactions by both historians and philosophers. He completely ignores the practice of historians and the relation of evidence and theory. He is concerned only with the narrative part of history.

to explain the greater number of present data. This process often leads to many contradictions and historians must compensate for it by adjusting the theories. These complex networks of historical statements are then retold in various historical narratives, which constitute some of the final products of a historian's work. These narratives are considered to be the context other historians (for example historians of philosophy) use while interpreting works of ancient philosophers.

It is obvious that (if this scheme is correct) we cannot hope for some final and ultimate context we may use to explain all of historical evidence. Historical narratives are constantly shifting as new data are found or some old data are identified as evidence for a new theory. All of the big historical narratives sooner or later arrive at some data they cannot comprehensively include without changing their core or denying them as evidence. Their main contribution to historical disciplines is an introduction of a new way how to handle historical data and where to look for some original pieces of evidence and then they usually vanish. The idea that we must respect and honor the historical context in order to understand ancient philosophers is a myth. This skeptical statement may seem like a serious blow for the possibility of any kind of historical knowledge, the history of philosophy included. But this is not completely true. First, we must revise our idea of a final goal in the history of philosophy. Second, we can derive lesson from it and continue in our work.

What is the meaning of doing history? We cannot delve into this question too far here but a significant number of contemporary philosophers of historiography[16] agree that we are looking for some kind of knowledge. This knowledge is concerned with specific objects around us, which do not fit perfectly in our everyday experience. These objects require assumption of inaccessible past and, by conducting a systematic venture, we are able to reconstruct some limited aspects of this unknown past by postulating different people, groups, concepts and ideas. As we can see, we are primarily interested in our present empirical data, which serve as the base for our further inquiry. But our possibilities are seriously limited so we may hope in arriving at the best possible explanation but not in knowing the truth.

This very brief trip to philosophy of historiography may not seem extremely relevant to the history of philosophy but it clearly shows that we cannot deny any interpretation simply on the basis of ignoring historical context. Quite the opposite is true: all of us are always choosing some historical context for our work and we should be able to give good reasons for our chosen context, if necessary. Reconstruction of a historical context is a joint venture of many experts and there is a lot to choose from.

16 These philosophers are usually called "constructivists". We can mention A. Tucker and M. G. Murphey, for example. Both draw some assumptions from the book *Historical Knowing* by L. J. Goldstein. Their most visible opponents are "narrativists", especially H. White and F. Ankersmit.

Historians of philosophy belong to many different schools or they sympathize with them: Marxist, phenomenology, feminists. Or they choose some specific contexts as their main framework, like Homeric Hymns, astronomy, contemporary politics or development of philosophical thinking.

But are there any guidelines how to choose a context or a framework to which we can fit the subject of our interest? Or is there a better path we can follow in our way to the best possible explanation? We may of course decide to simply ignore every other theory about the past and postulate some timeless historical problems,[17] some perennial philosophy and focus on them. This way is definitely interesting and it might even pay off. But then we would stop doing the history of philosophy and we should question whether we are doing philosophy at all.[18] Let us agree that we cannot choose to ignore the fact that ancient philosophy was a part of the past world and that we need some kind of context which is somewhat reconstructed from historical evidence and not from our current idea of philosophy. We are slowly running out of options to base the history of philosophy in some nonrelative and nonsubjective concept of historical knowledge.

Another curious method how to solve this problem is to propose some strange metaphysical link to historical agents. Archeologist and philosopher R. G. Collingwood tried to sketch this approach in his Idea of History. He described his concept of "reenactment" which allows historians to rethink the ideas of historical agents in a specific manner and thus it creates proper kind of historical knowledge for all historical disciplines, the history of philosophy included. Gadamer praised this thinker in his "Truth and Method"[19] and especially admired his logic of question and answer. Collingwood also had strong influence on many people interested in philosophy of historiography[20] but not so much on historians of philosophy or historians of ideas. Even though we may decline his reenactment method as dubious and unclear, we may still give Collingwood credit for a lot of interesting observations and remarks. Let us follow his influence outside the philosophy of historiography and let us

17 The history of problems is one of the specific Anglo-American approaches to the history of philosophy. It has often been criticized as perennial philosophy. H.- J. Glock is defending this approach in the fourth chapter of his "What is Analytic Philosophy?" and we can definitely consider these interpretations to be worthwhile.

