# The Virtue of Consistency

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## Abstract: Consistency is commonly taken to be an interpretive virtue in scholarship, but the rationale behind this assumption is unclear. This paper explores the question of why we should take consistency to be an interpretive virtue; it finds that while considerations of accuracy might render the issue underdetermined, we nevertheless have reason to take consistency to be an interpretive virtue on the basis of considerations of philosophical worth.

## The History of Philosophy

Why is consistency an interpretive virtue? Commonly treated as falling under the more ecumenical heading of the principle of charity, considerations of consistency often implicitly guide scholarship in the History of Philosophy. For instance, Melamed (2013, p.275) states that ‘[t]he most (and possibly the only) legitimate application of charitable interpretation would be in the case of internal consistency within the same text’. Normore (2016, p.46) puts the point strongly: ‘Consistency may be the hobgoblin of small minds but it is the lifeblood of History of Philosophy’. What is more, consistency seems one of the less controversial aspects of charity, compared with, say, advocating reading a great historical figure as saying something *true*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Despite the ubiquity of treating consistency as a (or even *the*) guiding principle to interpretation, the rationale behind taking consistency to be an interpretive virtue is by no means immediately obvious. The purpose of this paper is not so much to convince readers that consistency is indeed an interpretive virtue, since I do not expect too much resistance on this front. It is rather to explore *why* consistency should be treated as an interpretive virtue.[[2]](#endnote-2)

First, let me briefly define consistency: to be consistent is to avoid contradicting oneself in the same work. One might of course contradict one’s previous work in later work, given that we are allowed to change our minds. Meanwhile, for a quality to be an interpretive virtue is for it to be a (defeasible) good-making feature of an interpretation. In short, to say that consistency is an interpretive virtue is to say that, *ceteris paribus*, we should prefer consistent over inconsistent interpretations.

Second, we must also clarify the discipline in question. The domain we are discussing is clear: it is Philosophy’s history. But there are different ways to study Philosophy’s history. Here my approach will lean heavily on Nomore’s (2016) careful take on the matter. Nomore differentiate between three broad approaches to Philosophy’s history.[[3]](#endnote-3) On one end, we have what Nomore refers to as Doxology. The Doxologist looks to the Philosophy’s history as a fruitful expanse where valuable philosophical nuggets might be mined (p.35). The Doxologist is interested almost wholly with the *philosophy* that might be derived from Philosophy’s history.[[4]](#endnote-4) On the other extreme, we have Intellectual History, which concerns itself more with the non-philosophical reasons behind certain ideas or arguments, such as what events may have prompted a certain work, or what texts and traditions might have influenced a thinker (p.34).[[5]](#endnote-5) The Intellectual Historian is interested primarily in the *history* in Philosophy’s history.[[6]](#endnote-6) In between we have the History of Philosophy. Scholars working in this tradition concern themselves with the philosophical issues in the historical texts. Historians of Philosophy are interested both in the philosophy *and* the history in Philosophy’s history—they study the philosophical ideas, and also the role these ideas play in those intellectual times.[[7]](#endnote-7) In short, the History of Philosophy looks to discern a purely philosophical narrative of Philosophy’s history. As Nomore puts it:

The History of Philosophy is thus poised, somewhat uneasily, between Doxology and Intellectual History. Its balance depends upon the truth of an assumption—that the history of Philosophy can be profitably understood as an internal history in the sense that what accounts for the historical development of Philosophy is (the consideration of) philosophical issues. (Nomore 2016, p.40)

My paper is oriented around the value of consistency for the History of Philosophy, rather than for Doxology or Intellectual History. This is primarily for the selfish reason that I consider my own self as engaging in this project, rather than because I think it is intrinsically superior to its siblings. Nevertheless, my discussion in this paper will allow me to draw conclusions regarding these adjacent disciplines as well.

Holding in view the distinctions between these three adjacent disciplines allows us to understand the different values that drive them to different degrees. For the purposes of this paper, I want to consider two distinct aims with regard to the study of Philosophy’s history: accuracy, and philosophical worth. As with any historical study, a study of Philosophy’s history aims at accuracy: it aims to offer an interpretation of historical figures that accurately represents the texts in their contexts.

