Ecclecticism and the History of Philosophy

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Eclecticism has recently been identified as a philosophy preferred by many thinkers, many of them German, in the last two decades of the seventeenth and the first three decades of the eighteenth century. Among historians of philosophy, philosophical eclecticism has been recognized as an important phenomenon of the early enlightenment (Frühzeitung), and interpreted in the context of the critique of prejudice.

Eclecticism has been found behind the injunction "to think for oneself" and has been also thought of as related to conceptions of certainty and "judgment" (Urteilung). A larger context has been opened up by interpreting eclecticism as an early modern philosophia christiana. Where twenty years ago little was known about eclectic philosophy, today we know almost too much, as witnessed by the recently published comprehensive inventory of texts which use the term. It is quite stunning how a whole new world of thought has emerged and been interpreted by historians of philosophy: terra incognita discovered!

It is possible, however, that the new historical knowledge about eclecticism has adapted too rapidly to the traditional conception of the history of philosophy. There is a common assumption that every "ism" indicates some position and eclecticism is consequently understood as a—rather weak—philosophical position which existed only for a very limited period, possibly a period of crisis. In this perspective eclecticism was held to disappear when contradicted and supplanted by systematic philosophy. Even after its "discovery" today, historians of philosophy will insist that eclecticism lacked any raison d'être and was therefore never again taken up as a part of a philosophical program, with the single exception of that of Victor Cousin. Even in the eighteenth century Christian Wolff and Johann Gottlieb Fichte accused eclecticism of being a philosophy without foundation. Not much later Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel tried to discern the "principles" implied in every philosophical system and called eclecticism "altogether meaningless and inconsequent," which was as much as to say: no philosophy at all.

This philosophical verdict on eclecticism persists in today's histories of philosophy. Eclecticism is presented as something to feel sorry about, and eclectic thinkers have difficulty in winning the respect of historians of philosophy. Most of them still find it all too easy to sympathize with the way the early claims of eclecticism were ignored by systematic thinkers such as Christian...
Wolff or Immanuel Kant, and they also feel that Victor Cousin's self-proclaimed “eclecticism” was obviously weaker than Hegelianism. This understanding rests on distinctions between important figures in the history of philosophy and minor ones, between thoughts which last and ones which do not, between the peaks and valleys in the landscape of thought. In order to achieve historical understanding, however, one has to be careful not to apply these distinctions to explicit opinions only. To think of the history of philosophy in terms of conflicting positions or in terms of a hierarchy of ideas means thinking of it as a kind of intellectual battleground—which of course it was, and is. But still there is a danger of missing the relevant point at issue and in the case of eclecticism, this includes the idea of not having a philosophical position at all.11

In Medias Res

In 1745, when Hieronymus Georg Gloeckner, professor of Weltweisheit at Leipzig, started to question the existence of the philosopher Potamon of Alexandria, he practically concluded a debate which had been going on for nearly sixty years. Many German academicians, including some important ones, had participated in a debate about the eclectic philosophy, whose founding father Potamon was thought to be. Gloeckner had one of his students defend a dissertation in which he tried to reconstruct the so-called “younger Platonic philosophy,” using material mainly drawn from Johann Jakob Brucker's monumental history of philosophy, then just published. The aim of Gloeckner's dissertation was to establish whether Potamon was indeed a Neoplatonic thinker. Gloeckner tried to solve the problem by examining the available sources. There were no surviving writings by Potamon himself, and Gloeckner quickly determined that Diogenes Laertius had provided the most reliable account.12 This account, however, turned out to be very brief indeed. Diogenes Laertius called Potamon the founder of a sect which professed no particular doctrine, but chose whatever it pleased from other sects.13 Diogenes Laertius considered the emphasis on choice to be the distinctive feature in Potamon's philosophy and consequently called him “a chooser” in Greek: eklektikos, in Latin: electivus or eclecticus. Diogenes, writing at the end of the third century A.D., added that the eclectic sect was a recent phenomenon and therefore did not go into detail.

The source thus provided not so much information as a blank space. It was this space—a bare indication of the existence of a new and special sect—that was transmitted by Diogenes for more than a thousand years along with other miscellaneous information about ancient philosophers. As we can see from humanist editions of Diogenes Laertius and commentaries on him, no one paid much attention to it till the end of the seventeenth century.14 In the middle of the eighteenth century, scholars like Gloeckner inaugurated a new period of indifference, pushing Potamon back into oblivion again. In between these dates however, eclecticism flourished as a fervently professed and debated philosophy. All was started off by the little note in Diogenes Laertius.