18 Let us assume that doing the history of philosophy is at least partly historical project and that we should respect limitations of historical disciplines. We may try to use the thoughts of ancient philosophers to solve our present problems but we should be able to give good reasons for doing so and the reasons for ignoring our contemporary tools. But that is scarcely possible without misinterpretation.

19 See Gadamer 1960, pp. 375–384.

20 L. J. Goldstein (1976, 1996) dedicated a lot of his studies to Collingwood and he tried to improve his concept. G. H. von Wright (1971) in his *Explanation and Understanding* discusses Collingwood a lot. A. Tucker (2004), M.G. Murphey (2008), all of them have acknowledged Collingwood's work to different extent.

ask what we can learn from him in connection with the history of philosophy. After discussing the ambiguity of context in this part, we need to find some better method before we can finally get to historical knowledge about ancient philosophy.

3. COLLINGWOOD–SKINNER LINE OF THOUGHT AND ITS APPLICABILITY

We have treated the history of philosophy as one of the historical disciplines[21] so far but that does not mean that the subject of our inquiry does not have any peculiarities of its own. We are definitely interested in some kind of historical evidence but we are not exactly interested in what happened in the past or what was the living in the past like. As previously stated, we try to explain or to understand some present kind of data, which we classified as evidence for big theory about people doing philosophy in the past. When we are reading one specific piece of text we are striving to understand its meaning. We have already dismissed the perennial vision of philosophical timeless problems and we have said that philosophers were always the part of their world. We have agreed that we need some kind of contextual reading but there is nothing like definitive historical context. On the one hand, historical theories are constantly changing and on the other hand, there are always multiple contending contexts at our disposal. Is our theory-choice purely value-laden or can we consider one context to be superior to the others?

It was Collingwood's belief that we can rethink, relive and reenact the thoughts of historical agents. But, apart from other requirements, Collingwood maintains that the thought of a historical agent has to be purposive in its nature and then he tries to prove that it entails even the philosophy. Context in his scheme has slightly different meaning: "*Every act of thought, as it actually happens, happens in a context out of which it arises and in which it lives, like any other experience, as an organic part of the thinker's life. Its relations with its context are not those of an item in a collection, but those of a special function in the total activity of an organism.*"[22]

We can see that Collingwood considers context to be very different from previously presented variations of historical contexts and those, which are mostly used to understand ancient philosophy. He is looking for the purpose of every thought, he is concerned with the intentions of a historical agent. This statement looks trivial but we will see that it is gravely neglected by a lot of researchers. Partly because it is also philosophically problematic that our access to the internal intentions of others is pretty much the same as the access we have to the past: nondirect or none. We shall not tackle the problems of philosophy of mind here. But we know well that

21 By historical disciplines or sciences, I mean the broader concept of them which includes even natural sciences like: evolutionary biology, cosmogony or geology. Together with history, comparative linguistics and others, they share similar methodological issues.

22 Collingwood 1994, p. 300.

we must be careful when assessing the intentions of an author. In the history of modern philosophy there is an ongoing debate about "New Hume" interpretation and Peter Millican often criticizes its advocates for not recognizing the irony David Hume employs, for example.[23] We are not going to reconstruct and to advocate the whole theory of reenactment so Collingwood's tradition may seem like a false track.

