



## **The Concept "System of Philosophy"**

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**The concept “system of philosophy” in Jacob Brucker’s  
historiography of philosophy\***

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**Abstract**

In this essay I shall examine and discuss the concept “system of philosophy” as a methodological tool in the history of philosophy. I shall do so in two moves. First I shall analyze the historical origin of the concept in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thereafter I shall undertake a discussion of its methodological weaknesses — a discussion, which is not only relevant to the writing of history of philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also to the writing of history of philosophy in our times, where the concept remains an important methodological tool.

My first move is to analyze Jacob Brucker’s employment of the concept in his influential history of philosophy, *Historia critica philosophiae*, dating from 1742-68. To Brucker, a “system of philosophy” is characterized by the following four features: (a) it is autonomous in regard to other, non-philosophical disciplines; (b) all doctrines stated within the various branches of philosophy can be deduced from one principle; (c) as an autonomous system it comprises all branches of philosophy; (d) the doctrines stated within these various branches of philosophy are internally coherent. Brucker employed the concept on the entire

history of philosophy, and he gave it a defining role in regard to two other methodological concepts, namely “eclecticism” and “syncretism”, which he regarded as more or less successful forms of systematic philosophy.

My second move is to point out the weakness of this concept of “system of philosophy” as a methodological tool in the history of philosophy. I shall argue that the interdisciplinary nature of much pre-modern philosophy makes Brucker’s methodological concept “system of philosophy” inadequate, and that we may be better off leaving it behind in our future exploration of pre-modern philosophy.

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The concept “system of philosophy” has had very wide currency in the modern period as a primary way of writing the history of philosophy. This essay examines the work of a thinker who was crucially instrumental in developing this concept and using it to write the history of philosophy, the German historian Jacob Brucker. The point of such an examination is not only to get Brucker’s thought straight (though this is not unimportant, given that earlier commentators have misunderstood the importance of the concept “system of philosophy” in his work); it is also to reveal the weaknesses of this concept, weaknesses that are especially clear as the concept first emerged. The work of Brucker shows both the power and the weakness of the notion of a system of philosophy, and this essay’s ultimate goal is to illuminate both the strengths and weaknesses of this crucially important idea in the writing of the history of philosophy.

As other methodological concepts, the historiographical concept “system of philosophy” emerged in a specific historical context. One of the influential adaptations of this concept on the history of philosophy was undertaken by the German priest and historian of philosophy, Jacob Brucker (1669-1770), notably in his *Kurtze Fragen aus der philosophischen Historie* (1731-1736) and in his *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742-1744).<sup>1</sup> Through the last mentioned work Brucker achieved an international reputation as a pioneering historian of philosophy, and this work became very influential on subsequent historians of

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\* This essay explains a key concept in my paper entitled *The emergence of the concept “systematic philosophy” in the seventeenth century: Some historiographical considerations*, presented at the conference *Historiography of philosophy, intellectual history and science*, Copenhagen, October 2-4, 2003. I should like to thank Peter Barker, Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster and Tom Sorell for their comments to my paper.

<sup>1</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabilis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: C. Breitkopf, 1742-1744). Appendix, 1 vol. (Leipzig: Heir of Weidemann and Reich, 1767). Anastatic reprint: BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabilis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta*, 6 vols, eds R. H. Popkin and G. Tonelli (Hildesheim and New York, 1975.) For an Italian translation of the *Dissertatio praeliminaris* (ibid., vol. 1, pp. 3-45), see M. LONGO, *Historia philosophiae philosophica. Teorie e metodi della storia della filosofia tra Seicento e Settecento* (Milan: IPL, 1986), 154-203. J. BRUCKER, *Kurtze Fragen aus der philosophischen Historie*, 7 vols. (Ulm: Daniel Bartholomai und Sohn, 1731-1736). For a full bibliography of Brucker’s writings, see H. ZÄH, “Verzeichnis der Schriften Jacob Bruckers,” in *Jacob Brucker (1696-1770) Philosoph und Historiker der europäischen Aufklärung*, ed. W. Schmidt-Biggemann and T. Stammen (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1998), 259-351. For Brucker’s religious stand as a priest, see E. FRANÇOIS, “Bruckers Stellung in der Augsburger Konfessionsgeschichte,” in *Jacob Brucker (1696-1770) Philosoph und Historiker der europäischen Aufklärung*, 99-109.

philosophy.<sup>2</sup> For this reason I shall primarily base my analysis of Brucker's historiography of philosophy on this Latin work.

Brucker scholars have observed Brucker's historiographical uses of the concepts "syncretism", "eclecticism" and "system of philosophy"; the conceptual structure by which Brucker relates these three concepts has not, however, been thoroughly examined, although a few passing comments on the relation between "eclecticism" and "system of philosophy" have been made.<sup>3</sup> In this essay I shall

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<sup>22</sup> For Brucker's influence, see P. CASINI, *Diderot "philosophe"* (Bari: Laterza, 1962), 254-261. (Ibid., 259 n. 95, Casini identifies 43 articles on philosophers and philosophical movements in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* based on this Latin work of Brucker); L. BRAUN, *Histoire de l'histoire de la philosophie* (Paris: Ophrys, 1973), 120-121; M. LONGO, "Le storie generali della filosofia in Germania," in *Storia delle storie generali della filosofia*, ed. G. Santinello, vol. 1-, (Brescia: La Scuola, 1979-), vol. 2, 611-632; G. PIAIA, "Jacob Bruckers Wirkungsgeschichte in Frankreich und Italien," in *Jacob Brucker (1696-1770). Philosoph und Historiker der europäischen Aufklärung*, 218-237.

<sup>3</sup> This applies to the following studies on Brucker's historiography of philosophy: J. FREYER, *Geschichte der Geschichte der Philosophie im achtzehnten Jahrhundert*, in *Beiträge zur Kultur- und Universalgeschichte*, Heft 16, (Leipzig: R. Voigtländers Verlag, 1912), 21-49; G. SANTINELLO, "Il problema metodologico nella storia critica della filosofia di Jakob Brucker," in id., *Metaphysica e critica in Kant* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1965), 293-315; L. BRAUN, *Histoire de l'histoire de la philosophie*, 119-137; M. A. DEL TORRE, *Le origini moderne della storiografia filosofica* (Florence: La nuova Italia editrice, 1976), 69-102; LONGO, "Le storie generali della filosofia in Germania," 527-635; id., *Historia philosophiae philosophica. Teorie e metodi della storia della filosofia tra Seicento e Settecento* (Milan: IPL, 1986), 103-117; SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, "Jacob Bruckers philosophiegeschichtliches Konzept," in *Jacob Brucker (1696-1770). Philosoph und Historiker der europäischen Aufklärung*, 113-134; SCHNEIDER, "Das Eklektizismus-Problem in der Philosophiegeschichte," in *Jacob Brucker (1696-1770).*

argue that Brucker's criteria for characterizing a philosophy as "syncretistic", or "eclectic", are intimately linked to his concept "system of philosophy", and that this concept, "system of philosophy", for this reason is more central to Brucker's historiography of philosophy than has been recognised so far. In the first part I shall outline the meanings assigned by Brucker to the concept "system of philosophy" as a historiographical tool with universal validity in the history of philosophy. In the second part I shall explain how this methodological device was applied in his categorisations of various past philosophers as being "syncretistic" or "eclectic". At the end of this essay I shall raise some general questions concerning the validity and usefulness of the concept "system of philosophy" in writing the history of philosophy.

**I. The notion "system of philosophy" as a historiographical tool  
in Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae***

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*Philosoph und Historiker der europäischen Aufklärung*, 135-158; G. PIAIA, "Brucker versus Rorty? On the 'models' of the historiography of philosophy," *British Journal for the history of philosophy*, vol. 9 (2001), 69-81. Nor has the conceptual structure between "syncretism", "eclecticism" and "system of philosophy" in Brucker's historiography of philosophy been examined in the studies on eclecticism mentioned in n. 43 below.

