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# Canons, Careers, and Campfollowers: Randall and the Historiography of Philosophy

Gary Shapiro

*University of Richmond*, [gshapiro@richmond.edu](mailto:gshapiro@richmond.edu)

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## Canons, Careers, and Campfollowers: Randall and the Historiography of Philosophy

For some very good reasons John Herman Randall, Jr. saw himself as an innovator and a deviant within the discourse that is called the history of philosophy. In an early chapter of *The Career of Philosophy* he pronounces this characteristically salty judgment on the main tendency of such work:

The history of philosophy, in truth, since German professors captured it and made it the handmaiden of academic advancement, has been a rigid tradition. Philosophy began with Thales, it falls neatly into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, and it culminates in the men now writing for your favorite philosophical journal, God forgive them their sins! (CPI, 21).<sup>1</sup>

Randall should be celebrated simply for the several ways in which he succeeded in shaking and displacing this "German" model of the history of philosophy, although there is, of course, much more to his work. I propose both to investigate some of these ways and to raise the question whether there might be some traces of the model still to be found in Randall's own work. Randall's objections to the German model in the passage just quoted seem to be two. First, it sees the development of philosophy as relatively unilinear, following a single pattern that neglects the many rough edges, the roads not taken and the thought that was so influential in its own time, but is now neglected. Second, it tends to construct that pattern in terms of a culminating point, which is simply the philosophical present understood in a certain way. It is not that Randall objects to mobilizing the sources of the past in order to make sense of the present but that he believes, quite sensibly, that we will succeed better at such a use of history if we acknowledge more explicitly to ourselves and others just what it is that we are doing.

In a recent essay "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,"

Richard Rorty has made a series of distinctions which may be useful in helping to situate Randall's achievement. The duller and most intellectually dangerous of the genres is doxography, which begins (implicitly) with a conception of what the fundamental questions or problems of philosophy are and proceeds to discuss a list of traditionally approved philosophers in terms of what they say or fail to say about such topics. Doxography operates with both a canonical conception of philosophical topics and a list of canonical philosophers, but it is not concerned either to argue for its conceptions of these canons or to take notice of alternative canonical conceptions. More appealing but still limited procedures that Rorty identifies are rational reconstruction and historical contextualization. The first aims at making the thought of some great philosopher as perspicuous and appealing as possible, in order to see how he can help us to understand some topic of pressing, current interest; so we might reconstruct Hume, as so many have done, in order to see just how his treatment of causality or the self succeeds, fails, opens up interesting new questions and the like. A historical contextualization on the other hand, will emphasize what Hume's intellectual world was like; that is, it will attempt to explain what he and his intellectual community saw as the significant questions, problems and traditions to be dealt with. The most ambitious and consequential enterprise in the history of philosophy, Rorty suggests, is *Geistesgeschichte* or the formation of canons. It may engage itself in rational reconstruction and historical contextualization or draw upon the work of others in these areas, but it will be primarily concerned with something else; it "works at the level of problematics rather than of solutions to problems."<sup>2</sup> *Geistesgeschichte* determines what the important questions are and whose struggles with those questions ought to be taken seriously. In this respect it resembles the determination of the canonical texts of the Bible or the establishment of literary canons which situate some writers and some of their texts as more significant than other writers and texts. It employs an "honorific" sense of philosophy in order to enhance the value of some contemporary philosophical tendencies by associating them with the work of the great philosophers of the past. And since *Geistesgeschichte* is distinctively an activity of a Hegelian or

post-Hegelian culture that takes reality to be essentially temporal and historical, its claim to tell us what is important about the history of philosophy is simultaneously a claim to tell us what is important about the world. This broadly Hegelian culture makes it possible for the *Geisteshistoriker* to replace the ancient sage. For by using "philosophy" in an honorific sense

[h]e is thus the person who decides what is worth thinking about — which questions are matters of the "contingent arrangements" of our day and which are the ones that tie us together with our ancestors. As the person who decides who was "getting at" what was really important and who was merely distracted by the epiphenomena of his times he plays the role which, in the ancient world, was played by the sage.<sup>3</sup>