In the second part of this paper we explored and stated that accusing somebody of ignoring the historical context (of any kind) is not the right way because we all have our preferred contexts. Somebody is interested in the Homeric scholarship, somebody else enjoys studying variations in the Ancient Greek and yet another one delves into the politics or the astronomy. All of these are contexts identified by present historians or philosophers and all of them can possibly provide viable and interesting interpretation. But is this what we really want to achieve? Simple contextualism can provide justification for almost any theory or narrative about the past. The label "contextualism" is ambiguous to the same extent as the term "context". If somebody wants to dispute contextualism (as something opposed to the perennial philosophy), he may choose Quentin Skinner as his target.[24] He is often referred to as a "contextualist" or as a "linguistic contextualist".

But this label is not exactly correct. First, let us simply look at Skinner's statement from his most famous paper on the methodology of history of ideas: "*The "context" mistakenly gets treated as the determinant of what is said. It needs rather to be treated as an ultimate framework for helping to decide what conventionally recognizable meanings, in a society of that kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate.*"[25] Actually a notable part of "*Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*" is focused on criticizing "contextual reading". Second, to prove that Skinner is not simply "a contextualist", let us explore his method in comparison with Collinwood's reenactment and Skinner's second source of inspiration philosophy of language.

Quentin Skinner indeed mentions Collingwood in his works many times. He shares his high regard of the importance of rediscovering intentionality of historical agents and he praises same parts of Collingwood's work as Gadamer. But he is not resurrecting the method of reenactment at all. He deals with the problem of intentionality of historical agents in a completely different way. The philosophy of J. L. Austin is also concerned with intentionality of human agents and its role during speech acts. Moreover, context and intentionality

23 See Millican 2007.

24 One of such critiques is provided by R. Lamb (2009) in his "Quentin Skinner's Revised Historical Contextualism: A Critique." In this paper, he also advocates some use of perennial philosophy. On the other hand, M. Goodhart (2000) clearly sees that Skinner opposes vulgar contextualism in his "Quentin Skinner's Hobbes, Reconsidered". The latter article also much more clearly describes actual problems of Skinner's method in practice.

25 Skinner 1969, p. 49.

are important subjects of the philosophy of language as well as of history. We stated before that we feel that a historical context is different from a context of an utterance and we can still hold this distinction in relation to certain kinds of evidence. But let us explore the most common evidence for history of ideas and for the history of philosophy.

Skinner considers every textual piece[26] of historical evidence to be a kind of a speech act. The main task of a historian of ideas is to decipher what a historical agent intended to communicate and *what* he was actually doing by his speech act (writing). By this way we can easily avoid the danger of perennial philosophy, we understand philosophy as a purposive project (even the accumulation of knowledge is a purpose) and we know what to look for. The context we are looking for is not any kind of countless possible historical contexts, even though we have to be vary of language variations, social context, political situation etc. The author in question can reveal the relevant context by himself, provided we are able to piece together all the evidence. Skinner provides us with an interesting but somewhat undistinctive method, how to interpret old texts, which respects other findings we discussed previously in connection with more general philosophy of historiography. There are other concerns like Skinner's warning against using anachronisms or the fact that he is focusing on a political philosophy and his method might not be so useful anywhere else. We are not going to pursue these issues here too far but the latter one requires at least some commentary.

Is every philosophical work a speech act? Is actually every philosopher intending to do something by his writing? Is he addressing some specific group of people and does he know what he is trying to achieve in his contemporary audience? What if there is some kind of pure contemplation? The truth is that we often do not have any specific data, which would point us straight to the intentions of an ancient philosopher. But it would not be appropriate to ignore such data, if we had them, and then try to fit the philosopher and his texts into different contexts just because we can. We cannot afford to ignore any data, any possible evidence and any reasonable interpretation, but we definitely should try to respect the context even the ancient philosopher considered to be important to his work. This method has nothing to do with the question whether given philosophers were political or not but we may say that philosophers were mostly addressing people they shared the world with. This also does not mean that we can ignore linguistic, cultural, social, religious or any other context. It only warns us against choosing any of these as a main context without consideration.

26 There are of course non-textual pieces of evidence. It can be argued that the history of philosophy is not interested in those kinds of evidence but we can see that many historians of philosophy use comparisons with contemporary art, for example. Sometimes even non-textual artifact, like paintings, statues or coins, can serve as an evidence for some theory about social status of some philosopher and therefore we can more easily place their philosophy in certain contexts.