In the two introductory sections of Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae* — that is, in the *Praefatio*<sup>4</sup> and in the *Dissertatio praeliminaris*<sup>5</sup> — Brucker frequently uses the term “system” (*systema*) in relation to various forms of philosophy developed in the course of history.<sup>6</sup> In these two introductory sections he does not, however, explain the meaning of the term explicitly. Nor is it, to my knowledge, explained in the remaining part of the work, even though it is used frequently and forcefully when describing various past philosophers.

Brucker's first move in the *Dissertatio praeliminaris* is to define the scientific object of the historian of philosophy. Due to philosophy's historical links with disciplines such as theology, cosmology, medicine, mathematics, etc., one might have expected an inclusive definition of the historian's task — a definition, which would give room to such and other links between philosophy

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<sup>4</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, [viii]-[xi]. The pages in the *Praefatio* are unpaginated. I count as the first page the page after the title page, which begins “Serenissimo ac potentissimo”. Page number ii thus begins “Rex potentissime” in my pagination.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 3-45. For a study of the methodological aspects of the *Dissertatio praeliminaris*, see M. LONGO, *Historia philosophiae philosophica*, 103-117. In J. BRUCKER, *Kurtze Fragen*, vol. 1, 1-38, we find a methodological section entitled *Vorbereitung*, which is similar to the *Dissertatio praeliminaris* in Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae*.

<sup>6</sup> In the *Praefatio* and the *Dissertatio praeliminaris* Brucker uses the term in the context of history of philosophy on the following pages: J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, [viii].28, [viii].31, [ix].18, [ix].22, 4.21, 5.24, 10.23, 10.40, 11.1, 11.2-3, 11.5, 11.21, 11.27, 12.10, 12.28, 14.3, 15.3, 15.11, 15.17, 15.21, 15.25, 15.29, 15.35, 16.32, 29.25, 31.5, 37.16, 39.40, 40.30. He also uses the term on these pages in regard to the planetary system; see *ibid.*, vol. 1, 23.22. In this note, and in the following ones, the number after a full stop, following a page number, refers to the line on the page.

and its disciplinary neighbors. Brucker, however, rejects a wide definition of history of philosophy, stating that it is not his intention to write the history of erudition (*historia eruditionis*), including all its arts and disciplines, but the history of philosophy (*historia philosophiae*).<sup>7</sup> What, then, does Brucker mean by “philosophy”?

Brucker offers an essentialist definition of philosophy. The word “philosophy”, he explains, is derived from the Greek word σοφία (*sophia*), later translated into Latin as *sapientia*. Despite this linguistic development from Greek into Latin, the meaning of “philosophy” has remained unchanged, he says.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of humankind’s history, the term *sapientia* was applied to any discipline in which the human mind (*ingenium*) was perfected. Brucker thus attributes the view to Aristotle and Plato, justly or unjustly, that philosophy is identical with man’s perfectionment within the arts, or simply identical with any

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 3.10-12: “Scilicet non eruditionis, et quas illa comprehendit omnium artium et disciplinarum historiam exponere animus est, sed philosophiae.” In this and other quotations from this work of Brucker, I transcribe “&” as “et”.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 3.16-19: “Philosophiam vero, quam nominamus, dicta olim est σοφία, id est sapientia; quosque philosophos salutamus, sapientes salutatores esse, constat, nomine postea quidem mutato, sed retenta pristina significatione.” For Brucker’s notion of philosophy as *sapientia*, see M. LONGO, *Historia philosophiae philosophica*, 536-537.



experience within the arts.<sup>9</sup> This meaning of philosophy, the perfectionment of the human mind, remains central throughout history, but the perfection itself takes on new and more advanced forms over time, still according to Brucker. In the course of history, the perfection of the human mind has been hindered by corrupt, religious traditions and authorities, which prevented the human mind from grasping the principles of truth. This sad state of humankind changed for the better when individual, talented minds were able to abandon such corrupt traditions and to reflect independently of authorities.<sup>10</sup> These exceptionally gifted minds were able to grasp the principles of truth by means of their own reason and to build systems of philosophy on these principles:

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<sup>9</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 3.22-26: “Scilicet prima illa humani ingenii aetate, qua ejus quasi infantia absolvitur, sapientiae nomen omnibus artibus tributum est, quae ullo modo ingenio excolebantur, et ad humani generis utilitatem aliquo modo faciebant; unde Aristoteli [Brucker’s note: *Ethic. ad Nicom.* L. VI. c. 7. T. 11. p. 58. ed. Casaub. (According to M. LONGO, *Historia philosophiae philosophica*, 154 n. 1, Brucker refers to this work of Aristotele in Casaubon’s edition published in Leiden in 1590.)] sapientia, ‘artium virtus’ sive ‘perfectio’, et Platoni [Brucker’s note: v. *Theaetetos* et *Theages* et ex his Laert. 1. III. f. 63 ubi consulendus est Is. Casaub. ad h. l. (According to M. LONGO, *ibid.*, 154 n. 2 and 188 n. 27, Brucker refers to Casaubon’s edition of Diogenes Laertius published in 1692.)] ‘quaevis artis experientia’ dicta est.”

<sup>10</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 4.4-18.

And in this way the sublime minds took on the ambition, that they should search for the truth by means of a more profound meditation, and, having abandoned the hollow and impure traditions which they were initially nourished by, that they would consult the sources of reason (*ratio*), reducing everything to certain principles of science, joining together a system of wisdom [*systema sapientiae*] built upon its own foundations.<sup>11</sup>

This quotation conveys three important elements in Brucker's concept of philosophy. First, philosophical reflection requires complete emancipation from traditions in order to reflect independently; Brucker does not consider a critical but continuous revision of the traditions initially absorbed by the various past philosophers as progressive, but only a radical break with traditions. Second, having freed himself from these traditions, the philosopher may turn to his own personal reason and there find certain principles. Third, having sought out and established these principles, a system of wisdom (that is, a system of philosophy) can be founded on these principles. Due to this nature of philosophy, Brucker continues, the cultivation of the philosopher's reason (*ratio*) is very central in philosophical progress, and only those people who possess a very noble reason

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 4.18-25: "Et hinc animi ingeniis sublimibus additi sunt, ut profundiori meditatione in veritatem inquirerent, et defertis impuris traditionis patriae lacunis, rationis fontes consulerent, omnia ad certa scientiae principia revocantes, et ita sapientiae systema condentes suis fundamentis superstructum." My translation. If nothing else is mentioned, the translations below are also made by me.

should be considered philosophers.<sup>12</sup> In the quotation above Brucker also latches on to a metaphor used conspicuously elsewhere in his *Historia critica philosophiae*, namely that of a house: the above-mentioned “principles” correspond to the foundation of a house; the “system” is the building raised upon this foundation, that is, on these principles.<sup>13</sup> This metaphor tacitly offers a peculiar methodology: Just as a house raised on its own foundation is unique and solitary, a philosophy should, at least ideally, be autonomous.

Brucker does not explain what he means by “principle” (*principium*) in this context, although it is frequently used in his *Dissertatio praeliminaris*.<sup>14</sup> It would make sense, however, to interpret Brucker’s “principle”, in the quotation above, and in similar contexts in the *Dissertatio praeliminaris*, as a general philosophical theory — almost in the sense of a philosophical axiom — which can be applied to more restricted areas or disciplines in philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Even though Brucker does not, as already said, explain explicitly what he means by “system”, we are led to assume by the quotation above that it is the complex outcome of some sort of deduction from general principles to special doctrines within various

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 4.22-25: “Quae veritatem omnem, eam praecipue, quae ad Deum hominesque refertur, excolendi ratio cum nobillissima fit, sapientiae nomen in propria tandem sibi significatione vindicavit, et cultores suos sapientium nomine decoravit.”

