Introduction: Explanatory Narratives in the History of Philosophy

Patricia Easton

Thinkers of the early modern period, particularly seventeenth-century Europe, were faced with an increasingly destabilized Aristotelian model of nature. The new mechanical philosophy, one that viewed nature as a machine, captivated the imaginations of the leading intellectuals in England, France, Germany and beyond. Yet, how the new mechanical model should be constructed—what metaphysics could best support the physics of matter in motion, and what method would best generate the evidence and demonstrations of the new science—were highly contested subjects. Thomas Lennon’s ground-breaking study, The Battle of the Gods and the Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655–1715,1 posits Descartes as the leader of the Gods, and Gassendi as the leader of the Giants, and argues persuasively that they defined the terms and debates that shaped early modern philosophy. Lennon’s reconstructions of the dialectics that raged in the latter half of the seventeenth century help us to step into the early modern age while eliciting the truths as well as the uncertainties of the past and present. The title of this volume is a tribute to Lennon’s seminal work, and the impact it has had on scholarship in the field.

Plato’s Sophist tells the compelling story of a perennial and interminable battle of ideas between the friends of the forms—the Gods—and the friends of matter—the Giants.2 The army of the Gods places being in the forms; the forms are real and absolute, as is their authority. The army of the Giants drags being down to matter; matter is relative and changing. How is it that we attribute hot and cold, motion and rest, virtue and vice to the same being? What becomes of qualities like justice and wisdom in the uncertain hands of the giants, and in the assured minds of the Gods? Ultimately questions of being in the battle come down to normative questions of the proper exercise of moral and political authority. And, although the terms shift and change through time and place, and different historical moments yield different winners and losers, the battle rages on.

Lennon’s contributions to early modern philosophical scholarship are broad and deep. A quick perusal of his bibliography (included as an appendix to this volume) shows he has produced significant studies of major philosophers such as Descartes, Gassendi, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Moreover, Lennon has helped to bring various “minor” thinkers such as Desgabets, Régis, Cudworth, Foucher, Bernier, Huet, François Bayle, and Pierre Bayle to the fore of scholarly discussions. Such additions have enriched our understanding of the issues as they were understood in the period, and built bridges to the philosophical discussions of the present. Lennon’s translation and commentary on Nicolas Malebranche’s Search After Truth has stimulated the much-deserved restoration of Malebranche to the major list of thinkers of the seventeenth century.3 Beyond these important contributions is Lennon’s approach to telling the history of philosophy. Lennon describes his approach as having one foot in the camp of the historians of ideas, who are concerned with the interpretation of texts in historical terms; the other foot in the camp of the historians of philosophy, who are concerned with the interpretation of text only in so far as it informs contemporary philosophical concerns. By adopting the nominalist-relativist stance of the giants, Lennon argues that our job is to construct simpler, more efficient, more fruitful, and more interesting histories of philosophy.4 Once freed of the realist-absolutist goal of finding the history of philosophy, philosophy and history become continuous, and the two camps, whether they be historians of philosophy and historians of ideas, or gods and giants, find themselves along a continuum. Rather than an interminable battle awaiting a victor or a grand synthesis, there are multiple histories to be told with multiple perspectives to be represented. Out of the values of relativism, skepticism, and tolerance comes the unity of epistemic and political difference.

There are other metaphors and narratives not unlike Lennon’s gods and giants that offer a framework for a simple, efficient, fruitful, and interesting history of philosophy. For example, in Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay on Tolstoy he famously quips, “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” He proceeds to classify thinkers and philosophers throughout history into one of the two camps: the hedgehog, who views the world through the lens of a single defining idea such as Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel, Nietzsche, etc., and the fox who draws on a wide variety of experiences and for whom the world cannot be boiled down to a single idea, such as Aristotle, Erasmus,