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THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Oakeshott once wrote that political philosophy concerns the relation “between politics and eternity.” “At all other levels of reflection on political life we have before us the single world of political activity, and what we are interested in is the internal coherence of that world; but in political philosophy we have in our minds that world and another world, and our endeavour is to explore the coherence of the two worlds together.” This is a vivid conception of political philosophy. But it is one which is challenged by history. Oakeshott rather blithely claimed that the history of political philosophy is simply the recognition that political philosophy so defined has a “continuous history in our civilisation” (Oakeshott, 1991, 225). But if history is the antithesis of eternity, then the history of political philosophy may be nothing other than the death of political philosophy so defined.

History has an essentially contradictory nature. We may write history after we have lost something, as Acton suggested, or in order to lose it, as Goethe suggested (Goethe, 1904, 158). The historian may bury the past by writing about it, but he may also bring it back to view. This is why the philosopher is never sure whether the historian is his friend or his enemy. The historian may be Brutus

to his Caesar, but he may also be Jesus to his Lazarus. The consequence of this extreme indeterminacy is that there is no way to legislate for the history of political philosophy which cannot be immediately contradicted. In this chapter, therefore, I seek not to legislate for it, but instead to clarify some of its constitutions, conditions, and contradictions. The first thing to observe is that each of its three substantive terms—“history,” “politics,” “philosophy”—is contested.

Politics, before the twentieth century, was always subjugated to something else—to the *polis*, or to empire, church, or state. But in the twentieth century, there were attempts to define politics (or the category of “the political”) as something in itself. This was evident in classic works like Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political*, Collingwood’s *New Leviathan*, Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, Oakeshott’s *On Human Conduct*, and even in more quixotic works like Badiou’s *Metapolitics* and Rancière’s *Dis-Agreement*. The consensus now, however, seems to be that politics has no simple meaning: it can mean more or less anything (Alexander, 2014). In the last half century or so, almost everything has become subject to what we could call the last laugh of Protagoras—the possibility that everything is

relative, that there is nothing true about politics. It is in this situation that we attempt to make sense of politics in historical or philosophical terms, or both.

Philosophy is, I have argued elsewhere, any attempt to respond to the world, or any part of it, in terms of wonder, faith, doubt, or skepticism (Alexander, 2012). It is, of course, a rather high specification for thought: it appears to exclude ordinary thought, while being related to it. I think we have to admit that political philosophy cannot always be very securely distinguished from political theory or political thought. When they are distinguished it is usually on the grounds that political thought includes any judgment, no matter how fragmentary or incoherent (e.g. “Legislate!”), that political theory is something more ordered so it includes justifications of certain ideas used in politics (e.g. “Liberalism”), and that political philosophy is something further narrowed and intensified so it includes all attempts to understand and explain what politics is and where it stands in relation to other human concerns (e.g. *Leviathan*). It would be a mistake to distinguish them too severely: to only suppose, say, that ideas do not matter in politics, or that ideas matter in politics only in terms of what purposes they serve, or that ideas are only of significance when they enable us to understand politics without regard to purpose. But if the three were blurred together without argument, then we would be unable to distinguish prescription, justification, and explanation. There would be no distinction between “We should do this,” “We should do this for this set of reasons,” and “We say ‘We should do this for this set of reasons’ for *this* set of reasons” (Oakshott, 2008, 193). Where all this leaves political philosophy is, of course, unclear: which is why we sometimes turn to history.

History complicates everything. It places everything in the framework not of truth but of time: and so raises questions about whether we are telling a story or set of stories about what was thought true rather than trying to establish whether it is true or not. Consciousness of time makes us aware of broken traditions, of literatures canonical and uncanonical, of discontinuities and silences in our stories, and of the difficulty of assessing the motives behind and meanings of the relics which survive of older thoughts, theories, and philosophies. Perhaps it also increases our consciousness of the fragility of our own understanding, generating a caution about saying anything at all. And then there is also, as Condren has observed, the fact that we read historic works of political philosophy for a variety of reasons: sometimes because they are original, sometimes because they are coherent, and sometimes because they are influential. It should be obvious to everyone that what is original may not be coherent or influential; that what is coherent may not be influential or original; and that what may be influential may not be original or coherent (Condren, 1985).

The problem of history was evident to Aristotle when he distinguished poetry and history. On the one hand, philosophy, like poetry, has always been with the gods, while history has always been human, all too human. Hegel wrote in the *Phenomenology* that “philosophy moves essentially in the element of universality” (Hegel, 1977, 1). History, on the other hand, moves essentially in the element of particularity. Within the “fundamental category of historical thought,” as Collingwood put it, we no longer look “for a changeless and knowable something.” We suppose that there is “no unchanging substrate behind the changes, and no unchanging laws according to which the changes took place” (Collingwood, 1945, 10–13). This is clear.