Skinner truly explores the possibilities of his method by examples from modern philosophy and politics. He can back up his theories by a significant amount of data. He does not seriously struggle with lack of evidence. He is interested in famous philosophers who left us a lot of writings, books, letters and dedications. But is this method really applicable to all the history of philosophy or are some periods excluded from Skinner's framework? Let us test this method, as it is presented here, on one example from pre-Socratic philosophy, which pose us a lot of obstacles. Is this method going to provide us some non-trivial interpretation of Heraclitus of Ephesus?

4. THE CONTEXT OF HERACLITUS

This ancient figure from the Ionian city of Ephesus is a very interesting subject. We have a lot of different fragments[27] preserved and other ancient philosophers engaged into many debates with this thinker. They considered him to be very strange and incomprehensible and that is something we cannot simply deny when we first take a glance at his texts. We can soon see and believe that his reputation as a dark and obscure philosopher is probably well deserved. His fragments have a complex structure, he uses very interesting terms, which soon became the core of philosophical language, he addresses many different issues and he is presenting a fascinating vision of the world.

It is customary to present Heraclitus as a mystical metaphysician who ignores the laws of logic and who baffled even such a philosopher as Socrates. The terms like λόγος[28] or ψυχή quickly draw our attention because we know them well from later philosophy. We cannot ignore the term πῦρ because according to Aristotle's historical narrative about the history of philosophy this was the constitutive element of Heraclitus' philosophy. Several other words interest us simply because they appear many times and they often have a special position in a fragment, like πόλεμος. We can study many books, which teach us how to read his fragments, how to identify chiasms, how to deal with ambiguities, how to divide his fragments into different topics and how to generally understand this thinker, but we may fail to notice one of the major discrepancies between Heraclitus and the fragments of other preSocratics.

If we compare the fragments of Heraclitus' with the fragments of his contemporaries, there is something what should strike us but we often miss it because the attractiveness of more mystical fragments overshadows this peculiarity. We safely know that the Ionian philosophers were largely interested in helping their fellow citizens and they interfered with political matters.[29] What is more

27 Apart from textual evidence we also have a coin from Ephesus with Heraclitus' effigy. It can tell us something about his social status.

28 Especially the term λόγος is the subject of many discussions. How should we understand its meaning in Heraclitus' fragments?

29 Xenophanes directly criticises contemporary society and beliefs. We have texts and fragments describing political

interesting is the fact that in the case of Heraclitus we have many fragments at our disposal, which address specific people and very specific situations in Ephesus.[30] He openly disapproves certain actions, he mentions specific names and it seems that he is very emotionally interested in these matters. His recommendations for the people of Ephesus are considered to be "drastic",[31] "the motive which Heraclitus attributes to his fellow citizens is a paradigm of human folly",[32] his rhetoric is considered to be an "overkill"[33], his tone is "scornful"[34] at least and we can definitely consider attacks on other people (either famous persons, Ephesians or people in general) to be an important part of Heraclitus' legacy. [35] That is something we cannot say about other pre-Socratics.

His attitude towards people around him also intertwines with his whole philosophy. At least two points are considered to be clear: his physics is closely related to his ethics[36] and the fact that he is often using a distinction between plural and singular as an evaluation of somebody's worth.[37] This cannot prove that some form of Heraclitus' ethics would be superior to his physics but there was definitely some relation and, once again, we see that he really invested a lot of emotions into his ethical and political statements. That may actually tell us that he considered this part of his work to be important. We may never know whether this part of his work was meant for the people of Ephesus or whether we should consider it as a confession to goddess Artemis but their actions and their attitude was a significant subject for Heraclitus. We should at least try to reconstruct what has provoked a response like this because these strong local references can tell us more about Heraclitus and his thought.