<sup>13</sup> The same metaphor can be found *ibid.*, vol. 1, 15.10-14, as quoted in n. 18 below. It is also found in *ibid.*, vol. 5, 3.22-4.11, as quoted in n. 57 below.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. *ibid.*, vol. 1, 4.13-14, 4.21, 10.24, 15.12, 15.15.

<sup>15</sup> For the meanings of “principle” in early modern philosophy, see H. HOLZHEY, ‘Pinzip. III. Neuzeit’, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, general ed. J. Ritter. Vol. 1-, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971-), vol. 7, cols 1355-1372.

areas of philosophy, the latter forming a body of doctrines characterized by an internally coherent order, that is, a system.

This conception of philosophy is followed by a distinction between philosophy and theology. There are, Brucker states, two sources to truth. One is the “innate light” or “human reason”. The other is the (Christian) Revelation. In concord with Brucker’s above definition of philosophy, philosophers make use of the first source of truth. There are, however, narrow limitations to the powers of human reason in regard to the understanding of all areas in the universe, wherefore human reason must be aided by Revelation; not only in order to grasp the truths about matters transcending the powers of human comprehension, but also in order to know what will make human beings happy.<sup>16</sup> So unless theology is understood as natural theology — in which rational principles are employed — philosophy should be separated from theology, since the two disciplines make use of distinct forms of understanding.<sup>17</sup>

Having explained the essence of philosophy and its relation to theology, Brucker goes on to define the task of the historian of philosophy:

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<sup>16</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 7.27-34: “Duplex vero veritatis ad veri boni possessionem, et exoriundam inde felicitatem ducentis cognitionis fons est, unus congenitae lucis sive rationis humanae regulae, alter divina revelatio. Cum enim adeo angustis limitibus humanus intellectus circumscriptus sit, ut patentissimos veritatis universae campos emetiri, immo nec ea omnia cognoscere valeat, quae tamen felicitatis humanae ratio cognosci et sciri postulat, necesse erat, ut divina revelatio suppetias homini ferret, et de iis eum instrueret, quae felicitatem ejus summo loco ponere apta sunt.” For Brucker’s separation between philosophy and theology, see L. BRAUN, *Histoire de l’histoire de la philosophie*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 7.34-8.8.

*In order to pass a sound and proper judgment on the propositions of philosophers, it is necessary to reconstruct the whole system on the basis of their writings.* First of all, the general principles, which constitute the foundation underlying the entire building of doctrines, should be reconstructed; on these [general principles] the conclusions should be erected, conclusions which derive willingly from these sources [the general principles]. For since it is the main task of the philosopher to deduce the special ideas from some general principles by means of an apt connection, you [i.e. the historian of philosophy, to be distinguished from the past philosopher] should prefer, due to higher merit, the interpretation which aptly conforms with, and internally coheres with, the form and order of the whole system, even though it seems to suggest something else at first sight.<sup>18</sup> [Brucker's italics.]

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 15.10-18: “*Ut itaque de sententia philosophorum sanum rectumque iudicium ferri queat, totum ex eorum scriptis systema ita eruendum est, ut ante omnia principia generalia, quae fundamenti loco toti doctrinarum aedificio subjiciuntur, eruantur, et his demum illae superstruantur conclusiones, quae ex istis fontibus sponte sua fluunt. Quemadmodum enim hoc praecipue philosophi officium est, ut ex positis quibusdam principiis generalibus, specialia dogmata justo nexu derivet, ita eam interpretationem merito alteri praetuleris, quae cum toto systematis habitu et connexione convenit apteque inter se cohaeret, etsi prima facie aliud dicere videatur.*” (Brucker's italics.)

In other words, the historian of philosophy carries out a reversed process of that of the past philosopher whose thoughts he tries to understand and to expose: The past philosopher, on the one hand, first chooses out the general principles on which he subsequently builds his system of philosophy with all its special doctrines. The historian of philosophy, on the other hand, has to reconstruct these general principles on the basis of the past philosopher's writings; having done so, the historian of philosophy may be able to detect how the various doctrines are connected to these general principles, and, ultimately, the past philosopher's system of philosophy. Hence the methodological concept "system of philosophy" remains crucial to the philosopher as well as to the historian of philosophy; it offers the possibility of intellectual heroism to both of them in their respective pursuits of systems of philosophy. In the *Dissertatio praeliminaris*, Brucker does not set up any limitations in regard to the periods in the history of philosophy which can be dealt with in this way — on the contrary, he claims that this method can be applied to the philosophies from the beginning of the world up till his own time.<sup>19</sup>

The past philosopher's system must, as said, be unveiled on the basis of the philosopher's written texts.<sup>20</sup> This is not, however, the only task of historians of philosophy. In addition, they should also, in order to give a full exposition, uncover the historical circumstances (*circumstantiae*) of the philosopher and make clear how these influence the philosopher's system. On one occasion Brucker mentions the following circumstances, all concerned with biographical

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 11.21-33.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 15.10-11.

issues: The philosopher's temperament, his education, his teachers, his adversaries, his patrons, his lifestyle, the people with whom he lived, and similar matters.<sup>21</sup> If the historian of philosophy does not take these circumstances into consideration in his understanding of the past philosopher's system, Brucker warns, then his exposition will be deluded.<sup>22</sup>

The task of the historian of philosophy is thus twofold, still according to Brucker, namely to expose the past philosopher's system, and to explain how the historical context contribute to this system. Such an undertaking Brucker calls a "critical" history of philosophy, since the historian of philosophy employs a considerable amount of discernment (and is therefore "critical") in his unveiling of connections between a past philosopher's system and his biographical circumstances.<sup>23</sup> Obviously, this is also an explanation for the title of Brucker's own work, *Historia critica philosophiae*, a critical history of philosophy.

Apparently, it does not cross Brucker's mind that the mere effort to detect a past philosopher's "system" could, *per se*, be a delusion, if the past philosopher in question did not possess, nor refer to, any such system. Brucker simply assumes

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 15.29-36: "Non vero ad systemata tantum ipsa, in scriptis philosophorum obvia, sed ad circumstantias quoque auctorum, temperamenti et educationis rationem, praeceptores, quos ex parte imitati sunt, adversarios, quibus sua dogmata opposuerunt, fautores, vitae genus, quod sectati sunt, gentem unde vel oriundi, vel apud quam vixerunt, et quae alia his similia attendendum est. Supra enim jam monuimus, ejusmodi circumstantias plurimum habere in ipsa systemta philosophorum influxum, quae ubi negliguntur, ineluctabilem obscuritatem pariunt." Some of these *circumstantiae* are also mentioned *ibid.*, vol. 1, 11.21-30.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 10.39-11.4. This warning is repeated *ibid.*, vol. 1, 15.34-36.

<sup>23</sup> For the importance of critical power of discernment, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, [ix].16-31, 12.6-10.

that philosophers have always intended to work out systems of philosophy, though not always with good results. Even Plato did so, albeit imperfectly, Brucker holds. If we are to understand how the doctrines in Plato's system cohere, which they "often" do "badly", according to Brucker, we must take recourse to his circumstances, that is, identify the various philosophers who influenced the doctrines in Plato's system, e.g. Pythagoras, Cratylus, Parmenides, etc.<sup>24</sup> On a more general level one may ask whether Brucker remains faithful to his own warning, not to impose our modern systems and hypotheses on past philosophers?<sup>25</sup> The mere assumption that past philosophers had always striven to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 11.4-12. For Brucker's treatment of Plato's assumed system (as it is presented in his *Kurtze Fragen*), see M. LONGO, "Le storie generali della filosofia in Germania", 556-559. It is still assumed by some Plato scholars that Plato possessed a system of philosophy: One example can be found in R. KRAUT, "Introduction to the study of Plato," in *The Cambridge companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-50. On the opening page Plato is described as the "head of our philosophical tradition," who gave a "unitary treatment" of various disciplines still discussed (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political theory, language, art, love, mathematics, science, and religion). Plato, according to Kraut, thus fulfilled the demand to philosophy, namely to "yeld an organized system of truths". Other examples in Plato scholarship can be found in H. J. KRÄMER, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles, zum Wesen und zur Geschichte der platonischen Ontologie, vorgelegt am 9. Juli 1958 von Wolfgang Schadewaldt* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1959); see "System" in index, 596; K. GAISER, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre. Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründung der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1963), 8-11.