Secta Eclectica

Early in the seventeenth century, Justus Lipsius, a famous scholar from Leyden University, added a little commentary to the reference in Diogenes Laertius, saying that he liked the eclectic sect.15 Half a century later, in 1657, another great Dutch scholar, Gerhard Johannes Vossius, published a new version of Diogenes Laertius, which devoted the whole final chapter to the eclectic sect, whereas Diogenes had mentioned it only in his preface. After all the sects come, for Vossius, a sect which is not itself another sect, but which regards them all as its sources. Vossius, like Lipsius, praises this philosophy and seems to include himself among its followers, by concluding that one should indeed choose the best from all existing sects.16

It is of course true that if Vossius had had time to continue his history of philosophy, the eclectic sect would have become one episode amongst others, so losing its privileged place at the end.17 Another history of philosophy, published almost at the same time by Vossius's colleague Georg Horn, illustrates this point: when modern philosophy was included the eclectic sect lost its prominence.18 Vossius probably had a different opinion of modernity in that he still clung to the “prejudice of antiquity,” not granting much originality to later thought. But it is precisely in this perspective that his appraisal of eclecticism becomes important, as can be seen in reference to yet another contemporary history of philosophy, by the Englishman Thomas Stanley. Stanley confined his history to ancient philosophy, but never even mentioned the eclectic sect.19 In stressing the active and methodical character of eclecticism, Vossius was clearly attempting to justify his own work as an historian who no longer believes in the possibility of importing the knowledge of things past into the present, but who takes responsibility for representing and interpreting the past using his own judgment. In the eclectic sect Vossius recognized a philosophy that might justify the work of an historian.20

It was with a similar intention that Gottfried Leibniz, philologist and professor for theology at the University of Leipzig, translated Stanley's history of philosophy into Latin in 1711, adding a new concluding chapter on the eclectic philosophy. Leibniz too wanted to show that “the eclectic manner of philosophizing” represents a decisive step away from the sectarianism of ancient philosophy. Leibniz's way of recommending the eclectic method to his contemporaries may also be understood as a reflection on the task of an historian. He highlights specific eclectic virtues such as "modesty, justice, caution and courage,"21 and seeks to avoid scepticism by means of the simple eclectic maxim "to investigate carefully the propositions and opinions of the philosophers, and to discern the principles and guidelines in which they agree."22 So in describing the eclectic sect the historian was indirectly explaining his general relationship to his object: past thought.

When in 1690 a second and enlarged edition of Vossius's little history of philosophical sects was printed, more than thirty years after the first, the book became part of an already vivid debate about eclecticism.23 The fascination was
not confined to scholars. In 1686 Johann Christoph Sturm, professor of physics
at the University of Altdorf, published a series of dissertations defending eclectic
isim an overly programmatic way. In 1688, there came the Philosophy of the Court (Philosophia Audita), of Christian Thomasius, a professor of law first in Lübeck, and then, from 1690, in Halle. Thomasius too unmistakably advocated eclectic
ism. The heated debate triggered off by Vossius, Sturm and Thomasius was to last well into the eighteenth century, and important new contributors included
Arnold Wesenfled, professor of ethics, logic and metaphysics at Frankfurt (Oder), and Johann Franz Budde, professor first at Halle and then, from 1705, professor of theology at Jena.

The debate over eclecticism was connected with some wider issues at the
time: freedom of teaching and research; independence from authority, both
cultural and theological; and the conditions for forming responsible judgments
and reasonable forms of discussion. To the eclectics, membership of a sect meant
repeating opinions without examination or understanding and they welcomed
eclecticism as an additional weapon in the fight against prejudice. Even
without knowing much about eclecticism, the general idea of an unjudged
selection of the best opinions suited the purpose of enlightened thinkers.
So the claim to be eclectic was associated unproblematically with a plea for a more
rational, moral and juridical style of philosophy, as put forward by instance
by Christian Thomasius. In many ways the urge for sect-free philosophizing was
linked to the critique of prejudices, discussed at great length around the same
time by the same people.

At first glance, then, it seems that Vossius did no more than hand over the
term "eclectic" to the philosophers. And indeed the theoretical signification of
the idea of eclectic thinking as superseding sectarianism was not lost on enlightened
intellectuals among the German academics, who were happy to march under the banner of eclecticism. However, the historical meaning of eclectic
ism never quite disappeared, and in the period 1680 to 1740 it was present in
all contemporary writings on eclectic philosophy. The idea of the eclectic sect
as nourishing itself from others was always at work even in the philosophical
debate, and was indeed at the very heart of the modern fascination with eclectic
ism.

Eclecticism is not equivalent to enlightenment, and although many enlightened
thinkers cherished eclecticism, they would use the term to epitomize their
claims. The critique of pedantry or Aristotelianism, of prejudices in general,
could dispense with all reference to eclecticism. Wherever this reference is
made, however, an historical problem becomes evident in terms of the relation
of present and past (modernity and antiquity) as well as in terms of the present
reflection on past doctrines. Viewed from an eclectic perspective, any critique
of sectarianism or authoritarianism is a position which must come at the end of
a history of opinions and arguments. At the same time, one has to realize from
this privileged final position that present opinions are not fundamentally dif-
ferent from opinions of the past, and that consequently it is no use simply to

reject the past. Rather, present thinking must relate positively to the past if it is
to avoid repeating it. If the present is a consequence of history, and if historical
understanding is a mediation for the present, then the philosopher and the
historian are not very different one from another anymore.