But such an emphasis on change may seem to undermine philosophical certainty altogether. Oakeshott noticed that “almost imperceptibly, Collingwood’s philosophy of history turned into a philosophy in which all knowledge is assimilated to historical knowledge, and consequently into a radically sceptical enquiry” (Oakeshott, 2007, 199). Skepticism is a form of philosophy, and perhaps the most influential one now (though we resist it), because of our tendency to think historically. But the history of political philosophy draws our attention to the fact that most political philosophers were concerned with essences, ideas, and truth, and rarely concerned themselves with history. History itself, therefore, seems to ask whether the historian always has to think historically. Certainly, no one until the last few centuries could have imagined the possibility that history might be the fundamental category of thought.

It is important to recognize that the emergence of our historical consciousness has a history. In *The Idea of Nature*, Collingwood argued that at certain critical points in the past there has been a ruling analogy which has enabled men to explain nature—and also, we may add, politics. The first was an analogy between nature and man, so that nature was macrocosm and man microcosm. When this analogy was brought into politics, it suggested that politics was natural, in harmony with the universe. The second was an analogy between God as the creator of the world and man as creator of machines. When this analogy was brought into politics, it suggested that politics was artificial. The third was an analogy between the history of nature and the history of man, so that nature was seen to be historical, subject to change (Collingwood, 1945, 3 ff). This third analogy “detached early modernity from its past and at the same time inaugurated our modernity

with a new future” (Koselleck, 1985, 16). In this modernity, politics is neither natural nor artificial but emergent. As Marx put it, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1963, 15). In this continually changing situation, and one recognized as such, it becomes much harder to postulate a foundation of politics. Aristotle simply assumed that politics must be in harmony with the laws of nature: it was our nature to be political. Hobbes thought this too complacent. He suggested that politics had another foundation, namely, the brutal necessity imposed on us by nature to find some artifice by which we can achieve order. Many contemporary philosophers still begin with Aristotle or Hobbes. But this is to ignore the fact that political philosophy since at least the time of Hegel has begun with the lack of any certain foundation. Hegel did not think that this was a problem, since his philosophy was meant to explain everything without depending on any foundational assumptions. But Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Marx all criticized Hegel’s philosophy in very different ways, and those who have followed—apart from the scientists who can continue on Cartesian or Baconian assumptions—have made these criticisms their starting point. This is still not understood as well as it should be. It explains why political philosophy is generally now so fragmentary, and why it blurs into political theory and thought, and their histories. Most modern writings are indirect testimony to our failure to sketch a total understanding of politics in relation to what we have done in history and in relation to what we can think in philosophy.

It is unlikely we could understand this without the history of political philosophy. Some

modern writers have understood it: Andrew Vincent in *The Nature of Political Theory*, a book which deals with everyone but the *marxisant* French; and Olivier Marchart in *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, a book which deals only with the *marxisant* French. Marchart distinguishes modern political philosophers into three categories. First, there are foundational philosophers, who posit some foundation for politics. Most philosophers before the nineteenth century fit into this category. It survives into the present, although heavily modified: since instead of simply postulating that there are foundations, philosophers like Rawls and Habermas have instead sought to construct them. Yet this classical tradition has come under severe assault. For there are also anti-foundational philosophers who claim that such foundations do not exist, and so instead propose theories that tend to be relativistic, skeptical, or nihilistic. Thirdly, there are post-foundational philosophers, who posit that the “lack” or “absence” of foundations is itself constitutive of political philosophy, which then becomes “a constant interrogation of metaphysical figures of foundation—such as totality, universality, essence and ground” (Marchart, 2007, 2). This involves paradoxes which have to be accepted as a matter of faith. If one accepts them, then one can adopt the obscure terminology of Baudrillard, Badiou, and the rest; if one does not, then one can, as many do, ignore it. Most moderate commentators, such as Vincent, think that the best we can do is to adopt the sort of position sketched by Gadamer, who simply says we cannot escape our traditions and prejudices. But it is far from clear what the consequence of this would be, or that Gadamer, despite his sophistication, has done as much as Collingwood, Koselleck, Arendt, Oakeshott, and MacIntyre have done to dramatize its difficulties in relation to politics.

Vincent divides the different attitudes to foundations somewhat differently. In his book he distinguishes, first, those who believe in transcendental foundations: foundations of politics derived from some external sources, such as divine revelation, natural law, and even perhaps, although more ambiguously, historical inevitability and scientific generalization; secondly, those who believe in immanent foundations, which are foundations found within politics itself: what these are is highly contested, since writers are torn between universal claims, usually constructed abstractly or in terms of discourse, and “conventional” claims which depend on particular historical traditions; and, thirdly, those who do not believe in foundations, since they consider that everything is conventional and therefore particular (Vincent, 2004, 3–14). If we combine these two schemes together, then I think we have something like a complete scheme. There are five possible claims:

1. The claim that there are foundations, which are transcendental and universal, and that these can be known.
2. The claim that foundations can be somehow constructed through or for the sake of universal agreement, so we can avoid contingency.
3. The claim that the foundations are contingent and conventional, so not universal but particular (and traditional).
4. The claim that since everything is contingent there are no foundations.
5. The claim that there are no foundations, but that our need for foundations is so fundamental that it may still be considered constitutive of whatever we think about the world.