<sup>25</sup> BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 12.23-30. FREYER, *Geschichte der Geschichte der Philosophie*, 38-39, criticizes Brucker for ignoring that various past philosophies employ their systems in ways which do not always conform with the deductive method prescribed by



work out systems of philosophy may in itself be a rash retro-projection: Did all past philosophers possess the concept “system of philosophy” at all? Did they strive to organize their doctrines in such philosophical systems?

The term “system”, in Greek σύστημα (*systema*), in Latin *systema*, and its cognates, were not used by Ancient or Medieval philosophers in the context of methodology or philosophy of science, but in many other contexts.<sup>26</sup> In this period, in Greek as well in Latin, the concept “system” and its cognates were used in the following ways:<sup>27</sup> To denote the organization of a government;<sup>28</sup> the

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Brucker’s concept “system of philosophy”. In this work Freyer does not, however, raise the issue whether the concept “system of philosophy” existed in pre-modern philosophy. SANTINELLO, in his “Il problema metodologico nella storia critica della filosofia di Jakob Brucker”, 310, rejects Brucker’s claim that pre-modern philosophy, including that of Plato, can be described as systems of philosophy: “L’accentuazione di questo carattere formale [systems of philosophy made up of principles and deductions from them] non si può dire derivi al Brucker proprio dal pensiero antico, come egli sostiene; gli viene piuttosto dalla tradizione scolastica del suo tempo, dal razionalismo della scuola leibniziana, e si ripercuoterà, contemporaneamente, sul criticismo kantiano.”

<sup>26</sup> F.-P. HAGER, “System. I. Antikke,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 10, cols 824-825. The result of my own examination, regarding the possible use of “system” in the meaning of methodology or philosophy of science, concurs with this view of Hager.

<sup>27</sup> Here I rely on the following dictionaries. For Greek I have used (a) *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. with *Supplement*, eds H. G. Lidell and R. Scott, rev. by H. S. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940, rep. 1996), covering Classical Greek until the fifth century AD, but not Patristic and Byzantine Greek in this period; (b) *Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus*, ed. J. F. Niermeyer (Leiden: Brill, 1976). For Latin I have used (a) *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), covering the period up till ca. 200 AD; (b) *A Latin*

organization of an institution, in particular a college of priests or magistrates<sup>29</sup> — a meaning which is also conspicuous among the Patristics;<sup>30</sup> harmonies in music;<sup>31</sup> the composition of a literary work;<sup>32</sup> a biological organism (including man) consisting of several parts;<sup>33</sup> and, finally, the universe and its parts.<sup>34</sup> Hence, from a purely philological view point, it is fair to say that the term “system” and its cognates were not key terms in Ancient and Medieval philosophy, and certainly not in the methodology, or philosophy of science, of this period.<sup>35</sup>

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*Dictionary*, eds C. T. Lewis and C. Short (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), covering Classical Latin and the period up to ca. 600 AD.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. PLATO, *Leges* 686B; ARISTOTLE, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1168b32.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. POLYBIUS 21.13.11.

<sup>30</sup> See “[ύ [ | | [(<” in *A patristic Greek lexicon*, 1350-1351.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. PLATO, *Philebus* 17D.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. ARISTOTLE, *Poetica* 1456a11.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. id., *De generatione animilium* 740a20, 758b3.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. FULGENTIUS, *Mythologiae* 3.9. This cosmological meaning of “system” we encounter in BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 23.22.

<sup>35</sup> This view concurs with O. RITSCHL, *System und systematische Methode in der Geschichte des wissenschaftlichen Sprachgebrauchs und der philosophischen Metodologie*. Bonn: A. Marcus und E. Webers Verlag, 1906), col. 7, citing FORCELLINI, *Totius latinitatis lexicon*, 1871: “Systema proprie compages, constructio; speciatim vero solet in scientiarum studiis adhiberi pro ingeniose excogitata rerum dispositione, quo sensu tamen deest nobis Latini scriptoris exemplum.”

In the second half of the sixteenth century and in the seventeenth century, on the other hand, the Latin word for system, *systema*, was not only used in the traditional contexts, such as cosmology; in addition, the meaning of the term was transferred to a new field, methodology.<sup>36</sup> It was now used to denote a body of doctrines pertaining to a specific scientific field, for instance philosophy or theology. The German Protestant reformer Philipp Melanchton (1497-1560) was among the first to transfer the term “system” to methodology. For instance, he called the quadrivium — that is, the disciplines arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music — “a fourfold system of a lyre”.<sup>37</sup> This meaning of “system”, a body of scientific disciplines, were to become prominent over the next two centuries. Admittedly, this coinage of Melanchton was rather isolated in the sixteenth century. In sixteenth-century Protestant theology, the term was frequently compared with the expression “corpus integrum”, that is, “a complete body”, used to express a body of articles of faith, or a body of Christian doctrines.<sup>38</sup> This usage was transferred to philosophy and sciences in the first three decades of the seventeenth century.<sup>39</sup> If we look at a list of seventeenth-century titles on

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<sup>36</sup> For a study of the concept “system” in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century philosophy, see O. RITSCHL, *System und systematische Methode*, 6-53; C. STRUB, “System, II. S. und S.-Kritik in der Neuzeit,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 10, cols 825-856; N. W. GILBERT, *Renaissance concepts of method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 213-220.

<sup>37</sup> “Quaternum lyrae systema” in Ritschl’s translation of Melanchton’s Greek words. Cited from RITSCHL, *System und systematische Methode*, col. 10.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, cols 12-13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 26.

philosophical, theological and scientific publications wherein the word *systema* appears — it runs into more than hundred and fifty titles<sup>40</sup> — we get the impression that it was not only regarded as desirable to treat a subject “systematically”, it was also regarded as a useful marketing strategy to put that precious word “system” on the front page of the book.

It is beyond the limitations of this essay to trace the development of the concept “system of philosophy” in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy and science in great detail. What is clear, however, is that “system” had only been employed to a body of philosophical disciplines one or two centuries before Brucker did so in the 1740s. Hence, from a purely philological perspective, Brucker may have been misled by the methodology of his own time to believe that pre-modern philosophers also possessed systems of philosophy; this meaning of “system” was simply unknown to pre-modern philosophers. It is possible, of course, that these pre-modern philosophers in fact did organize their philosophical disciplines and doctrines in a way adequately described by Brucker’s concept “system of philosophy”, even though they did not know the expression “system of philosophy”. Whether that was the case is a question open to discussion — a discussion, in which we should keep in mind the distinction between a past philosopher’s own organization of his doctrines, on the one hand, and the organization supplied by subsequent authors, on the other hand.<sup>41</sup> It is

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Anhang, i-v.

<sup>41</sup> One may object, for instance, that Aristotle did provide a system of philosophy, even though he did not use the concept “system of philosophy”. However, in this case we should distinguish Aristotele’s own statements, few as they are, about the organization of philosophy’s branches (e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics* VI iii-vi), on the one hand, and later systematizations of his

beyond doubt, however, that Brucker did not carry out such a critical examination, and that he may well have ignored one of his own advices to the historian of philosophy, not to impose “our systems and hypotheses” on the philosophies of past philosophers.<sup>42</sup>

## **II. Brucker’s historiographical notion “system of philosophy” and the notions “syncretism” and “eclecticism”**

The terms “syncretism” and “eclecticism” had already a history of their own when Brucker took them on in his histories of philosophy dating from the 1730s and 1740s.<sup>43</sup> These terms are perhaps best understood in Brucker’s thought through

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philosophy. For the tendency towards systematization of Aristotle through textbooks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see C. B. SCHMITT, “The rise of the philosophical textbook,” in *The Cambridge history of Renaissance philosophy*, eds C. B. Schmitt, Q. Skinner, E. Kessler, J. Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 792-804.