So behind the philosophical debate about eclecticism lies something like a
problematization of the burden of history, and it is probably through this de-
bate that, in the period around 1700, this problematization became a concern
for philosophers. From the eclectic position, the historical existence of phil-
osophy is a positive phenomenon, even though this may not mean much more
than having a past, being contingent, and taking many different forms. The
field opened up by eclecticism was different of course from any nineteenth-
century dialectics of spirit and time; rather it comprised all the handed-down
facts about philosophy and philosophers, the mass of miscellaneous information
about their life and opinions. In itself, the idea of representing tradition
was not of interest for any seventeenth-century philosopher; but every radically
modern philosopher finds himself indirectly concerned with it, since tradition
proves all former philosophers to have failed. This is precisely the meaning
of the term "sect"—an unsuccessful philosophy of interest only to a few follow-
ers. Eclecticism is a permanent discussion of sects and sectarianism, and thus
allows for enlightened thinkers to rekindle their proper aim; by way of respect-
ing the historical multitude of philosophical intentions, philosophers may find
themselves related to historical reality, not opposed to it. In this view, sev-
teenth-century eclecticism represents within the history of modern European
philosophy a first and fundamental recognition of the relevance of historical
knowledge to philosophy, without yet developing a proper historical interest.
The historiography of philosophy remained, up to Hegel, a scholarly enter-
prise. Even Leibniz, a philosopher and a scholar, only projected the writing of a
history of philosophy.

Philosophia Eclectica

There appears to be an important analogy in the debate about eclecticism in
Germany between the 1680s and the 1740s concerning eclecticism as a sect
which once existed, and eclecticism as involved in the formulation of every
great philosophy. The transition from secta eclectica to philosophia eclectica
marks the point of actual philosophical interest at the time. Furthermore, many
concluded not only from the existence of an eclectic sect to the possibility of
an eclectic philosophy, but also to the identity of eclecticism and philosophy
itself.

The transition from the (historical) secta eclectica to the (theoretical)
assumption of a philosophia eclectica can be found even in histories of philosophy,
as for instance in the mid-eighteenth-century history of philosophy by Johann
Jakob Brucker, scholar and pastor in Augsburg and member of the Berlin Academy
of Sciences. Brucker's history (published in Latin from 1742 onwards)
bears witness to the generalization of the phenomenon. In his view, eclecticism is at work everywhere in history—not of course labelled as such, but in terms of what it stands for. Long before Brucker, Sturm had been the first to argue that Aristotle was an eclectic, taking Aristotle’s constant critique of predecessors as proof. This retrospective ubiquity of eclecticism can also be found in many dissertations on eclecticism, as for instance in Johann Heinrich Zopf, master at the University of Jena, who included Thales, Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato among eclectic thinkers, as well as Zeno and Epicurus, “concluding the series of the old eclectics.” Other authors had yet other lists of names in order to prove that basically every great thinker of the past had been an eclectic. These interpretations all turn on the idea that these thinkers had predecessors whom they could not ignore. On this view, philosophers who made reference, critical or affirmative, to other philosophers formed the history of philosophy into a series of different inventions, each inaugurated by a new thought. It is this view which is fully integrated in the work of Brucker. While dealing with schools and sects Brucker was always concerned with underlying the achievements of individual authors. The formation of schools and sects thus represents forms of decadence or deviation from original intentions. At any rate, the authentic moment of philosophical thinking is identified exclusively with the distance taken towards the ideas and thoughts of predecessors.

The generalization of eclecticism is of course not so much an historical insight as a philosophical claim. Enlightened thinkers were not historians of philosophy. They interpreted the history of philosophy as the history of “honest heretics,” as Heumann said. Only exceptionally did they believe that eclectic philosophy might comprise nothing but the history of philosophy, an opinion held by the Jena moral philosopher Ephraim Gerhard. When Heumann designates Aristotle, Luther and Descartes as great eclectics, he does not state historical facts, but deliberately points to these philosophers as examples. There are trivial forms of this attitude, as when Protestantism is identified with the revolutionary struggle against authority. The schoolmaster Johann Heinrich Stuss of Gorba declared Luther an “arch-eclectic,” since he overthrew the greatest authorities of his time, Aristotle and the pope. The title “eclectic” serves here as an index for revolutionary intentions behind major historical changes. This “intentionality” of implicit eclecticism points to the supposed radicality of eclecticism—a radicality attributed to it as a method.

For Arnold Wesenfeld the fascination of the Alexandrian philosopher Potamion stemmed from the fact that he had recommended just a method and, consequently, that he professed no doctrines of his own. (The lack of information about Potamion was thus turned into a positive argument.) This is a quite radical point of view: the eclectic character of true philosophy consists in disrupting the dogmatic tradition and attempting to organize it anew. The moment of disruption and reorganization is described by some as meditatio (Budde), by others as examination (Teller, Thomasius) or as fruitful doubting (Feuerlin). It is the moment the philosopher appears as somebody who “uses his own eyes instead of those of others,” as Thomasius put it. It remains however a paradox that intellectual independence, whether claimed in the present or attributed to the past, cannot itself have a tradition except the one from which it tries to disrupt or emancipate itself: the tradition of philosophical doctrines.