Now ought we to think of Randall as a *Geisteshistoriker*? After all, as the quotation with which I began indicates (and as I remember from his constant ribbing of Paul Oskar Kristeller in a seminar they taught together), he was constantly contrasting his own procedure and approach with that of the Germans. We might begin to clarify the question by appealing to the distinction between doxography and *Geistesgeschichte*. Randall's most sharply satirical comments are reserved for the sort of doxography that would read the questions of neoKantianism or British epistemology back into the thought of Plato or Aristotle. But Randall is clearly engaged in evaluating and diagnosing the history of philosophy in order to see what the important questions are and to suggest the many ways in which "philosophy uses its past." In terms of the modes by which Nietzsche says that we can turn history to our advantage, Randall is both a monumental and a critical historian. He is impressed with the monumental example set by an Aristotle who was able to formulate and integrate so many of the tendencies of his culture and looks with delight at the recurrence of the spirit of this great knower in Spinoza or John Dewey; at the same time he is critical of Aristotle's failure to see beyond the limits of his culture or to understand that his own philosophy was

essentially an activity of cultural integration and critique.

I have already suggested in a way what constitutes the main motif of Randallian *Geistesgeschichte*. It is the determination to read the history of philosophy in its cultural and social context as a way of refining and formulating the various sides of the culture; in the specific case of the modern West, to which Randall devoted his most thorough treatment (in *The Career of Philosophy* and other studies) this cultural role takes on the specific form of adjusting, resolving or dissolving cultural tensions and contradictions. To some, and perhaps to Randall himself at times, this may have seemed like a radically empirical, pragmatic, functionalistic alternative to classical *Geistesgeschichte* as well as a relief from the naivetes of doxography. In *How Philosophy Uses its Past* he says, for example, "These historical patterns to which my attention has been called are purely empirical generalizations." But I want to suggest (and I think that there is a side of Randall that sees this also) that he too is engaged in *Geistesgeschichte* and canon-formation. If that suggestion can be made plausible, then the question arises as to whether Randall's work exhibits something like a hermeneutical circle despite the fact that he would be the first to point with suspicion to the presence of such circles in more traditional historians of philosophy.

As a *Geisteshistoriker*, Randall's views are something like this: Although some cultures may at least sometimes be stable and harmonious, philosophy arises as an attempt to adjust actual discrepancies among various cultural tendencies. A special case is presented by the history of the West in which such conflicts or contradictions are typically experienced *historically*, that is, as the result of changes brought about by cultural activities. The experience of such change is built into the culture to the extent that it contains institutions and practices, such as the natural sciences, that are intrinsically historical and progressive; that is, they are oriented not to the preservation of any set of beliefs but to the continual testing and examination of hypotheses and the result of that process is further change in the culture's structure of beliefs, in its material possibilities and its social arrangements. In the history of philosophy the "fundamental unities" are not so much individual theories, texts, or thinkers but "traditions." Indi-

vidual thinkers ought to be seen in terms of their place in these traditions; Descartes does not begin modern philosophy *de novo*, but stands within an honorable Augustinian tradition even while attempting to turn it to the new aim of making intellectual life safe for mathematical physicists. At the same time we ought to see that a single thinker can be the locus at which a number of traditions intersect or from whom they arise. "Augustine," for example, can name at least three different traditions: the Augustine of rational illumination (the tradition eventually mathematicized by Descartes); the Augustine who believes in human depravity and the miracle of grace (taken up by early Protestantism), and the Augustine who deploys an array of skeptical arguments against the evidence of the senses (arguments that remain available for a variety of skeptical positions). Traditions are always associated with particular cultural or special formations: for example, the various branches of the Catholic church, the forms of Protestantism, or national cultures such as Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. From such a perspective what makes a text, a thinker, an idea or a tradition canonical is not a place held in an eternal order of meanings, but availability as a strategy or expression that is responsive to the twin cultural dimensions of continuity and change. So Randall proposes, at the beginning of *The Career of Philosophy*, that the enterprise of philosophy ought not to be viewed in terms of what it *says* about itself but in the light of what it *does*. Personifying philosophy and attributing to her a gender, he says:

What she can give, and that in full abundance, she manifests not in her tempting words, but in her living deeds. The words may only paint a poet's vision; if they be no better founded, at least they are no worse. The deeds are mighty and they leave enduring trace. (CP I, 4).

When we observe a philosophical idea "in its natural environment" we can disclose the "secret" of its career for we will see its role in regard to the climate of opinion out of which it arose and in relation to "the great social and intellectual conflicts that drove men to construct it."