<sup>42</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 12.23-30.

<sup>43</sup> For the history of “eclecticism”, see W. NIEKE, “Eklektizismus,” *Philosophisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 2, cols 432-433; H. HOLZHEY, “Philosophie als Eklektik,” *Studia Leibnitiana*, vol. 15 (1983), 19-29; H. DREITZEL, “Zur Entwicklung und Eigenart der ‘eklektischen’ Philosophie,” *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, vol. 18 (1991), cols 281-343; M. ALBRECT, *Eklektik. Eine Begriffsgeschichte mit Hinweisen auf die Philosophie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1994), where Brucker’s contribution is discussed 545-

their application in his division of the history of philosophy into three periods, of which the third period in particular is characterized by syncretism and eclecticism.<sup>44</sup>

The first period stretches from the beginning of the world, that is, according to conventions at Brucker's time, around 6.500 BC, until the birth of the Roman Empire in the first century BC.<sup>45</sup> It is, according to Brucker, the period of "barbaric philosophy", that is, non-Christian philosophies, comprising Hebrew, Persian, Chaldean, Indian, Arabic, Egyptian, Ethiopian and Greek philosophers. The philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, for instance, are reduced to two of the many competing sects in Greek philosophy.<sup>46</sup>

The second period begins with the rise of the Roman Empire and ends with the assumed crisis of scholasticism, which Brucker apparently dates to the

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550 *et passim*. For "eclecticism" in Brucker's historiography of philosophy, see SCHNEIDER, "Das Eklektizismus-Problem in der Philosophiegeschichte," 135-158.

<sup>44</sup> The periodization is briefly explained in BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 38.27-45.26. For this scheme of periodization and C. A. Heumann as a possible source, see L. BRAUN, *Histoire de l'histoire de la philosophie*, 128-133. The periodization in BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, 1742-1744, differs from the periodization which he gave in his earlier *Kurtze Fragen*, 1731-1736. For the periodization in the *Kurtze Fragen*, see W. SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, "Jacob Bruckers philosophieggeschichtliches Konzept," 126-134; for a comparison between the two periodizations, see *ibid.*, 134.

<sup>45</sup> The first period is described in BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 46-1357.

<sup>46</sup> For Plato, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, 627-728; for Aristotle, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, 776-839.

thirteenth century.<sup>47</sup> This second period is subdivided into two parts. The first part covers the time before the coming of Christ — here we find Jewish philosophy and the Greek sects, etc.<sup>48</sup> The second part starts with the philosophies of Christ and his apostles, including the church fathers, and it ends with the scholasticism of the thirteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

The third and last period runs from the revival of learning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and up till Brucker's time.<sup>50</sup> The revival of learning regards, among other things, knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin, allowing philosophers of this third period to return to the ancient sources.<sup>51</sup> This third period too is subdivided into two parts. The first begins, as said, with the rediscovery of learning in the fourteenth century and implies the revival of various ancient sects and schools throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>52</sup> The Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) belongs, due to his alleged revival of ancient Platonic philosophy, to the first part

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<sup>47</sup> The second period is described *ibid.*, vol. 2, 3-1069, and vol. 3, 3-912. For Brucker's treatment of Medieval philosophy, see K. FLASCH, "Jacob Brucker und die Philosophie des Mittelalters," in *Jacob Brucker (1696-1770). Philosoph und Historiker der europäischen Aufklärung*, 187-197.

<sup>48</sup> The first part of the second period is described in J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 2, 3-1069, and vol. 3, 3-240.

<sup>49</sup> The second part of the second period is described in *ibid.*, vol. 3, 241-912.

<sup>50</sup> The third period is described in *ibid.*, vol. 4, 3-785, and vol. 5, 3-923.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 4.

<sup>52</sup> For the first part of the third period, see *ibid.*, vol. 4, 3-785.

of the third period.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Pico is regarded as the emblem of this period as far as his philosophy is syncretistic, precisely what the first part of the third period is in general.

The second half of this third period lasts from this revival of ancient philosophy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries until Brucker's days.<sup>54</sup> Contrary to the first half of this third period, the second half is more than a mere revival of ancient philosophical sects and schools. In this period talented philosophers lay down new foundations for original philosophical systems. These new philosophies are not characterized by syncretism, but by eclecticism, as we shall see. In this second half of the third period we find, among others, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), René Descartes (1596-1650), Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) and Gottfried W. Leibniz (1646-1716). It is precisely within the third period of Brucker's scheme, that we find the terms "syncretism" and "eclecticism" exposed, terms to which I shall now turn.

Brucker was convinced that philosophy had progressed since the age of syncretism, that is, since the first part of the third period, to a large extent

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<sup>53</sup> For Pico reviving Platonic philosophy, see *ibid.*, vol. 4, 59. It may not come as a great surprise that later Pico scholars have rejected this simplistic identification of Pico's sources. One example is A. DULLES, *Princeps concordiae. Pico della Mirandola and the scholastic tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941). For more recent studies on Pico, see the bibliography in J. HANKINS, "Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni (1463-94)," in *Routledge encyclopedia of philosophy*, general ed. E. Craig. 10 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), vol. 7, 386-392.

<sup>54</sup> For the second part of the third period, see BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 5, 3-923.



covering what we today call the Italian Renaissance.<sup>55</sup> The philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, located in the second part of the third period, was not marked by syncretism, but, as said, by eclecticism. Today “syncretism” and “eclecticism” are typically used synonymously, in the sense of unoriginal borrowings from various philosophies, but Brucker distinguished the two concepts and valued them differently.<sup>56</sup>

According to Brucker, “eclecticism” has a very positive potential. He introduces eclecticism, characterizing the second part of the third period, with the following words:

Eclectic philosophy, after many wars, is indeed restored, victorious and powerful, having thrown off and trampled upon the sectarian mode of philosophizing. Having cast off this mean and unworthy yoke from human reason, and having cast off that slavish clinging to authority and prejudice of antiquity, some great and acute minds began to choose out true and universal principles, not by consulting the opinions of others, but by consulting their own [inner] lights. On these principles they began to erect conclusions and, thanks to their meditation, to build for themselves a personal and domestic system of philosophy; these great minds began to store up truths from

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<sup>55</sup> For the historiography of the Italian Renaissance, see C. B. SCHMITT, “Towards a history of Renaissance philosophy,” in *Aristotelismus und Renaissance: In memoriam Charles Schmitt*, eds E. Kessler, C. Lohr and W. Sparr (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 9-16.

<sup>56</sup> For the difference between “syncretistic” and “eclectic” philosophy, see J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 5, 4-5.

scattered sects, separating them from dogmas and connecting [the truths] to their convenient and apt place in the system. They did not approve or admit anything, which did not appear demonstrated and certain according to the judgment of their reason and according to the clarity of truth.<sup>57</sup>

In this quotation Brucker describes eclectic philosophy in ways that are in fundamental harmony with his conception of philosophy as a system of philosophy. I shall point out seven similarities between “eclecticism” and “system of philosophy” which strongly suggest that Brucker’s concept of eclecticism is

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<sup>57</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 5, 3.22-4.11: “Nempe restituta tandem et post multas pugnas victoria potita est philosophia eclectica, eiecta et conculcata sectaria philosophandi ratione. Abiecto enim indigno humana ratione hoc iugo, et contemto servili auctoritatis et antiquitatis praeiudicio coeperunt magna quaedam et acuta ingenia non aliorum quidem placita, sed sua lumina consulere, principia vera, universalia, certa seligere, conclusiones iis inaedificare, et suae meditationis beneficio proprium atque domesticum sibi philosophiae systema condere; veritates autem per sectas omnes sparsas, separatas suisque dogmatibus iunctas in commodum aptumque systematis sui locum reponere: nihil vero probare et admittere, quod non rationis iudicio et veritatis evidentia sibi demonstratum certumque videretur esse.” According to CASINI, *Diderot “philosophe”*, 259 n. 95, Diderot’s article “Éclectisme” in his *Encyclopédie* is based on Brucker’s conception of “eclecticism” as it appears in his *Historia critica philosophiae*.

derived from his concept of “systematic philosophy”. First, the eclectic philosopher in the quotation above has emancipated himself from “the sectarian mode of philosophizing”, characteristic to a large part of philosophies in the first period of the history of philosophy, and he has freed himself from “authority”, and “prejudice of antiquity”.<sup>58</sup> This state of complete intellectual emancipation is a precondition for the eclectic philosopher’s construction of a new philosophy. Similarly, Brucker states about the philosopher who construes a system of philosophy, that before doing so, he must have “abandoned the hollow and impure traditions which they were initially nourished by”.<sup>59</sup> Philosophical progress requires the same radical break with traditions from the systematic and the eclectic philosopher.