However, although accuracy is a crucial goal, it is not the only one. Besides accuracy, one of the key aims of scholarship is to bring out philosophical worth in systems gone by. As Eckel, Garfield, and Powers (2016, p.37) argue, commentary on a text can develop philosophical insight that only exists *in potentio* in the text, and this is one of the key aims of the History of Philosophy.[[8]](#endnote-8) We study the philosophical greats of the past not merely as a curiosity, but in the hope of clarifying and furthering our understanding of philosophy by discovering thoughts and systems of great philosophical worth.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Let us revisit the threefold distinction between Doxology, History of Philosophy, and Intellectual History in the light of these dual aims. The Doxologist is little concerned with historical accuracy; her focus is on philosophical worth. As long as her study yields philosophically valuable insights, it matters little whether or not these views were actually held by the figures being studied. Meanwhile, the Intellectual Historian is little concerned with philosophical worth; her focus is on accuracy.[[10]](#endnote-10) Her study concerns the historical development of various ideas and the wider effects that these ideas precipitated; any concern with philosophical worth is incidental and instrumental. Finally, the Historian of Philosophy is concerned with both accuracy and philosophical worth.[[11]](#endnote-11) Unlike the Doxologist, the Historian of Philosophy seeks to discern the actual views of the philosophical thinkers being studied. And unlike the Intellectual Historian, the Historian of Philosophy is interested in the philosophical reasons for the theses and frameworks held by the thinkers under study. In particular, the Historian of Philosophy is concerned with *good* philosophical reasons for the intellectual positions being staked—that is, these reasons, and hence the philosophical systems they support, should carry philosophical worth.

As mentioned, the scope of my paper is primarily the discipline of the History of Philosophy, rather than Intellectual History or Doxology. Thus, we can precisify the question of the paper as follows: why is consistency an interpretive virtue in the History of Philosophy? Given that the History of Philosophy aims at both accuracy and philosophical worth, do either or both of these aims determine the worth of consistency?

Before we answer this question, there is another important qualification to be made. The result that the History of Philosophy is concerned both with accuracy and philosophical worth will be crucial later, but also carries an important immediate ramification that needs stating. The History of Philosophy, in virtue of its aims of bringing out philosophical worth in texts gone by, concerns itself with the study of *great* philosophical works.[[12]](#endnote-12) This is why obviously bad philosophers tend to be neglected in scholarship, since their works suffer a dearth of philosophical worth and insight to be brought out. For the Historian of Philosophy (as with the Doxologist), there would be little point in devoting considerable energy to understanding the views of a weak thinker.[[13]](#endnote-13)

This raises the following difficult but important question: what is philosophical greatness? A philosophically great thinker or work would be one that carried great philosophical worth. But this clarifies nothing in itself, because we in turn require an account of philosophical worth. It would be impossible to offer a complete—or even a satisfactory—account of philosophical greatness and philosophical worth in this paper. Perhaps the best we can do here is to offer a number of qualities that track these properties: a non-exhaustive list would include ingenuity, originality, importance, influence, clarity, systematicity, and ambition, for instance.

One important point that does need to be clarified here, however, is the relation between philosophical greatness and consistency. On the face of it, philosophical greatness does not in itself have obvious bearings on consistency. It should be uncontroversial that a philosophically great work can indeed be inconsistent—if the *Critique of Pure Reason* inadvertently contradicts itself at some point, this would not be a reasonable basis for dropping it from the philosophical canon. And certainly no one would think that being consistent automatically qualifies a work for philosophical greatness.

As we will see, however, there is a more indirect way in which philosophical greatness bears on consistency, as I will argue in the course of this paper.