In this way, radical implicit eclecticism was thought to be identical to philosophical method. Budde called meditatio “the exact and diligent accommodation of thoughts to laws in order to find the truth.” Meditatio should be involved in every operation of the mind. Budde’s pupil, the Jena theology professor Johann Georg Walch, defines meditatio as “the examination of truth.” Teller calls it (following Cicero) “examination by free judgment”; an examination which subjects all existing philosophies to test in the light of the eternal search for truth. Sturm extends his definition of eclecticism as a method into a whole scientific research program, to which all scholars and scientists should subscribe if they want to “grasp the truth freely and be purified in their judgments.” Wesenfeld takes up this scientific formulation and writes that the eclectic must recognize truth in tradition (through reading) as well as in nature itself (through observation).

It is clear from these statements that the definition of eclecticism as a method cannot establish a concrete working program; as put forward by German writers of around 1700, eclecticism is primarily an intellectual activity. Only the really active mind is protected against sectarianism, Heumann says, and accordingly the real strength of a philosophy called eclectic depends entirely on the way of disrupting and re-organizing knowledge (constituted by tradition and experience).

On the one hand, eclecticism is self-determined thinking, but on the other, this self-determination is always endangered by parroting followers. Many contributors to the debate about eclecticism tried to encompass both sides of the phenomenon, both affirming the ideal and recognizing the inevitability of losing it time and again. The ideal was formulated for instance by Christian Thomasius who held that philosophy cannot be conceived as being dogmatically fixed. To explain why this ideal was constantly betrayed, and philosophy perverted into dogma, he turns back to the history of philosophical doctrines. It seems to be no coincidence that these analyses, undertaken by many writers, are often rather lengthy reflections on what today we might call the dialectical moment inherent in every formulation of philosophy. Arnold Wesenfeld dealt with this problem most diligently in the longest essay ever written on eclecticism (his four dissertations fill 170 pages in small quarto), an essay which for some reason did not find any echo in his time. Wesenfeld’s main point is that there can only be relative freedom from sectarianism, never absolute. In other words: eclecticism cannot dissipate sectarianism, and has to admit the historical possibility of it at any time, just as it presupposes its own possibility at any time in history. As a consequence of admitting that eclecticism and sectarianism are both ubiquitous, the question arises how to relate one to the other. For
the modern radical eclectic the problem was how to interpret sects and sectarians once their existence has been accepted not only as unavoidable, but as constituting the history of philosophy itself. This problem is primarily a hermeneutical one.

Interpretation of Philosophy

As soon as eclecticism is defined as a method of thinking, of philosophy, the difference between scholarship and philosophy begins to melt away. Philosophizing in an eclectic way means maintaining constant discussion with already formulated philosophical systems and thoughts, and thinking against their very formulation. Mistrusting the dogmatic character of philosophical propositions is simply the reverse of the conviction that all great philosophers have been eclectics. In order to transform this conviction into a practical attitude, a way of dealing with traditional philosophy has to be found, if scepticism is to be avoided. Budde says at one point that the philosopher is forced to play the role of the historian; he therefore has to have rules. Of course the eclectic attitude towards other philosophers does not lead to a fully historical conception of philosophy: it does not turn present philosophy into the historiography of philosophy (even in the case of Brucker, eclecticism is not the main motive for historical work). However, the eclectic attitude can lead to a limited acceptance of past philosophies without ending in despair about philosophy's fate and without being paralyzed by the multitude of forms it is expressed in. A typically eclectic interpretation would be not reproductive, but productive.

In all late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century dissertations dealing with eclecticism, rules of interpretation are put forward. These are only basic rules, even in a dissertation as long as Wesenfeld's, and fall well short of the hermeneutical considerations included in logical treatises of the time.35 In most cases, the often quoted motto from Horace, "not to swear on any master's words" serves as an explanation of what "selecting" exactly means, providing some sort of positive version of the quotation in form of general precautions. Freedom from prejudices and freedom of judgment are said to be one and the same: Wesenfeld sees the main evil of sectarian philosophizing in the hasty formation of opinion, influenced by contempt or adoration. On the other hand, perfection in philosophy would be "to know how to select with reason."36 The expression "to know" in this definition shows that the eclectic selection of the best represents a problem of knowledge and cognition. Consequently, Wesenfeld narrows down his definition in saying that the eclectic method consists in "understanding the thoughts and the works of others, not as the final result of cognition, but as an instrument for further perfection." What follows from this definition may very well be called a hermeneutical program. Once the general rule is accepted that no result of cognition, no end of thinking (terminum cognitivum) can be stated just because some proposition has been formulated and believed, there is no limit to further interpretation. So eclecticism takes a vital interest in interpretation, since no selection is possible without it, as Olearius affirms.37

Eclectics do not stop at single terms or propositions when they realize their "selecting" relation between present and re-presented past thinking. This is obvious from the widespread criticism of compilation: the mere putting together of different doctrines and dogmata is not sufficient to ground an independent judgment. There is general acceptance of Vossius's thesis that eclectics cannot be miscellanei.38 Wesenfeld attenuates this thesis only insignificantly in saying that although compilations do not constitute understanding, they may serve as its means.39 So even if the eclectics recognize the pedagogical and even scholarly merit of compilations, they refuse to identify it as their method of selecting. Selection is no exterior procedure, but requires interpretation, since there is always a difference between the original, authentic philosophy and its dogmatic form. Interpretation alone transcends the outward form, and the superiority of the "selector" resides not in his capacity to subtract or add parts of this or that doctrine, but in his reflection and close analysis of doctrines. Only through interpretation does the work of internal differentiation, selection and appropriation become possible.