Second, eclectic philosophy is an individualistic enterprise undertaken by exceptional and heroic minds. Brucker refers in the quotation above to “some great and acute minds”, who had the talent not only to free themselves from traditions and authorities, but also to produce new philosophies.<sup>60</sup> Such

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<sup>58</sup> BRUCKER, *Historia critical philosophiae*, vol. 5, 3.22-4.4: “Nempe restituta tandem et post multas pugnas victoria potita est philosophia eclecticica, eiecta et conculcata sectaria philosophandi ratione. Abiecto enim indigno humana ratione hoc iugo, et contemto servili auctoritatis et antiquitatis praeiudicio ...”

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 4.19-20: “... desertus impuris traditionis patriae lacunis ...” For the context of these words, see n. 11 above.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 4.4-5: “... coeperunt magna quaedam et acuta ingenia non aliorum quidem placita, sed sua lumina consulere ...”

individuals, “sublime minds”, are also considered the formative power of systems of philosophy.<sup>61</sup>

Third, these exceptionally gifted philosophers, both eclectic and systematic philosophers, produce their philosophies by means of their personal, intellectual powers alone; they are not indebted to other philosophers, other scientific traditions or to institutions. In the quotation above Brucker thus states that the eclectic philosophers reach their philosophies, “not by consulting the opinions of others, but by consulting their own [inner] lights”.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the systematic philosophers have the ambition to “consult the sources of reason (*ratio*)”, in order to give their respective philosophies “its own foundations”.<sup>63</sup> Fourth, and epistemologically connected with this third point, such autonomous, eclectic philosophers turn inwardly in meditation (*meditatio*), through which they produce new philosophies.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the systematic philosophers set out to “search for the truth by means of a more profound meditation”.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 4.18: “... ingeniis sublimibus ...” For the context of these words, see n. 11 above.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 4.4-5, as quoted in n. 60 above.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 4.20-22: “... rationis fontes consulerent ... suis fundamentis ...” For the context of these words, see n. 11 above.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 4.4-7: “... coeperunt magna quaedam et acuta ingenia non aliorum quidem placita, sed sua lumina consulere, principia vera, universalia, certa seligere, conclusiones iis inaedificare, et suae meditationis beneficio proprium atque domesticum sibi philosophiae systema condere ...”

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 4.18-19: “... profundiori meditatione in veritatem inquirerent ...” For the context of these words, see n. 11 above.

The remaining two similarities between eclecticism and systematic philosophy do not, as these first four similarities, regard the social and epistemic practise of the philosopher, but the formal and methodological aspects related to the philosopher's conception of a new philosophy. My fifth observation is thus concerned with "principles". The eclectic philosopher, having freed himself from authorities and traditions and having turned to his own reason in meditation, chooses out "true and universal principles", as said in the quotation above.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the philosopher who produces a system of philosophy through meditation is "reducing everything to certain principles of science".<sup>67</sup> So both the eclectic and the systematic philosopher search for principles.

Sixth, Brucker employs the metaphor of a house to the method of the eclectic philosopher. The principles are like a foundation of a house; on these principles, "conclusions" are erected; the complex whole of principles and conclusions is termed a "domestic system of philosophy".<sup>68</sup> This metaphor we also find when Brucker describes the genesis of a system of philosophy, in which process the systematic philosopher is "reducing everything to certain principles of science, joining together a system of wisdom [*systema sapientiae*] built upon its own foundations".<sup>69</sup> Seventh, as the last point makes clear, the eclectic

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 4.4-7, as quoted in n. 64 above.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 4.20-21: "... omnia ad certa scientiae principia revocantes ...". For the context of these words, see n. 11 above.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 4.4-7, as quoted in n. 64 above.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 4.20-22: "...omnia ad certa scientiae principia revocantes, et ita sapientiae systema condentes suis fundamentis suerpstructum..." For the context of these words, see n. 11 above.

philosopher make deductions from some selected principles; the complex body of deductions make up a system.<sup>70</sup> The philosopher who builds a system of philosophy follows the same method.<sup>71</sup> These seven similarities between the concepts “eclecticism” and “systematic philosophy” strongly suggest that these two concepts are not only close in meaning, but also that the eclectic philosopher is striving to work out a system of philosophy, and that the concept “system of philosophy” thus plays a key role in Brucker’s historiography.

Let us look at a few examples of eclectic philosophers. According to Brucker, the Italian Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno was the first to revive, though imperfectly, eclectic philosophy in the second part of the third period.<sup>72</sup> Brucker’s reason for accepting Bruno as an eclectic philosopher lies in his conception of Bruno’s philosophy as encrusted into an Epicurean system. Bruno, through his atomism, was able, at least in the eyes of Brucker, to develop the Epicurean system better than Epicure and Democritus had been able to.<sup>73</sup> Although Bruno took the history of philosophy one step further through his mere effort to philosophize in an eclectic manner, his eclectic philosophy was in itself

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 4.4-7, as quoted in n. 64 above.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 4.20-22. See also *ibid.*, vol. 1, 465.13-17: “Versabatur tum in ipsis philosophandi σύστηματικως initiis humanum ingenium, videratque veritates aliquas, easque ex principiis suis deduxerat, sed nec plene nec accurate satis, ut in intiis scientiarum plerumque fieri solet, quae non nisi multorum seculorum labore et meditatione ad justam perfectionem perducuntur.”

<sup>72</sup> For Bruno as the first to revive eclectic philosophy, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 38.15-20, as quoted in n. 74 below. For Brucker’s treatment of Bruno’s philosophy, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 12-62, and vol. 6, 809-816.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 36.34-38.26.

unsatisfying, for it was almost destroyed by the poverty of his judgment, by his undisciplined imagination, by his veneration for old philosophical hypotheses; in fact, the new philosophy which Bruno fostered, was, in Brucker's words, "more like a monster (*monstrum*) than an apt and rational system".<sup>74</sup> In his history of philosophy, Brucker asked persistently for a single and unified system in Bruno's philosophy, something which he did not find. And Bruno's mind — the mind being essential to good eclectic philosophy — was equally described in less flattering terms, namely as a *spiritus contradictorius*, whose poor merit it was not only to have opposed the school of Aristotle, but the schools of all philosophers.<sup>75</sup>

Brucker also includes Descartes and Leibniz in the group of eclectic philosophers.<sup>76</sup> To what extent the philosophies of Descartes and Leibniz can be described adequately in the terms quoted from Brucker, is a problem which I shall not address here. Be this as it may, Brucker's emphasis, when speaking about eclecticism, is clearly on system and systematic thinking. This is surprising to

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 38.15-20: "Quem philosophiae scopum si recte attigisset Brunus, gloria illi primum restitutae philosophiae eclecticae omnino esset tribuenda. Verum enim vero obstabant infelici philosopho iudicii paupertas, imaginationis lascivia, et ineptus mos consarcinandi veterum hypotheses, ut novam philosophiam effingeret, quae inde monstrum magis, quam aptum et rationale systema prodiiit." The alleged lack of system in Bruno's philosophy, is repeated *ibid.*, vol. 5, 40, 51, 54-55, 62.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 34.31-35.1: "Obscuritati Bruni iungi potest debetque spiritus, quem fovit, contradictorius, quo non uni tantum Aristotelis scholae, sed omnibus omnino philosophis se opposuit."