## Accuracy and Consistency

Why is consistency an interpretive virtue in the History of Philosophy? Here is a tempting first pass: it is an interpretive virtue to read a great historical figure as consistent for reasons of accuracy. *Prima facie*, this seems plausible. After all, the History of Philosophy concerns the study of great thinkers, as we have seen. Being a great thinker suggests a certain ability to spot and resolve inconsistencies. Thus, a consistent interpretation is more likely to be correct than an inconsistent one. Nelson (2013, p.239) is a representative proponent of this intuitive viewpoint: ‘Why assume that most apparent inconsistencies in the texts are resolvable? I find it very unlikely that these geniuses left major inconsistencies in their thinking and did not notice them.’

However, Fogelin (1998) argues the opposite corner, claiming that considerations of accuracy recommend *inconsistency* rather than consistency. He makes the point that ‘conceptually rich and self-reflective’ systems are prone to ‘inconsistency and other forms of incoherence’ (p. 161). Since great historical figures are prone to produce deep, complex works, and deep, complex works are liable to inconsistencies, we should expect some measure of inconsistency in the works of great historical figures. If Fogelin is right, it is a mark of great philosophers to be inconsistent, at least to some degree.[[14]](#endnote-14) A similar viewpoint is expressed by Costelloe (2000), in his review of Garrett (1997). Costelloe worries that Garrett’s famously consistent reading of Hume is of questionable accuracy, precisely because of its lack of inconsistency:

… Garrett makes almost perfect sense of *everything* Hume says; and even when found wanting, it is “less philosophically vitiating than one might expect” (39). Charitable readings and Hume’s greatness, notwithstanding, for his work to be free of *all* contradiction would be extraordinary. (Costelloe 2000, p.442)

The point may be put thusly: while it would be remarkable for the work of a great historical figure to be riddled with inconsistencies, it would also be remarkable for such a work to be contradiction-free. Why should we expect a great historical figure to be utterly free from human error? Great they may be, but surely no amount of genius should grant one immunity from human error, especially in crafting such convoluted masterpieces. In this vein, Glock (2008, p.892) has argued that due to the evolution of complex ideas in a text, simple inattention might mean that inconsistencies occur, and so we should not be afraid to ascribe explicit contradictions to the text. He puts the point sharply: ‘Commentators who believe that one must never ascribe inconsistent views to a text have, I suspect, never bothered to reread their own writings’ (*ibid*.).[[15]](#endnote-15)

Besides the possibility of a great historical figure accidentally committing inconsistencies, there is also the possibility of their *intentionally* doing so for non-philosophical reasons. Great thinkers are great partly in virtue of their iconoclast ideas. Consequently, social circumstances might dictate that a philosopher be prudentially required to conceal or even deny some controversial doctrines they endorse, often of the sort that will raise religious, political, and moral hackles. In such cases, committing a few strategic inconsistencies might well be the most expedient method of throwing critics off the scent. In such a case, an interpretation that is accurate to the texts will be inconsistent.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Thus, it seems that considerations of accuracy do not obviously decide whether consistency is an interpretive virtue. On the one hand, great philosophers are philosophically skilled and incredibly clever, which inclines them to be capable of avoiding inconsistencies. On the other hand, great philosophers are prone to ‘conceptually rich and self-reflective’ systems, which tend to lend themselves to inconsistencies, and moreover, in virtue of their maverick thinking, they may have had non-philosophical reasons to obscure their true beliefs by means of deliberately introducing inconsistency; under such conditions, an accurate interpretation would attribute inconsistency. In abstraction and by itself, it is unclear that considerations of accuracy are sufficient to recommend consistency. Why then should we take consistency to be an interpretive virtue?

## Philosophical Worth and Consistency

I do think that consistency is an interpretive virtue in the History of Philosophy, but in virtue of considerations of philosophical worth rather than of accuracy. My argument proceeds thusly. I take it to be uncontroversial that it is good to attribute consistency to works that are in fact consistent. More controversial will be cases in which a work is *in fact* inconsistent, but where we are not in a position to definitively judge this inconsistency. Methodologically speaking, how should we interpretively approach such cases, given our imperfect epistemic vantages?