But can we actually claim that Heraclitus' focus was at least partly political or ethical? Or how can we distinguish ethics from politics in this early stage of philosophical inquiry? There are a few studies[38] in the last few years, which suggest a similar idea and provide

activity of Thales, etc. It seems implausible to see Ionian philosophers as secluded solitaires. See Sandywell 1996, p. 131.

30 Significant amount of such fragments we have at our disposal is much bigger and more direct than similar fragments we have, for example, in the case of Xenophanes.

31 Sandywell 1996, p.236. This comment appears in connection with fragment B 121.

32 Kahn 1979, p.179.

33 Sider 2013, p. 331. He is concerned with the same fragment, B 121.

34 Hussey 1982, p. 54.

35 Kratochvíl 2006, p. 69. He lists "the critique of somebody mentioned" among typical expressive tools of Heraclitus.

36 The relation of wet and dry soul Is a good example of this case. See Finkelberg 2013.

37 See Sandywell 1996, the chapter: "Critical reflexivity: thinking as polemos", subchapter: "Againts The Many", p. 236. Kratochchíl 2006, p. 69 also states that the meaning of plural is pejorative. This expressive tool of Heraclitus is especially visible in connection with ethics and politics. Kratochvíl consider this to be an evidence for Heraclitus being solitaire but we must admit that for being solitaire he is very interested in the actions of his fellow citizens. Sider does not doubt pejorative meaning of plural at all. See Sider 2013, pp. 236–237.

38 Apart from David Sider we must mention also Fattal 2011.

different reasons for their claim. David Sider complains about marginalizing the role of ethics in Heraclitus and the fact that even the most systematic scholars, who devoted their books to Heraclitus, do not include ethics among the main motives of Heraclitus.[39] Researchers are usually very reluctant towards the following sentence from Diogenes Laertius: "Τὸ δὲ φερόμενον αὐτοῦ βιβλίον ἐστὶ μὲν ἀπὸ τοῦ συνέχοντος Περὶ φύσεως, διήρηται δ' εἰς τρεῖς λόγους, εἵς τε τὸν περὶ τοῦ παντὸς καὶ πολιτικὸν καὶ θεολογικόν." (D.L. IX.5) (As to the work, which passes as his, it is a continuous treatise On Nature, but is divided into three discourses, one on the universe, another on politics, and a third on theology.).[40]

Sider takes this remark more seriously, he focuses more on Heraclitus' ethics (in the present meaning) and he comments on the relevant fragments (B 29, B 28, B 135, B 112...). In the end, he uses his interpretation of Heraclitus' ethic to elucidate the term λόγος: "*Heraclitus' ethics, then, is inextricably linked to his epistemology and politics. His urging everyone to exercize one's own logos in order to recognize the external logos of the cosmos entails a ethical and political scheme in which one is persuaded by the one best person, who can only be the one who exercises this capacity best.*"[41]

Unfortunately, Sider does not try to identify Heraclitus' closest audience, he is not trying to put Heraclitus' opinions in his immediate context.[42] It seems that we can really find a strong incentive for people to use their rationality to acquire the true knowledge of the world. But it seems that the people of Ephesus are exhibiting tendencies to the opposite. Can we identify these tendencies? Can we know what they have done to upset Heraclitus, to inspire him to write his text and to show such anger towards them? And can knowledge of these circumstances help us learn more about other central themes of his philosophy?

Edward Hussey mentions that it would be quite interesting to do a research, which would cover Heraclitus' attitude toward the Persian empire and religion.[43] He supposed that Heraclitus could be inspired by the thinking of Iranian cultures and that he probably valued their influence in Ephesus. There is indeed one such study, which conveys a comparative research of the relation between the early Greek philosophy and the Orient,[44] but it exhibits a lot of usual problems of comparative historiogra-

39 Sider 2013, pp. 321–322. He mentions that C. Kahn does not include ethics in the index of his book. On the other hand, Kahn included "political theory" in the index. Z. Kratochvíl also does not distinguish Heraclitus' ethics among the themes but he acknowledges his politology.