<sup>76</sup> For Descartes as an eclectic philosopher, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 10.33-40; for Leibniz as an eclectic philosopher, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 11. For more recent eclectic philosophers, see *ibid.*, vol. 6, 807-809.

modern usage, according to which “eclecticism” is not only used in a negative sense, but also in the sense of an incomplete and often self-contradictory sampling of elements from various philosophies, that is, in the sense of an unsystematic philosophy. Few, if any, modern historians of philosophy would, for instance, call Descartes and Leibniz eclectic philosophers.

So much for eclecticism. Syncretism, in Brucker’s thought, can be understood as unsuccessful eclecticism: In syncretism the eclectic ability to philosophize does not even go as far as to produce a coherent system.<sup>77</sup> By implication the syncretistic philosopher also fails to produce what is essential to philosophy, a system of philosophy. Hence syncretism can hardly be called philosophy at all. Syncretistic philosophers strive, though clearly unsuccessfully, to unify various doctrines and various schools, but, Brucker says, “they should only be allowed [into the history of philosophy] with considerable caution, because they normally betray the authentic thought of the philosophers, as the history of philosophy shows to us, both Ancient, Medieval and our own recent past.”<sup>78</sup> By the last words he probably refers to some of the “very recent Platonists”,<sup>79</sup> but he may also refer to several ancient philosophers whose

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<sup>77</sup> E.g. id., *Kurtze Fragen*, vol. 3, 449-551.

<sup>78</sup> Id., *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 16.39-17.3: “Unde omnes omnino Syncretistae, id est, variarum sententiarum et diversarum sectarum inter se consiliatores caute audiendi et multo cautius admittendi sunt, quippe qui mentem philosophorum plerumque adulterant, cujus testes fere infinitos historia philosophica, tum veteris, tum mediae, tum recentioris aetatis nobis exhibebit.”

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 17.4-14.



fraudulent works enjoyed considerable popularity in the Italian Renaissance, for instance the works attributed to Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>80</sup>

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola is an exemplary syncretist. He was not only a Platonist, still according to Brucker, but he also propagated ancient figures as Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus. Pico is therefore used as a conspicuous example of the syncretism characteristic of the first part of the third period. Brucker presents Pico with the following words:

Likewise in philosophy, to the degree that he [Pico] pursued it, the Platonic [philosophy] stood out: [Pico] was betaken by syncretism, a plague, introduced by more recent Platonists and Greek exiles coming to the house of Cosimo [Cosimo dei Medici, de facto ruling Venice at the time of Ficino] and also reaching Ficino [Marsilio Ficino, 1433-1499]; he [Pico] was ensnared by the elegant prejudice, that Platonism exhibits a true and divine philosophy, and he assigned opinions of the Platonists to Moses and other holy men, and, as we have already gathered, he mixed everything up without showing a sense of what is fitting, and Cabalistic, Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, Jewish and Christian [philosophy] mixed with each other in a wretched manner.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 17.14-17. For Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus in the Italian Renaissance, see D. P. WALKER, *The ancient theology. Studies in Christian Platonism from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century* (London: Duckworth, 1972).

<sup>81</sup> J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 4, pp. 59.38-60.4: "Idem in philosophia, quam secutus est, Platonica praestitit: Syncretismo enim pestilenti, quem recentiores Platonici introduxerant, et Graeci exules in Cosmi domum et ad ipsum quoque Ficinum perduxerant,

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correptus, et lepido seductus praeiudicio, veram et divinam philosophiam Platonismum exhibere, Platonorum placita Mosi aliisque viris sanctis tribuit, et ut semel complectamur, inepte miscet omnia, et Cabbalistica, Pythagorica, Platonica, Aristotelica, Iudaica, Christiana inter se misere confundit.”

These words of Brucker became the point of departure for Ernst Cassirer’s effort to rehabilitate Pico’s philosophy; see E. CASSIRER, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. A study in the history of Renaissance ideas,” *Journal of the history of ideas*, vol. 3 (1942), 128: “This objection has been directed against Pico from the very beginning, and it has determined the traditional estimate of his philosophy. His many-sidedness and comprehensiveness have been admired, but in the same breath his thought has been denied any philosophic value. For men saw in it for the most part nothing but an expression of eclecticism and syncretism. The accounts of the first historians of philosophy who treated Pico in detail, and tried to determine his position in the development of modern philosophy, expressed just such a view. Brucker in his critical history of philosophy sees in Pico’s thought nothing but an assembling and confusing of the most incompatible elements: ‘inepte miscet omnia et inter se misere confundit’ [= BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 4, 60.2-3]. Later historians have sought to soften this judgement, at least to defend Pico against the charge of being a fool and intellectually incompetent. They too have found the supposed ‘system’ of Pico burdened with the heaviest contradictions; but they have admired the subjective ability and readiness with which Pico succeeded in harmonizing all these contradictions, at least in his own mind, and effecting an apparent reconciliation.” M. LONGO, “Le storie generali della filosofia in Germania,” 626, claims that Cassirer only mentioned Brucker once, namely in his *La filosofia dell’illuminismo*, translated into Italian by E. Pogar. Florence, 1936, 314 [probably corresponding to E. CASSIRER, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, in id., *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1-, general ed. B. Recki (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1998-), vol. 15, 236; I have not had access to the Italian translation]. Longo seems to have ignored the reference to Brucker in this study of Pico dating from 1942. In addition, Cassirer also made explicit references to Brucker in his *Kants Leben und Lehre*, in id., *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, 244, and in his *Geschichte. Mythos*,

This quotation conveys some central features characterizing syncretism. First, we are told that Pico was “ensnared by” an “elegant prejudice”, which is precisely what a philosopher should not be, according to Brucker: Neither the eclectic nor the systematic philosopher carries on prejudices, as said above, but purges his mind from such obstacles, in order to meditate freely.<sup>82</sup> Pico failed on this score, since he had not sanitized his mind from philosophical and intellectual traditions and their prejudices.

Second, Pico “mixed everything up without showing a sense of what is fitting,” Brucker claims in the quotation above, probably referring to Pico’s synthesis of Platonic philosophy and Christianity.<sup>83</sup> On this occasion Brucker’s condemnation may aim at Pico’s synthesis of philosophy and theology, which should be kept apart according to Brucker,<sup>84</sup> but Brucker may also aim at Pico’s synthesis of various philosophical traditions. A few lines below, Brucker thus cites approvingly the words of another scholar holding that Pico’s combination of various authors, that is, past philosophers, was not ordered into a chain (*catena*), and that it was not guided by a sound reason (*ratio*); instead, Pico’s philosophy

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in id., *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 1-, eds K. C. Köhnke, J. M. Krois, O. Schwemmer et al. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1995-), vol. 3, 98.

<sup>82</sup> For the systematic philosopher purging his mind from “impure traditions” and applying his reason (*ratio*) freely, see J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 4.18-25, as quoted in n. 11 above. For the eclectic philosopher in this respect, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 3.22-4.11, as quoted in n. 57 above.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 60.2-3: “... inepte miscet omnia ...”.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 727-8.8.

was produced by his uncontrolled fantasies (*phantasiae*).<sup>85</sup> These words, all concerned with Pico's unfortunate mixing "everything up without showing a sense of what is fitting", are reminiscent of Brucker's criteria for systematic and eclectic philosophy; for both the systematic and the eclectic philosopher must, as said above, possess a sound reason.<sup>86</sup> Pico did not, Brucker thought. The result is disastrous, since it is precisely the office of the philosopher's reason to choose out certain principles<sup>87</sup> and to deduce an internally coherent system from these principles.<sup>88</sup> Pico simply lacked the epistemological precondition for choosing out principles and deducing doctrines from them into a system, wherefore Pico's philosophy failed completely.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, 60.4-11: "Id quod in *Heptaplo* eius, sive commentario in Genesin, desiderasse, sibique indicasse Aloysium Lippomannum, Veronesem episcopum, narrat Sixtus Senensis, 'nempe se in consulendis et coniungendis auctoribus in catena sua, ideo Pici rationem nullam habuisse, quod existimavisset, nihil se eius opera indigere, cum animadvertisset, Picum in hoc tantum unum incumbere, ut Platonicas cogitationes, vel suas potius phantasias verbis ac dictis Mosaicis exprimeret.'"