In order to abstract from considerations of textual evidence, assume for the purposes of the following argument that textual evidence is inconclusive regarding whether the in fact inconsistent work in question is inconsistent or not, which is simply to say that it is unclear from a simple examination of the texts whether or not the author endorses inconsistent positions within the same work. Do we have reason to interpret this work as consistent or inconsistent, given what we know?[[17]](#endnote-17)

For this inconsistent philosophical work, either

1. There is a consistent version[[18]](#endnote-18) of it that is of equal or greater philosophical worth, or
2. Any consistent version of it will be inferior in philosophical worth.

If (i) is true, then the inconsistency of the work actively detracts from its philosophical worth. Thus, this inconsistency cannot be an interpretive virtue, insofar as the History of Philosophy aims at philosophical worth. In such a case, consistency proves an interpretive virtue, since it brings out the philosophical worth of the work, in the same way that archeologists brush the dirt and detritus off excavated artifacts to better reveal their splendour.[[19]](#endnote-19) In fixing problems that an author might have succumbed to, or removing distracting (but perhaps politically necessary) misdirections, a work of equal or greater philosophical worth is uncovered.

If, on the other hand, (ii) is true and any consistent version of this inconsistent philosophical work would be of lesser philosophical worth, then any philosophical worth the work does contain is insuperably founded on inconsistency. In such a case, the work in question seems fundamentally flawed in a deep way, and this seems to preclude any claim to greatness. If the worth of a work is *fundamentally founded* on inconsistency (as opposed to incidentally containing it), then this work seems to fall short of greatness.

This is importantly not to deny that great works can indeed be inconsistent; an ingenious and important work might nevertheless contradict itself at certain points, as noted earlier. But if this is the case, then a consistent version of this work will be of greater philosophical worth, as in (i). Examine again the reasons cited above for why a great thinker might succumb to inconsistency. Perhaps the author deliberately obscured their own views due to non-philosophical reasons (such as political pressure), in which case a consistent version of the work seems at least equal in philosophical worth; indeed, a consistent version would arguably be even more philosophically worthy in having the additional philosophical virtue of clarity. Or perhaps the author’s system was conceptually rich and involved to an extent such that they fell to inconsistency despite their philosophical acumen, in which case a ‘fixed’ consistent version of the work would be of greater philosophical worth. Based on the plausible reasons given above as to why a great thinker might commit an inconsistency, it seems that consistent versions of such inconsistent works will be of equal or greater philosophical worth.

But if an inconsistent work is such that any consistent version of it will be of inferior philosophical worth, then it is difficult to see how such a work could be great. Any purported philosophical insight or appearance of profundity would be founded on contradiction. Thus, philosophical greatness has the following relation to consistency: a philosophically great work will either be consistent, or be such that any consistent version of it will be of equal or greater philosophical worth.

It might be objected that is perfectly possible for a great work to be fundamentally founded on *falsehood*; many scientific theories of days gone by have been subsequently found to operate on profoundly false assumptions, and certainly at least some of them will count as great. If so, why can a great work not be fundamentally founded on inconsistency?

This objection requires qualification, however. If a work is fundamentally founded on a falsehood that is very difficult to discern, this does not preclude its claim to greatness. Indeed, for most of the great scientific theories of the past that are fundamentally founded on falsehoods, discerning these falsehoods will typically be virtually *impossible* for the thinkers in question, given the intellectual frameworks and developments of the day.

If, however, a work is fundamentally founded on an *obvious* falsehood, then this seems to pose a far greater threat to its philosophical worth. If the falsehood is one that would be easy or trivial for the thinker to spot, and this falsehood is absolutely pivotal to the framework, then it seems that the work could not be great.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Similar considerations apply in the case of inconsistency. In general, inconsistency seems a much more serious philosophical sin than falsity, since one might not be in an epistemic position to discover falsehood, even in principle, but one is arguably always, at least in principle, in an epistemic position to determine inconsistency. Discovering an inconsistency requires no new information beyond what is already available to the author, and so failure to address inconsistency seems on first blush a more culpable oversight.

Nevertheless, the case of falsehood suggests an important qualification for the case of inconsistency. Like falsehoods, not all inconsistencies are created equal; some will be more or less discernible than other. For instance, a sufficiently complex framework will be such that discerning a particularly subtle inconsistency might prove to be astoundingly difficult. Or consider consistency proofs in mathematics, which can certainly be far from trivial. The difficulty of discerning a given inconsistency should also be relevant to our interpretative practices here.