At this point, we encounter what is probably the purplest passage in all of Randall's prose, the same one with which he regularly began his year's lectures on the history of philosophy at Columbia. To analyze philosophy's career, he suggests, we must recognize that "She belongs to the oldest profession in the world: she exists to give men pleasure and to satisfy their imperious needs." It would, I think, be easy to make either too much or too little of Randall's extended comparison of philosophy to a woman of easy virtue, "indispensable, but quite without conscience" (*CP*, I, 5). One might attempt a deconstructive reading, for example, that interrogated this text (and some similar flights of eloquence) in the light of Nietzsche's question "Suppose that truth is a woman?" and the varied turns that the question has taken at the hands of Jacques Derrida. Or one might dismiss the simile as simply a way of conveying the human sweep and interest of philosophy's career from Plato to Nato in an image designed to be provocative. But I propose that we read this figurative introduction to Randall's most comprehensive and successful work as itself a visionary expression of his own need to come to terms with a number of different traditions in the writing of the history of philosophy and with the concurrent problems of his and our culture. Randall's portrait of *philosophia* is a way of giving flesh to his historiographical concept of a "career." To have a career is to admit of a certain kind of narrative description, to be the subject of a story. It will not be the positivistic story told by the doxographers who play off the opinions of the philosophers against an eternal set of questions. Nor will it be the closed Hegelian story that purports to show how the concepts of German idealism are logically unfolded from the musings of Parmenides and Heraclitus on being and nothingness. And it will be in many ways the antipodes of Heidegger's history of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*) which traces an essentially tragic story of philosophy's progressive *hybris* in claiming to uncover that which is present, while neglecting the absent and the obscure. A career, then, is more than a series of isolated episodes and less than a logical development. By conceptualizing his material in terms of a career Randall is enabled to assert that "the joint presence of continuity and novelty in human history need present no problem" and that "[h]istory is thus a con-

tinual readaptation of old materials in the light of changing needs and problems" (*CP I*, 9-10). However, we must remember that philosophy's career is not just any life-story but that of "the eternal but everchanging handmaiden of men's ideas and ideals, appearing always with the fighters, for new and old alike, indefatigably setting their baggage and their weapons in order" (*CP I*, 5). The woman of Randall's image is not only a prostitute but a camp-follower; she is not directly involved in the fray but helps to humanize it while giving "tantalizing glimpses of something calm and serene above the tumult."

So far as I know, Randall did not directly address the question of the relation between historical and literary forms of narration, although he is both a philosopher of history and a fascinating storyteller. Yet implicit in both his theoretical writings about history and in his histories of philosophy is a very contemporary attitude concerning the interdependence of literary and historical narrative, of the sort that has been developed in the last twenty years by writers like Louis Mink, Hayden White, and Paul Ricoeur. On such a view histories are inevitably framed as stories whose forms and strategies have much in common with fictional or dramatic narratives whether or not the historian consciously sets out to employ some particular genre or to model himself on a specific literary work. Taking our cue from Randall's description of philosophy as a woman who "consorts with men, comforts them, tells them what they want to hear" we might ask whether his account of philosophy's career bears a significant resemblance to a recognizable form of literary narrative. Let me suggest (in an experimental and not in a dogmatic spirit) that Northrop Frye's well-known four-fold classification of narrative forms into romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire is as useful a first approximation to the understanding of the gross features of large-scale narrative forms as any other approach that we might devise. It is a perspective that Hayden White has applied with some success to the analysis of the ideological and aesthetic commitments of some of the major historians and philosophers of history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: precisely the milieu which is relevant to Randall in both of those roles.<sup>4</sup>

To emplot a history as a romance is to see it as the story of a quest,



in which redemption and salvation are won by a hero in a struggle with the forces of evil. To write the history of philosophy as a romance would be to show how the grail of a final and absolute truth is finally secured by the heroic thinker or school who must battle the forces of error and illusion. There is something of such romanticism in many vulgarized forms of Platonism or in Descartes's story of his self-constitution of a rational philosophy in the teeth of the evil demon and the misleading paths of traditional learning; and Hobbes exemplifies another style of philosophical romantic history in his denunciation "Of Darkness from Vain Philosophy and Fabulous Traditions" which was to be countered by a sovereign materialism. A comic history of philosophy would be one in which opposing forces are reconciled in a higher union, although the process of harmonization might require a series of conflicts, disguises, and misunderstandings. Hegel's conception of philosophy's history would be the best example; error is not rejected but *becomes* truth through the dialectical interplay of philosophical positions. There is also a tragic historiography of philosophy according to which the heroic efforts of the protagonist are necessarily fruitless because of the overwhelming force of an impersonal fate that scorns human efforts and perhaps because the quest was impossible and misconceived from the start. Heidegger tells such a tragic story of philosophy's Oedipal drive to uncover the present as such, which leads from the Platonic ideas to the Cartesian *cogito* and through modern varieties of subjectivism and idealism, ending finally with Nietzsche whose teaching of the will to power and final madness are poetically linked as are Oedipus' quest and his tragic self-blinding. Randall is often appreciative of the imaginative vision of these various ways of emplotting the history of philosophy, but he is also suspicious of their premature closure of both the scope and the end of the story as well as the way in which their speculative histories reinforce some human, all too human goals. As Rorty says of Heidegger, for example, we may "in the aftermath of being enthralled by the drama [he] stages, . . . begin to find it suspicious that Being stuck so close to the syllabus" of the German university's Ph.D. program in philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Such a remark serves to remind us that all of these narrative forms of *Geistesgeschichte* are