<sup>86</sup> For this role of reason among eclectic philosophers, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 4.4-5, as quoted p. 15 n. 60; for this role among systematic philosophers, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, 4.20-22, as quoted in n. 69 above.

<sup>87</sup> For the role of principles in eclectic philosophy, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 4.4-7, as quoted in n. 64 above; for the role of principles in systematic philosophy, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, 4.20-21, as quoted in n. 67 above.

<sup>88</sup> For the system deduced from principles in eclectic philosophy, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 4.4-7, as quoted in n. 64 above; for the system deduced from principles in a philosophy, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, 4.20-22, as quoted in n. 69 above.

## Conclusion

I hope this study of the notions “system of philosophy”, “eclecticism” and “syncretism” in Brucker’s *Historia critica philosophiae* support my contention, that “systematic philosophy” takes up a defining role in relation to the two other concepts. Moreover, I have raised the question whether all pre-modern philosophers possessed Brucker’s concept “system of philosophy” as a methodological tool. Even though I left this question open, I hope that I have called this into doubt, or at least called for caution before applying this concept to pre-modern and early modern philosophers.

The relevance of these matters may, at first sight, be limited: Does the above analysis of Brucker’s concept “system of philosophy” have any value beyond the circle of Brucker scholars? I think the answer is affirmative, because the concept is still used forcefully, and uncritically, among a considerable number of modern historians of philosophy.<sup>89</sup> Admittedly, the concept of system has received new and original philosophical interpretations over the intermediary centuries, but without obliterating the historiographical sense of the concept advocated by Brucker.<sup>90</sup> One might object that nowadays the concept, even as a historiographical concept used in the history of philosophy, has taken on new meanings, and that it is therefore futile to use Brucker’s concept system of

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<sup>89</sup> For a few examples taken from Plato scholarship, see n. 24 above. Another example is Ernst Cassirer and his analysis of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s philosophy; see n. 91 below.

<sup>90</sup> For interpretations of the concept system in early modern philosophy, see STRUB, “System, II. S. und S.-Kritik in der Neuzeit,” cols 825-856.

philosophy as a pretext for criticizing modern uses of this concept. That would be a fair objection to be considered in each case.

My sense is, however, that at least four features from Brucker's concept "system of philosophy" can be found, in various combinations and to various degrees, among a substantial number of modern historians's use of the same concept in expositions of past philosophers — in which case a criticism of Brucker's concept becomes less futile. In the first place, philosophy is sometimes regarded as an autonomous discipline possessing internal unity.<sup>91</sup> It is, as in

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<sup>91</sup> An example of a modern historian of philosophy who accepts these four features is E. CASSIRER, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," p. 129: "And in truth it is just at this point that the critical problem lies, from the standpoint of the history of philosophy. Were we forced to deny to Pico's thought any such 'inner form', it would then remain but a mere literary curiosity, a document in many respects important and interesting, instructive as to all the manifold and antagonistic interests that motivated the thinking of the Renaissance. But Pico's thought would have to be expunged from the history of genuine *philosophy*. For we can attribute no philosophical significance to an accomplishment that takes no definite *stand* on the great antitheses of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics; which poses no definite problems and which maintains or rejects no certain solutions. Can we count Pico della Mirandola as belonging to philosophy in *this* sense, and include him in its intellectual development? And what is the distinctive *principle* he set up, and expressed in the whole of his thinking?" (Cassirer's italics.) For Cassirer's reference to Brucker's reading of Pico, see *ibid.*, 128, as quoted in n. 81 above. Cassirer does not build his defense of Pico on a rejection of Brucker's criteria for a genuine philosophy, but on a fresh reading of Pico's texts which, so Cassirer thinks, reveals a unity in Pico's philosophy which has been ignored by earlier historians of philosophy, and which fulfills Brucker's criteria for genuine philosophy; see E. CASSIRER, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 137: "The distinctive category under which he subsumed his doctrine of God, of the world and of man, his theology and his psychology, is the category of

Brucker, regarded as distinct from its disciplinary neighbors, such as theology, astronomy, etc., and can be exposed as such. Second, philosophy is ideally based on certain principles from which specific doctrines in various fields of philosophy can be derived, though perhaps in a less rigid way than prescribed by Brucker. Third, a past philosophy should make up an internally coherent unity of doctrines within various branches of philosophy (e.g. ontology, epistemology, ethics), that is, a system. Finally, the concept “system of philosophy” has at least two aspects in Brucker’s thought, which can also be detected among many modern historians of philosophy. On the one hand, the thinkers deserving to be included in the history of philosophy should deal with their material systematically. On the other hand, and ideally congruent with this first position, the historian of philosophy should present past philosophers in a systematic mode.<sup>92</sup>

These four features of the concept “system of philosophy” introduce a series of problems. The first problem is related to the idea of philosophy’s autonomy. This feature of the concept “system of philosophy” may hinder an understanding of philosophical problems, which are generated through an interplay between philosophical and non-philosophical disciplines — theology, astronomy, medicine, alchemy, music, etc. If such problems, and their solutions, were reducible to certain philosophical principles, then why should the past philosopher in question bother with terminology and ideas from non-philosophical

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*symbolic thought*. Once we ascertain this central point of his thinking, the different parts of his doctrine immediately coalesce into a whole.”

<sup>92</sup> This two-folded demand is expressed in J. BRUCKER, *Historia critica philosophiae*, vol. 1, 15.10-18, as quoted in n. 18 above.

disciplines? And why should a historian of philosophy assume that these non-philosophical disciplines did not provide a cognitive and scientific content, which is irreducible to purely philosophical propositions?

The second feature, concerned with the deductive procedure, also gives rise to a problem. The demand entails the idea that the doctrines in various branches of philosophy, e.g. natural philosophy, should be deduced from one or more general principles. But why, one may object, should we expect such a method in branches of philosophy, which for longer periods have led an existence fairly independent from other branches of philosophy? Does it make sense, one may ask on a general level, to seek for a general principle employed on a specific philosophical discipline, if the problems and the terminology used in that specific philosophical discipline are primarily shaped within the discipline itself, or, alternatively, through an interplay with other non-philosophical disciplines? Why assume that a philosophical position held within one field should be deduced from outside rather than developed in response to the problems, the conceptual and terminological framework, which are specific to the field itself?

The third feature, that of internal coherence in a philosophy, is also problematic. If we leave open the possibility that past philosophers have developed their ideas through interplays between philosophy and its disciplinary neighbors, it becomes seemingly difficult to see why such a past philosopher should have striven to unify his philosophical positions within one single and internally unified order. If there is consistency and logical development of ideas in such a past philosopher's writings, then the order, or the system, is less likely to comprise all branches of philosophy, and nothing else; it would be more likely



that we find several distinct local systems, so to speak, that is, internal orders between one or a few branches of philosophy and some non-philosophical disciplines — internal orders determined by the historically given ties and interactions between various disciplines. The requirement for unity between the philosophical branches may in fact hinder the exploration of a past philosopher's writings as well as the integration of new discoveries, if these do not fit into the overall interpretation of the unity of the philosopher's system.

If these considerations bear some weight, then the last feature should also be reconsidered, that is, the requirement to the historian of philosophy only to include systematic thinkers, and to present his or her material systematically.

The question begs itself, why not give up the concept "system of philosophy" completely in the historiography of philosophy, in particular when it comes to pre-modern philosophy? The concept certainly seems to obscure more than it reveals.