Clearly, as with the case of falsehood, a work fundamentally founded on an obvious inconsistency cannot be great. Yet a work fundamentally founded on an inconsistency that is extremely difficult to discern might yet be great. We can try to precisify this thought. I propose the following qualification: a work cannot be great if it is fundamentally founded on a *discernible inconsistency*. A discernible inconsistency might be defined as an inconsistency that a deeply intelligent and knowledgeable expert in the field who has spent a great deal of time and effort thinking about the matter could reasonably be expected to spot.[[21]](#endnote-21) Presumably, the thinkers studied in the History of Philosophy typically fulfil this description of such an expert.

Thus, works falling under (ii) fail to attain greatness, with the qualification that the inconsistency is discernible. But in such a case, the question of whether consistency is an *interpretive* virtue does not so much as arise, since as we have seen, the History of Philosophy is in the business of studying great works; works whose worth are fundamentally founded on discernible inconsistencies fall outside the scope of the History of Philosophy in virtue of falling short of greatness. With respect to such works, we lack intrinsic philosophical reasons to study them in scholarship.

Thus, in the History of Philosophy, considerations of philosophical worth provide a *prima facie* reason to attribute consistency even to great works that are in fact inconsistent, so long as the inconsistency in question is discernible. For the works considered in this discipline—that is, philosophically great ones—even an inconsistent work is such that a consistent version thereof will be of greater philosophical worth, and so we have reason to attribute consistency to the works studied, if the textual evidence leaves the question ambiguous.

## Conclusion

Thus far, I have argued that where textual evidence is inconclusive regarding the consistency of a text, consistent interpretations should be preferred.[[22]](#endnote-22) Of course, if the textual evidence tells strongly in favour of an inconsistent interpretation, then it might be the ‘best’ interpretation all things considered, since considerations of accuracy might trump those of philosophical worth; if textual evidence strongly suggests inconsistency, then it might be that we should read the work as inconsistent. However, given that consistency is an interpretive virtue in the History of Philosophy, where textual evidence underdetermines the issue, if there is a plausible interpretation that resolves an apparent inconsistency, then it seems that it should *ceteris paribus* be accepted.

More concretely, how might we apply this preference for consistency? It might help to consider two apparently tricky cases. First, consider the case of philosophers who aim to raise equally compelling arguments for either side of an issue in their works. Should we read such philosophers are inconsistent?

In some such cases, such philosophers might undertake this project in order to make the case for a third consistent position. For instance, a Pyrrhonian sceptic might offer compelling arguments for both sides of an issue, but she does so to establish a consistent view, that is, that we should suspend judgment—the Pyrrhonian certainly commits no inconsistency, because her point is that we should endorse *neither* of the incompatible options.

But say that the philosopher in question actually endorses both inconsistent positions. In such a case I take it that such works will admit of a consistent version that is of at least equal philosophical worth. The philosophical value of such works seem to reside in staking the claim for two opposing positions; although the author may choose to establish their point by actually endorsing contradictory positions, such inconsistency does not in itself seem to contribute to the philosophical worth of the work. Such a work could be set out as straightforwardly spelling out the motivations and weaknesses of competing positions, for instance; this might be less titillating, but does not obviously seem inferior in philosophical worth. Indeed, the straightforward version would have a greater abundance of the philosophical virtue of clarity, and so would arguably be of more philosophical worth. In short, a figure may note that there seems an equally good case to be made for two incompatible positions, without committing an inconsistency by endorsing both. In such cases, the inconsistency itself, while perhaps dialectically useful, seems philosophically superfluous.

Consider a second case: say a philosopher attempts to develop at the same time two competing and mutually incompatible solutions to the same problem, without clearly endorsing either, or even making clear that they are mutually exclusive. (Leibniz might be an example of such a philosopher.) Should we read such a thinker as inconsistent?