simultaneously modes of canon-formation, in which texts, thinkers and traditions are valorized or cast aside in order to establish a certain view of the vocation and destiny of philosophy.

Where then, does Randall stand? Is he simply a realistic, empirical historian of philosophy who tells it like it is, enlightened by his critique of the tendentious and speculative alternatives offered by competing traditions? In some ways Randall's rhetoric invites such a reading. To suggest that the career of philosophy could be emplotted as a series of episodes in the life of one who is practicing the world's oldest profession might be thought to be not so much the introduction of a serious literary, or narrative model as the rejection of such paradigms for the sake of a more hard-nosed history. Yet the ironic gesture carries with it its own formula, explanatory, and ideological commitments. Even if these are close to the ones that we might share as good Americans, liberals and philosophical pluralists, they are commitments nevertheless. The literary genre that is the home of such a debunking gesture is, of course, satire, the most human and least transcendental of the forms distinguished by Northrop Frye. Where the tradition might have represented Lady Philosophy as the goddess of truth, Randall sees her as the bruised but resourceful heroine of a picaresque eighteenth century novel; above all she is a survivor.

If we inquire into the ontological and broadly political positions typically associated with the genre of satiric history we will find them exemplified in Randall's historical work as a whole, and not only in the ironic passage that I have been interrogating. The satiric or ironic mode tends toward explaining events contextually, rather than in terms of the immaculate formal principles of romance, the inevitable clash of tragedy, or the organic unities of comedy. Ideologically, satire is associated with liberalism because it either denies or reinterprets the possibility of transcendence. Its predominant trope or figure of speech will be irony, involving as it does the contrast between what things are said to be or appear to be and what they are; while romance will tend typically toward metaphorical identifications, tragedy will stress metonymic oppositions and fragmentations, and comedy will employ synecdochic correspondences of microcosmic and macrocosmic structure. In *The Career of Philosophy*, Randall's

commitments to the explanatory, ideological, and rhetorical principles associated with satire are generally fairly explicit. "History," he tells us, "is a construction made by men, not by God or by metaphysical forces," signalling that we are dealing with a merely human narrative. Randall's contextualism and political liberalism, likewise, hardly need to be illustrated, although the particular form that they take is worthy of close examination. I am suggesting then that the ironic move so prominent in Randall, as in the personification of philosophy and the warning to judge her by her deeds rather than her words, is more than an adventitious stylistic accompaniment to a history that might have been written in a quite different style. For it must be part of the practice of the liberal, the contextualist, and the satirist, to point out the discrepancy between transcendental rhetoric and reality. As Randall says "the history of philosophic thought in the West has . . . been a series of episodes," that is a picaresque or satiric adventure, and if a history is to be emplotted as a series of episodes, it is necessary that the episodes first be sufficiently detached from one another so as not to support any illusory unities and sufficiently rich internally that they are susceptible of rewarding contextual analysis (*CP* I, 11). Randall makes such an episodic conception of philosophy's history plausible by suggesting that the idea of continuity is itself manifold. Accordingly, he is suspicious of those who invoke it without analysis to support the writing of histories of philosophy (or anything else) as continuous developments. Continuity, he points out:

is said to obtain in histories in three main senses, which we often confuse. (1) . . . the continuance or *persistence* of materials — physical objects, customs, habits, or ideas. (2) . . . "continuity" . . . means the *gradualness* of change, as opposed to leaps or mutations — as in Darwinian evolution as opposed to "revolution" . . . (3) "Continuity" is taken as synonymous with the fact of history itself, as the persistence of something that "has" a history, and unifies that history, but undergoes whatever changes happen to it, so that they can be viewed as a serial order of antecedents

and consequents of changes of that thing. Continuity in this sense means *uninterruptedness* of function in an institution or idea . . . (NHE, 67).