The critics of eclecticism always had an easy job dismissing it, as long as they neglected its institutional interest in interpretation. It would indeed be very simple to think of eclecticism as a pure selection among given things, choosing without reading. However, it is very clear that philosophical eclecticism is from the outset characterized and distinguished by its hermeneutical insight that interpretation is unavoidable, and can only be perfected. Above all, it was their concern with interpretation which led the eclectics to criticize sectarianism. A judgment (judicium) could become a prejudice (praedjudicium), only once it had lost its original force as an authentic reflection and interpretative discussion of alternative opinions, and seems therefore to depend solely on unregulated inclinations and external influences (these are the praedicia praedictantes et auctoritates). From a sectarian point of view, this observation is impossible to make: it is precisely his incapacity to interpret the judgments of others that prevents the sectarian from regarding judgments as interpretations.

The eclectic stance is clear for instance from Wesenfeld's response to the Dutch scholar Johannes de Raey, a Cartesian. De Raey had attacked eclectic philosophers, saying that they confused the freedom of thinking with the simple rejection of sectarianism. Wesenfeld replied by saying that philosophical freedom cannot be achieved simply by rejecting sectarian authorities.40 He says: "Eclectic thinkers do not by any means hold that free philosophizing is nothing but the renunciation of sects, rather they combine freedom of thinking with respect for the writings and doctrines of the others." Respect is taken here in the literal sense of looking back: nothing within the tradition should be overlooked that may help to reveal the truth. In this explanation of eclecticism the philosophical program mutates backwards into the scholarly enterprise which generated the whole debate. And Vossius was well aware that it would require
great industry (industria), intelligence (ingenium) and judgment (judicium) to attend to a limited number of sects, let alone to all of them. Although it seems utopian, Wesenfeld's program of respecting all sects was probably meant to be applied only to the main rival sects of his time, Aristotelian school philosophy and Cartesianism. But then, how could one respect both of them equally?

Concilium

Eclecticism does not definitively privilege one doctrine or another: this attitude is often represented as the position of "not only, but also." In the German writings around 1700 this position is called one of "reconciliation" (concilium)—with the exception of Budde and Gottlieb Stolle, professor of philosophy at Jena, both of whom denied eclectic thinkers the title conciliators. All other authors explicitly included the task of taking "seemingly contradictory propositions" together within the hermeneutical program of eclecticism. No simple compilation was intended, and no catalogue of what could be reconciled was established. The principle of method was summed up by Olearius when he said that everybody should be heard (omnes audiantur). Thomasius put it differently, declaring that eclectic philosophy "is not a partisanship, but extends the same love to everybody." Sturm pleaded that war among philosophers has to end, and no proposition should be rejected out of hand.

The reconciliation or mediation involved in concilium does not ignore differences—but on the contrary. Mediation presupposes a recognition of diversity and devotes itself to searching for a "third term" to enable the opposing nature of the differences to be relativized. This third term, in which a common measure was to be found, was truth. With respect to truth, the eclectic program of interpretation amounted to a radically simple will to dismember tradition, and put together whatever could be put together. An eclectic course can therefore be designed as an encyclopedia of disciplines, as proposed by Jakob Wilhelm Feuerlin, professor of logic at Altdorf University. It is however important to realize that there is no proper eclectic canon, but rather a continual examination, as Wesenfeld warns. When eclectics call the truth neither Christian nor pagan, they do not want to define how to approach it, but to indicate what ways are leading towards it, especially what ways out of the past.

It was of great importance for the eclectics to find ways to truth in general, and to accept and try those ways others have found, in other times, at other places. Eclecticism may appear to traditional minds as revolutionary, since it does not respect the letter of any doctrine; but at the same time to moderns it will appear as traditional, since it does not share the belief in methodological exclusivity. A fine example is Wesenfeld's treatment of Francis Bacon. Quite often he quotes from Bacon with approval. But sometimes his quotations break off abruptly when Bacon starts to get angry about ancient philosophers and begins to attack the tradition. For instance Wesenfeld quotes a long passage by Bacon criticizing scholars, but omits the last sentence where Bacon refers to the "previous poverty of spirit." Instead Wesenfeld quotes another passage in Bacon where reference is made only to the "poverty of things which have previously occupied the mind." The accusation of tradition is transformed into an accusation of a traditional attitude. So when Wesenfeld quotes Bacon mocking the scientific achievements of the ancients, he is leaving out the famous last sentence where Bacon calls truth "the daughter of time" (veritas filia temporis). Instead Wesenfeld alludes to the humanist thinker Ludovico Vives and proposes the truly eclectic thesis that time cannot change truth. Of course such attenuation of criticism of ancient and medieval philosophy did not prevent the eclectic thinkers from identifying with modernity and agreeing with Bacon and Descartes in discarding traditional metaphysics. Eclecticism was however very much keen to play down the opposition between ancient and modern science. Wesenfeld did not quote Bacon's opinion that one cannot learn anything from Greek philosophy, but replaced it with his own opinion that one can profit even from the examination of the most abstract scholastic terminology.