The answer is similar to the previous case. Rather than reading the thinker as endorsing mutually incompatible solutions, we can read the thinker as proposing instead the consistent thesis that one of these solutions is true—that is, the thinker should be read as claiming ‘X or Y’ rather than ‘X and Y’. This consistent reading will be of greater philosophical worth, given the mutual incompatibility of the two solutions, and so it is a superior interpretation, *ceteris paribus*.

Finally, to conclude, what should we make of the value of consistency in Doxology and Intellectual History? I have argued that consistency is an interpretive virtue in the History of Philosophy because this discipline aims at uncovering philosophical worth. Correspondingly, there is no clear and obvious rationale for treating consistency as an interpretive virtue in Intellectual History, insofar as it does not share this aim. Meanwhile, Doxology only aims at uncovering philosophical worth; thus, consistency should be, if anything, even more important to this discipline than it is in the History of Philosophy, perhaps bordering on an inviolable constraint.[[23]](#endnote-23)

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1. See for instance Melamed (2013), who trenchantly criticises the practice of tuning our interpretations according to what we find philosophically plausible under the guise of charity. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. One explanation is offered by Nelson (2013): he takes it that Historians of Philosophy should undertake a methodology of reading important figures as presenting philosophical systems, and argues that doing so raises a presumption against attributing inconsistencies to these figures. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Of course, any given work on Philosophy’s history might not fit neatly into one of these three archetypes, but might cut across them in a number of aspects. Nevertheless, considering these paradigms will be conceptually useful for our purposes. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This approach has been (fairly or unfairly) become associated with Bennett (1984), although it is debatable to what extent his subsequent work in Philosophy’s history falls under this heading. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The distinction between what Nomore calls Doxology and Intellectual History is an old one, and has been presented under a number of different guises. A full discussion of the history of this distinction is beyond this paper, but briefly, some context is as follows. An influential statement is found in Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner (1984), which distinguishes between History of Philosophy and Intellectual History, with the former being a wholly philosophical enterprise, and the latter being a historical contextual one; an even earlier distinction between the History of Ideas and the History of Philosophy is found in Williams (1978, pp.9–10). A very elucidating discussion of the evolution of these distinctions and approaches is found in Garrett (2004), which seeks in part to offer a history of the philosophy of the history of Philosophy.

   More recently, Lærke (2013a, p.1) raises a similar distinction between ‘appropriationist’ and ‘contextualist’ approaches to Philosophy’s history. The former studies the history of Philosophy as a source of ideas in service of contemporary philosophy while the latter studies the history of Philosophy for its own sake and on its own terms, with little concern for making a positive contribution to current philosophy. Edwards (2012) distinguishes between ‘collegial’ and ‘contextual’ approaches to the history of Philosophy, but the distinction is essentially the same. Vermier (2013) criticises this distinction between appropriationist and contextualist approaches, and proposes an alternative one that differentiates between the use of history in Philosophy and the history of Philosophy, although it remains that the former is philosophical while the latter is historical in their practices. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Influential defences of the importance of recognising the *history* in Philosophy’s history are offered by Garber in Garber (2004) and Garber (2005), although I would not classify his work as purely Intellectual History. This builds on earlier such exhortations such as Ayers (1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kenny (2005) and Catana (2013) are particularly nice statements of the importance of a notion of the History of Philosophy that take seriously both the history and philosophy. Vermier (2013) likewise defends a genealogical notion of the History of Philosophy that ‘takes the demands of both history and philosophy seriously’ (p.69). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Eckel, Garfield, and Powers make this remark in relation to historical commentaries on Dignāga, rather than contemporary scholarship, but the point certainly seems to generalise. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. These dual aims might come into conflict. As Garber (2004, p.17) notes, ‘the focus on philosophical *truth* [can distort] our *historical* understanding of the figure and his position’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For instance, Lærke (2013b) defends an ‘unapologetic historiography of philosophy’ that ‘is concerned with the correct historical interpretation of past philosophical texts, not with the philosophical merits of the doctrines it reconstructs’ (p.10). Smith (2013, p.41) argues for a conception of the history of philosophy that does ‘not take the strength or weakness of a historical figure’s ideas as the sole or even the principle criterion for taking an interest in them’.