40 C. Kahn actually claims that he is following this clue but, as we said, he does not show serious interest in Heraclitus' ethics and politics. See Kahn 1979, p. 9.

41 Sider 2013, p. 333.

42 For example, Sider is interested in comparing the language and expressions of Heraclitus with the lyrics of Simonides. He also claims that Heraclitus was responding to Simonides but he is also aware of the fact that it greatly depends on how do we establish their relative chronology. See Sider 2013, pp. 325–327.

43 Hussey 1982, p. 51.

44 See West 1971.

phy.[45] More importantly, Charles Kahn also commented on this book and its assumptions in the appendix of "The art and thought of Heraclitus" and he did not find West's conclusions to be of bigger relevance.[46]

We can see that one of the important Heraclitus' scholars denied comparative approach to this question and that many philosophers of historiography doubt the methods of comparative research. Let us apply a different method then. Both Kratochvíl[47] and Kahn[48] do not put much effort into assessing the exact situation in Ephesus during Heraclitus' life and his attitude towards Persia. Hussey considers Heraclitus to admire Persian empire[49] and F. Kessidi believes that Heraclitus was strongly against Persian rule.[50] Our best source for assessing the situation in Ephesus during Heraclitus' life is definitely Herodotus. Another interesting subject of possible inquiry is the controversial mention of Hermodorus by Pliny the Elder.

Heraclitus was almost definitely living during the Ionian revolt and this might have been the major political conflict of his life. The Ionain revolt was accompanied by the sieges of several cities in Asia Minor, including Sardis and Miletus. How did the people of Ephesus, an important city-state of Ionia, react to this revolt? According to Herodotus, we must say that their support of other Ionian cities was reserved at best. It seems that they provided only a few guides for the Ionian war effort.[51] They also attacked and killed a few survivors from Chios, who fought against Persians, because they mistook them for raiders.[52] We can also read that probably a few years after the death of Heraclitus or during his late years (as would be preferred by D. Sider[53]) there was a trade outlet for Persian slaves in Ephesos[54] and that Xerxes' relatives commonly stayed in Ephesos during his campaigns.[55] We can assume that the majority of Ephesians actually supported the Persian rule (or that they were reluctant to join the Ionian revolt) in Ephesus and that this led to establishing a good relationship with Persian royalty. We may believe that this was a general tendency in Ephesus during the life of Heraclitus, who devoted his text to criticizing Ephesians. This could also explain his glorying of πόλεμος, because he was disgusted by the idleness of his fellow citizens.[56]

We can find another possible clue in B 121: "ἄξιον Ἐφεσίοις ἡβηδὸν ἀπάγξασθαι πᾶσι καὶ τοῖς ἀνήβοις τὴν πόλιν καταλιπεῖν, οἵτινες Ἑρμόδωρον ἄνδρα ἐωυτῶν ὀνήιστον ἐξέβαλον

45 See Tucker 2004, pp. 151–160, chapter: „Comparative historiography."

46 Kahn 1979, pp. 297–302.

47 See Kratochvíl, p. 21.

48 See Kahn, pp. 2–3, 179–180.

49 See Hussey 1982, p. 47.

50 See Kessidi 1985, pp. 30–31. He also believes that Heraclitus uses the term βάρβαροι as a pejorative term in reference to Persians etc.