This text exemplifies Randall's analytical skills, as does his parallel demonstration of the several senses of origin (NHE, 69-71). The distinctions made here and some of the ways in which Randall deploys them in his histories are similar in some interesting respects to Nietzsche's questioning of "linear" history and to his distinction between origin (*Ursprung*) and heritage (*Herkunft*). Michel Foucault has shown that on the basis of such critiques and distinctions it is possible to articulate a rather far-reaching contrast between history and genealogy.<sup>6</sup> "History" would be the conventional enterprise that exists by means of seeking continuities of all sorts, by conflating the various kinds of continuity (such as Randall distinguishes) and by establishing origins and ends that are more than provisional. Genealogy, on the other hand, is the vigilant attention to breaks, differences and affiliations of the sort that cannot be reduced to concepts. Clearly, one side of Randall's enterprise is to carry out such a genealogical approach to philosophy by exposing spurious continuities and pointing to the differentiating forces of traditions — national, institutional, linguistic — that tend to give philosophy its episodic career.

Yet there is another side of Randall which seems to except his own discourse and the variety of American naturalism that it represents from such genealogical analysis. For it seems that only with the advent of such thought has philosophy gained a reflective knowledge of itself as the adjustment of conflicting cultural tendencies. Naturally this leads Randall to a certain kind of *Geistesgeschichte*, in which he canonizes those moments and traditions of the history of philosophy in which philosophy can be said to have been statesmanlike in the adjudication of cultural disputes. And, one might ask, how is such a stance to be distinguished from the sort of operation that Randall decries, in which philosophy is seen to culminate in the topics and problems of the present, or, more specifically, in the historian's own selection of what is most significant and promising in his own present? If, as Randall is fond of saying, philosophical ideas are not refuted but

discarded, is this point of view one that might itself be discarded? The question is the old one that must be asked of any philosophy of a historicist tendency: if philosophy is (as Hegel said) its own time comprehended in thought, ought we not to expect every philosophy to become, if not outdated, at least dated? Now I think Randall has no difficulty in acknowledging that his thought, and the wider philosophical climate that supported it, has its own cultural and institutional context. A changing context might lead to another kind of canon-formation with new and stranger sages and *Geistes-historiker* as our guides. Randall's conclusion in *How Philosophy Uses its Past* is significant: he quotes Dewey's warning that philosophy is in danger of falling into a new scholasticism if it fails to recognize that the most important contemporary philosophical question is "What is philosophy itself? What is the nature and function of the philosophical enterprise?" (*HPUP*, 99). Certainly the years since Dewey gave that warning and since Randall cited it have seen a rich growth in philosophical reflection on the nature of philosophy. Linguistic analysis, phenomenology and existentialism have all undergone metamorphoses: they are by and large no longer unconscious imitators of the sciences or of the incontestable pronouncements of esoteric religions. Frequently the metaphilosophical turn in contemporary philosophy has been marked by talk of the "death" or "end" of philosophy, as if reflection could follow only the example of the anatomist dissecting a corpse, rather than that of the biologist or physician attempting to understand the living creature. Randall's thought can be contrasted with such perspectives on the narrative level that I discussed earlier. For it might be said that of all the narrative forms discussed only the open-ended, satiric, episodic strategy of emplotment allows for a real future. Those who have argued that philosophy is at an end have typically been convinced by a romantic, comic, or tragic story, all of which depend upon some final closure. So Randall's work can be seen, above and beyond its rich articulation of specific traditions and thinkers, as a way of affirming the life of philosophy in its many manifestations. This is perhaps an aspect of what Randall calls philosophy's "imaginative and poetic" function. It involves the use of the ironist's art in a way that is as

old as Socrates but surprisingly contemporary. For by bringing philosophy down to earth, and construing her, ironically, as a member of the world's oldest profession, Randall also indicates how such a humble status might be the key to a long, rich, and varied life.

University of Kansas

#### NOTES

1. References to Randall's writings are:  
*GPI, The Career of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (New York, 1962)  
*NHE, Nature and Historical Experience* (New York, 1958)  
*HPUP, How Philosophy Uses Its Past* (New York, 1963).
2. Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History* (New York, 1984), p. 60.
3. Rorty, p. 71.
4. Cf. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957) and Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore, 1973).
5. Cf. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* and Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, 1977).