    On the other hand, Beiser (2016) criticises what he calls the ‘New Historicism’ for overemphasising historical accuracy at the expense of philosophical value. Zarka (2005) similarly cautions against the dangers of allowing historical context to overwhelm philosophical content. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The Historian of Philosophy need not value these different aims equally, of course. For instance, Nomore states that ‘while the History of Philosophy may be in service to two masters [of History and Philosophy], it is to Philosophy that it renders the greater service’ (Nomore 2016, p.47). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This is not to deny the possibility of philosophical progress: past works can be great and yet the state of the discipline can nevertheless advance. For instance, Newtonian mechanics is undoubtedly a great accomplishment in the history of Physics, even if it has been superseded by more sophisticated frameworks. See Kenny (2005) for some discussion of this issue, although I take a more sanguine outlook than him on the resolvability of this tension. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. An Intellectual Historian might find such an endeavour worthwhile, if the weak thinker was an influential or pivotal voice of their day. Likewise, a Historian of Philosophy might have *instrumental* reason to study a weak thinker, for example because understanding a certain work would help in clarifying a great work, or would make sense of some larger tradition or school involving great thinkers. In such cases, considerations of accuracy should dominate considerations of philosophical worth in interpretation. We are not studying this work *qua* great work, but *qua* tool to understand other great works. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See my (Qu 2020, p.135) for a criticism of Fogelin’s ‘perspectivalist’ interpretation that reads Hume as holding inconsistent viewpoints. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Melamed (2013, p.275) raises the following related considerations: first, the author might not subscribe to ‘the standard formulation of the law of non-contradiction’; second, the author might have changed her mind, especially if the monograph in question is very long; and third, the internal inconsistency may result from unresolved deliberation by the author. In such cases, the most accurate interpretation might be an inconsistent one. That said, Melamed clearly considers these to be corner cases, since he nevertheless advocates charitably reading consistency into the works of great historical figures in general. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Although perhaps it could be argued that a consistent interpretation will be accurate to the ‘implicit text’ that the author *would* have wrote were it expedient to do so. See Normore (2016, p.33): ‘Historians of Philosophy can accept an interpretation of a text which has it not make sense *to themselves* only if they have an explanation of why the text might not make sense—say because it is corrupt or because the writer deliberately or inadvertently made it incoherent. In any of those cases the Historian of Philosophy studies that text only to access another implicit text which the author really wrote or really would have written were it not for extra-philosophical factors.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Of course, there is an objective sense in which we have reason to interpret the work as inconsistent, given that it is in fact inconsistent. My sense is the subjective one: from our epistemic standpoint, should we interpret the work as consistent or inconsistent? [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. ‘Consistent version’ is a concept that admits of vagueness, since there is indeterminacy about the degree of similarity required to make a theory a version of another, as opposed to an independent theory. However, I do not think this vagueness to be problematic. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This analogy is consonant with Smith’s (2013) archeological model for the History of Philosophy. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This is in some ways the flip side of the case of enthymemes in the text. We find it unproblematic to insert tacit premises that are trivial because of their obviousness: a great philosopher would not have failed to recognise them. Similarly, great philosophers should equally be able to recognise obvious falsehoods as well as obvious truths. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. This notion of a discernible inconsistency is that of an *intellectually* discernible inconsistency. My concern is to bracket off inconsistencies that are too difficult, intellectually speaking, to be discerned—being founded on such inconsistencies need not tell against the greatness of a work. Some inconsistencies might be indiscernible to an author not for intellectual reasons, but due to other psychological characteristics, such as preformed biases, underlying convictions, or tendencies to accept societal norms. Being founded on such inconsistencies, on the other hand, does seem to tell against the greatness of a work. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Unless the attributed inconsistency is an indiscernible one, as qualified above. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For very helpful comments, thanks are owed to Don Garrett, Beatrice Longuenesse, and Jim Pryor. I am also grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for some very constructive criticisms which helped me reformulate the paper for the better. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)