51 See *Hdt.* 5.100.

52 See *Hdt.* 6.16.2 This may also imply that they did not know about recent battle against Persian supremacy.

53 See footnote 40.

54 See *Hdt.* 8.105.1.

55 See *Hdt.* 8.103.1; *Hdt.* 8.107.1;

56 This is also the idea of F. Kessidi.

φάντες· ἡμέων μηδὲ εἷς ὀνήιστος ἔστω, εἰ δὲ μή, ἄλλη τε καὶ μετ' ἄλλων" (DK B 121) (What the Ephesians deserve is to be hanged to the last man, every one of them, and leave the city to the boys, since they drove out their best man, Hermodorus, saying 'Let no one be the best among us; if he is, let him be so elsewhere and among others.'). [57] We may also consider the possibility of Hermodorus really going to Italy after his banishment by Ephesians as suggested by one mention by Pliny the Elder.[58] We cannot strongly rely on this evidence but we know of many Greeks, who sympathized with Persians, and then they found a way to the royal court. But the exiled Hermodorus went the opposite way, which would suggest that he was against the Persian rule (possibly supporting the Ionian revolt) and he might have been banished for that reason. We can also consider that he was originally tyrant of Ephesus who was replaced by Persian government. If Hermodorus truly went to Italy, it would mean that he and his supporter Heraclitus were strongly against Persian rule in Ephesus. And Heraclitus himself was probably against democratic government too because it entails despised rule of the many. All the apparent similarities between the Persian religion and Heraclitus' philosophy would be just a coincidence.

If we consider these theories about Ephesus in the fifth century B.C. to be the best possible explanation of our data or evidence, then we also identified the probable situation Heraclitus found himself in.[59] He is clearly referencing very specific actions of Ephesians and he is often using them as a counter-example in his fragments concerning ethics. We may then see that his glorification of rationality, war, courage and other values was strictly tied to the actual lack of these qualities in Ephesus. We may also believe that by establishing these theories we have found a solid "entry point" through which we may continue with our interpretation of Heraclitus and his physics, astronomy and metaphysics. Discussing clear references to other people provides us safer and more solid ground for our theories. There are also similar fragments concerning Homer or Hesiod, which deserve the same amount of attention. These theories about the ethical or political thinking of Heraclitus cannot provide us the full understanding of his text but they help us establish the possible intentions of his text and we may regard them as hints while trying to decipher the meaning of much more "darker" terms of "the dark philosopher". We can continue by creating another theory about his attitude to Homer, Hesiod, the Greek religion and further simply by choosing the context, which could tell us something about his possible intentions, about the world he was referring to.

It can be argued that our application of Skinner's method, which is derived from the history of political theories, led us to picturing Heraclitus as a political

57 Kahn 1979, p. 178.

58 See *Plin. Nat.* 34.11.

59 We are not going to claim that we "know" his true intentions now.

thinker and philosopher. But this does not mean that the other parts of his philosophy are meaningless and that they do not deserve our attention. We can also say that the inclination of Heraclitus towards politics and ethics is simply too strong to ignore and this interpretation still holds some historical and philosophical relevance.

We have tried to follow some recommendations from the philosophy of historiography and we have inquired into the claim that we need to identify the proper context for our interpretations of ancient philosophers. We have maintained that a pursuit of an identification of a writer's possible intentions is a viable way to achieve understanding of his philosophy.

We have followed the way from Collingwood, a philosopher of historiography, to Quentin Skinner, a historian of ideas and political thinking, who proposed a method derived from philosophy of language as a possible way how to identify the intentions of an author. This method has been refined and criticized for almost fifty years. We have denied to regard Skinner as a simple contextualist and we decided to show the applicability of his approach on a very different subject to his traditional field of inquiry.

This short example of reconstructing the context of Heraclitus focuses on ethical and political thinking of this supposedly mystical philosopher and it mostly agrees with a similar project of David Sider, though it arrives at the results by different means. We have tried to establish his political orientation and his attitude towards the Persian empire. We have mentioned that different opinions about this question have already influenced some researchers in their interpretations of Heraclitus and that we can follow these conclusions to further our interpretation.

ABBREVIATIONS

DK	*Diels, H., Kranz, W. (1969). Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker. Zürich: Weidmann.*
D.L.	*Diogenes Laertius (1972). Lives of Eminent Philosophers (trans. R. D. Hicks). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.*
Hdt.	*Herodotus (1920–1925). Herodotus in four volumes (trans. A. D. Godley). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.*
Plin. Nat.	*Pliny the Elder (1906). Naturalis Historia (trans. K. F. T. Mayhoff). Lipsiae: Teubner.*

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