With respect to its principle that truth has to be freed from hiding in tradition and experience, eclecticism can be understood as part of the "querelle des anciens et des modernes." Eclecticism may even count as evidence that this "querelle" took place in philosophy as well. However, the eclectic obligation towards truth leads to a certain appeasement, a kind of coexistence of old wisdom with modern scientific rigorism, which eclectics also see as studio sapienzen. It is for this reason that Wesenfeld often refers to Jakob Thomasius. The impartiality of eclecticism is yet again based upon the double feature of philosophy which eclectic thinkers are articulating all along for them, philosophy as a whole has to be interpreted on the one hand as something prone to dogmatic fixation (sectarianism) and on the other hand as something originally undetermined (libertas sentendi). In this sense the recognition of an inner conflict in the "secta eclectic" as stated by Vossius can be said to have led to a deep reflection of the character of (modern) philosophy and a problematization of its claims in the light of what might today be called the historicity of reason.

Extra Muros

There are several other aspects of the role and function of eclecticism within the history of philosophy which have to be explored in order to explain the rapid career of the term. There are perhaps three main areas of interest for an historian of philosophy.

Without much doubt eclecticism has to be considered firstly as a part of the history of philosophical hermeneutics. There is as yet no adequate history of hermeneutics before Schleiermacher. If we think of Schleiermacher's general hermeneutics as making explicit the inarticulate rules presupposed in every process of thinking, then eclecticism could be recognized as an early form of it. Its insight into the fact that one cannot go beyond the structure of prejudices,
and that prejudices have practical meanings, makes eclecticism a kind of hermeneutical philosophy quite distinct from other hermeneutical theories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (logical ones as in Johannes Clauber, historical ones as in Martin Chladenius, and biblical ones as in Richard Simon and Baruch Spinoza). The eclecticism of the seventeenth century should probably be understood as “an effort of thinking in a late culture” and therefore a sort of reaction against Aristotelianism and Cartesianism.

Secondly, eclecticism belongs to philosophy’s “querelle des anciens et des modernes.” From the study of eclecticism one can conclude that the birth of modernity takes place in the acknowledgment of being related to tradition, or—more precisely—to antiquity. The very emergence of eclecticism as a philosophical concept, as well as its repeated though sporadic appearance throughout European intellectual history, is an important indication that modernity has a problem with antiquity. The eclectic belief that eclecticism has always been practiced proves the gap between antiquity and modernity to be almost unbridgeable for the moderns themselves. The fact that eclecticism grants “older” philosophers the right to be heard, and that it bases knowledge on interpretation, indicates the gap which has to be bridged by special efforts. The traces within modern thought of this reflection upon older figures became fully legible only in the nineteenth century, when the history of philosophy functions as an integral part of philosophy itself, for example in Hegel. But already in the eighteenth century, when the history of philosophy first emerged as a literary genre, emancipating itself from the erudite restraints of “historia litteraria,” the problem of the relation between ancient and modern thought represented a major difficulty. The narrative construction of philosophy as one (single and identical subject) of “its own” history was then the most successful conciliatio between philosophy and its many historical articulations.

Thirdly, eclecticism is opposed to systematic philosophy. Next to scepticism and theology, eclecticism was probably the most important enemy of the philosophical style in thinking and writing inaugurated by Descartes. To a far greater degree than all others, eclectics developed an affinity with the historian’s attitude and even with an empirical and historical conception of thought itself. In its empirical conception, eclecticism aims not only at criticizing the weaknesses of the human mind, but also at investigating them in the hope of formulating a theory of the actual process of cognition. In its historical conception, eclecticism tries to transform the critique of sects and doctrines into historical knowledge about tradition, in order eventually to construct a history of philosophy which would be a sort of philosophy of history at the same time. Already very early in the eighteenth century, such empirical and historical conceptions were clearly contradicted by systematic philosophy, as in Christian Wolff; or, later, Immanuel Kant. However, even if overruled as a model for philosophy, eclecticism belongs in its very anti-systematic intention to the same period the canon of great philosophers labels as the modern times.

There are two further ways of exploring eclecticism, both concerned with extra-philosophical features which might help to explain why its popularity in Germany was restricted mainly to the period around 1700.

Fourthly, to start an investigation of eclecticism in terms of intellectual history rather than the history of philosophy we have to care about the religious and/or theological subtext of the claim for free and independent—secular—scholarship. To what extent this subtext influenced the interest in eclectic concerns may be learned from the philosophy of Leibniz—who did not use the term eclecticism or related ones—and his efforts to reunite all Christian churches.

In his early writings, Leibniz insisted on several occasions on the validity of forgotten philosophies: “when we penetrate to the foundations of things, we observe more reason in most of the philosophical sects than commonly believed.” In his New Essays Concerning Human Understanding, he characterizes his own system as a synthesis of “Plato with Democritus, Aristotle with Descartes, the Scholastics with the Moderns, theology and morals with reason,” and in his essay on the Théodice he claims to have found “that in the case of disputes among men of high merit, there is reason on both sides, albeit with respect to different aspects.” Clearly these claims belong to the eclectic vocabulary of the time, and many may find no difficulty in aligning Leibniz with eclecticism. More interesting still is the fact that Leibniz was not only theoretically close to eclecticism but also exercised conciliatio in practice, as witness his project of uniting the Protestant and Catholic churches, which he based on his insight into the insignificance of most controversies between Protestants and Catholics and for which he argued in his letters to Bossuet. After the failure of this project, he concentrated his efforts on the reunification of the Lutheran and the Reformed churches, again basing himself on the assumption that theological differences were insignificant. The whole philosophy behind Leibniz’s “politics for European peace” emphasizes that the sense of philosophical or theological divergence is not simply a matter of having to deal with the history of philosophy and its many sects. It is rather the other way round, and the attention paid to the history of philosophy and its many sects is motivated—in Leibniz as well as in eclectic writers—by the idea of truth being widely distributed, so that one has to look for it everywhere. The assumption of the ubiquity of truth goes always with the idea of being able to reassemble it and thus to reveal stable ground shared by different dogmatisms, religious as well as philosophical.

The example of Leibniz is not intended as a model of how to extend the concept of eclecticism beyond its explicit formulation, but rather to orientate the historian’s attention to the political, theological and religious dimensions of what eclecticism meant around 1700. It is no surprise that Leibniz, never being affiliated to any university after he left Leipzig and Altdorf as a student, could do what no thinker within the university could do, that is, openly attempt to connect theory with practice, philosophy with politics, theology with conciliation of belief. We have to look much closer into the histories of universities.
to determine whether there were similar tendencies at work and exactly what part eclectic thinking may have played in them.

University teachers might have had another reason for favoring eclecticism, one which stemmed from their very practice of teaching. So the fifth context would be the situation of university teachers at German universities in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries. The philosophical faculty was then considered the lower faculty, and having a university career usually meant moving upwards and getting a professorship at one of the “higher” faculties, of jurisprudence, of medicine, or of theology. The exact measures every university member had to take in order to be able to make that upward move depended on the churches and on the state where the university was situated. But they also depended on the students: inasmuch as the philosophical faculty was designed to train students in knowledge of a kind which today would be described as philological or historical, teachers could hardly prevent the students from getting involved in debates. It was (and still is) impossible to teach how different philosophical “sects” argued about matters of the highest intellectual interest without kindling a curiosity and a desire to investigate the differences further or even to settle the disputes. We can indeed observe that eclecticism was especially popular among young academics, that is to say among “authors who had not yet reached the end of their career. Most of them later became theologians and never again produced anything eclectic, as for instance Buddle who became theology professor in Jena in 1705. It would be interesting to investigate this question further, and find out more about academic life in Jena, Halle, and Leipzig, where most of the dissertations dealing with eclecticism were produced. It is highly probable that the study of early eighteenth-century eclecticism can at least partly be explained by the structure and the needs of school-philosophy as taught in universities.

The degree to which historical knowledge was used in the teaching of philosophy at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth is difficult to determine. At least to the eclectic historians of the early eighteenth century, eclecticism made it possible to have an attitude of detachment to the contents of every philosophy, yet it made it also necessary to establish what exactly that content was. Thus eclecticism could not fail to affect the method of teaching the philosophy, which had to include indications of the origins of current opinions, and reflections upon the differences between them. It is at any rate very important not to disregard the historical situation in which eclecticism was popular and openly affirmed, since this situation could tell us more not only about the motives behind the promulgation of eclecticism, but also about the reasons for its subsequent decline.

Notes


6. Michael Albrecht, Elektrik. (Stuttgart, 1895.)

7. When Paul Hazard spoke of the “Crisis of the European Mind” (Le Crisis de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715, Paris, 1961), eclecticism was unknown to him.

8. When Victor Cousin tried to use the term “eclecticism” in opposition to Hegelianism, his success was limited in France, and he was heavily criticized in Germany; Amadeus Wehrlı called the term “most inconvenient”: see his review of Cousin’s Fragments philosophiques in Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen 25 Sept. (1834): 1359. On Cousin see No. 18/19 of the journal Corpus (Paris, 1992).


11. W. Schmidt-Biggemann views eclecticism from previous encyclopedic systems such as polyhistoria. See his Topica Universalis, 255 and 288–92; M. Albrecht regrets that “no philosopher has ever published a truly eclectic work” and that “no great philosopher was ever men whom by the idea of eclectic (Elektrik, 475, 466; Dreyfus: speaks of an “eclectic syndrome” (Zur Entstehung und Eigentum, 310 and passim).


14. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, Life and Opinions of Famous Philosophers, preface. There are only two other places where the Greek word elektos is used in a similar way: the Storiomata of Clement of Alexandria and the so-called “Suida” of the tenth century. Cf. Schmidt-Biggemann, Theorie und Tatsachen, 217.

15. Cf. the commenrated editions of the history of philosophy by Diogenes Laertius by H. Stephanus (Paris, 1570); Th. Aikbrotzand (Rome, 1594); C. Casabonius (Leiden, 1595), P. Menapius (London, 1603), and H. Westenhal (Amsterdam, 1692).


17. G. J. Vossius, De Philosophorum Securis Liber (The Hague, 1657) ch. 21, 816.

18. Vossius died in 1649. His book on the philosophical sects was published by his son Isaac.


20. Thomas Stanley, The History of Philosophy (London, 1655); ed, ed. 1657, 3d ed. 1702.)
21. See W. Schmidt-Billigmann, Topica Universalis, 255ff., where the whole conception of Vossius's thought is characterized as eclectic.

22. See Gottfried Leibniz, De philosophia eclectica, in Historia philosophiae sciar, opinions, resque gestas, et dicta philosophorum secern causae complexa, autem Thomas Stainels, ex angelo sermo in lustrum transita, emendata, varia dissertationibus atque observationibus passum aucte (Leipzig, 1711), 1219; 2d ed. (Venice, 1731), vol. III, 358. Leibniz taught Greek and Latin until 1728, when he took over the chair of theology from Seligmann.


25. In the previous year three smaller dissertations had been published: Georg Paul Röntgen, methodicae eclecticae conforme colloquium principi simpliciter et absoluta prima dignitatem ab alioque venenum (Helmstedt, 1685); Gottfried Leibniz, De philosophia conclusa (Rosnitz, 1657).


32. Cf. J.J. Brucker, Kurze Fragen aus der Philosophischen Historie vol. 7 (Ulm, 1736), 3; Historia Critica Philosophia vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1742), 199ff.; vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1743), 421 and passim.


35. Buddle mentions for instance Socrates, Plato, Pythagoras, Aristotele, Zeno, Descartes, and tonatus primus (1st ed. 1703) (Halke, 1722), 96; (ch. 6, 42).


37. Cf. Brucker, Historia Critica vol. 2 (Per 2, Pars 1, Lib. 1, Ch. 2, Sect. 4), 190, on the negative effects of ambition.


42. Sturm remained rector of the school in Gotha until his death in 1768.

43. Arnold Wesenfeld, Dissertatio philosophica quaestor maturae selecions de philosophia secundum et Electica (Frankfurt, 1694), Dis. 3, Ch. 3, §§ 5.

44. Thomasius, Introducuntio ad Philosophiam autricum, Ch. 1, 190; see also the echo of this formulation in Heumann, Acta philosophorum, P. 4 (1716), 582.

45. Buddle, Elementa Philosophica, P. 1, Ch. 4, §§ 159ff.; see also his De Cultura ingenii (Halle, 1692, 2d ed. Jena, 1723), Ch. 3, §§ 92-94.

46. Cf. Thomasius, Introducuntio ad Philosophiam autricum, 582; also De Cultura ingenii.

47. Sturm, De philosophiae electivae necessitate, utilitate et praeestantia, ch. 2 in Philosophica Eclectica, 14.

48. Wesenfeld, Dissertatio de philosophia secundum et Electica, Dis. 3, Ch. 3, §§ 12. See also his De Cultura ingenii, ch. 2, § 30.

49. Heumann, Acta philosophorum, P. 4 (1716), 589 and 79.

50. Thomasius, Introducuntio ad Philosophiam autricum, 589.

51. Sturm, De philosophiae electivae necessitate, utilitate et praeestantia, ch. 2 in Philosophica Eclectica, 14.

52. Dis. 3, Ch. 2, §§ 12. See also his De Cultura ingenii, ch. 2, § 30.
On the concept of system and its idealistic interpretation see Martin Heidegger, "Was heißt System und wie kommt es zur Systembildung in der Philosophie?" Schellings Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit (Lecture 1936, Tübingen, 1971), 27ff.

82. Cf. Leibniz, Clarification of the Difficulties which Mr. Boyle Has Found in the New System of the Union of Soul and Body, in Leibniz, Philosophical Papers and Letters, ed. Leney E. Loemker (Dordrecht, 1969), 496. Loemker actually translates the original French ("lorsqu'en entre dans le fond des choses, on remarque plus de la raison qu'en ne croyant dans la pluralité des sectes des philosophes") differently, making it hard to understand: "...more reason than most of philosophical sects believed in." See also Discourse on Metaphysics, §11, ibid., 309 (rehabilitation of Ancient philosophy) and §22, ibid. 318f. (combination of different perspectives).

83. Leibniz, Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain, Book 1, Ch. 1, and Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal, Preface.

84. Albrecht cites several such opinions, with which he disagrees, cf. Eldkait, 295.


88. Albrecht, Eldkait, 472; cf. also 383–84; Albrecht is right in his general assessment, although Buille himself affirmed eclecticism even after becoming a theology professor, cf. his preface to Martinus Musius, Licht der Wahrheit... nebst dessen [i.e. Buille's] Approbation und Vorrede von der Welt- und Schaff-Geläthheit, Part 1, (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1st ed. 1709, 2d ed. 1716), §49.


91. There are also examples of those contrary to this assumption, such as Heumann, who, while advocating eclecticism as the only way of philosophizing, wanted to restrict reaching to dogmatic methods and contents. Cf. Heumann, Poetie sine Eptetetico misellanea ad literaturos am nostrum eros Accedit appendix exhibens dissertationes argumenta varius, Tomi 1, Liber 1 (Halle, 1722), 136.