Each suggests a different purpose for the history of political philosophy. The first suggests that history is unified in terms of the

understanding and misunderstanding of the truth, and otherwise in terms of the continual failure to enact this truth in the past in any particular politics. The second suggests that history is a repository of earlier constructions, which are only to be studied for the sake of better construction. The third suggests that history is a constitutive form of study, since the supposition here is that we can only understand politics in terms of our own historical finitude: although here there is no secure way of distinguishing history from tradition. The fourth goes further and suggests that history is anything and everything. The fifth suggests that history is evidence for the intractable nature of our condition of being permanently committed to certainties we can neither wholly believe nor wholly abandon belief in.

All of these except the first would have struck everyone before Burke as possibilities to be avoided. This is one reason why we still read the classics: for the reason that, even if we cannot agree with them, we recognize that our own writings are in certain respects inferior to them. This is, perhaps, a minimal justification for the continued study of the history of political philosophy. But here we return to the original contradiction. We may study the history of political philosophy because our commitment to a historical form of understanding makes it impossible to believe in the certainties held about politics in the past by the political philosophers we study. The history of political philosophy both enables us to emancipate ourselves from the past and encourages us to recover it. We are in the interesting situation of remembering something we have chosen to forget.

The history of political philosophy is only a few centuries old. Momigliano notes that the English were rather good at it in the nineteenth century. But the tradition of Grote,

Lecky, Freeman, Maine, Bryce, and Bury was threatened in the mid-twentieth century by the positivistic view that ideas were of no significance in explaining politics (Momigliano, 1977, 1). It was in answering this sort of claim that certain figures tried to justify the status of history of political philosophy within the modern academic study of politics. In the early part of the twentieth century, the history of political philosophy and political science were rarely distinguished: they were part of a single study of politics. But the establishment of politics as a science forced what were now rival branches of political study to justify themselves. Justification for the history of political philosophy came, Vincent suggests, in two waves. Those of the first wave of the 1940s and 1950s—Strauss, Arendt, Oakeshott, and even to some extent others like MacIntyre later—suggested that if the history of political philosophy was correctly carried out it would enable us to establish what was of permanent philosophical significance. The books of these writers were still meant to be contributions to political philosophy. But the writers of the second wave of the 1960s and after—Pocock, Skinner, and Dunn—suggested that, since historians could only show what was of historical significance, nothing was of permanent philosophical significance (Vincent, 2004, 37–51). This position was associated with the intensification of historical study found in *The Political Thought of John Locke* (1969), *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), and *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), which are still taken to be models for the subject. A subject was legislated for: methods established, enemies identified, and books written. Skinner and Pocock between them drew our attention to two different ways of writing the history of political philosophy. Either we can write the history of the uses of argument found in the works of

political philosophers, so emphasizing the particularity of each argument, the question it was meant to answer, and the supposed use to which the argument was meant to be put; or we can write the history of the changes in the languages or discourses of political philosophy in terms of the *longue durée*. In practice, the difference between these may not be very great, although they may register slight differences in temperament and even in political inclination. If Foucault's historical writings were tainted with a radical hue, and Koselleck's with a reactionary hue, Skinner's and Pocock's have been tainted with the hues of moderate reformism and restraint. Even though their works are meant to be good history, they are also meant to offer something to contemporary political philosophers. Skinner has suggested that the value of history is in recovering past ideas in order to challenge present ones (Skinner, 1997). Pocock has suggested that its value is in performing "the liberal-conservative function of warning the ruler on the one hand, and the revolutionary on the other, that there is always more going on that either can understand or control" (Pocock, 2009, xiii). These, though not unreasonable, hardly require an elaborate apparatus of historical learning. What we may observe is that, unlike Koselleck, the leading figure of the German philological tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte*, who was mainly concerned to characterize what is distinctive about our modernity—the modernity constituted by a distinctive historical consciousness—Pocock and Skinner have concerned themselves with earlier eras. So they have had to face difficult questions about how their study relates to the present which Koselleck did not have to face. They are not characterizing our world, so they are perhaps explaining its origins, merely characterizing an earlier era for its own sake, or even only reminding

us of older ideas. In the end, it may be that most histories of this type are nothing more than archival compilations complicated by the subjectivity of the historian, in which case the history of political philosophy is nothing more than a high form of literature for failed politicians and frustrated philosophers.

This may seem like a dead end. So it is interesting to note that Dunn recanted. He saw that the revolution associated with the "Cambridge" contextualizing methods of Skinner and Pocock was no revolution at all, and that reaction was necessary if the history of political philosophy was to have any significance (Dunn, 1996). He argued that the study of politics should be

committed by its central tasks to a rejection of the intellectually, educationally, and politically disastrous divorce between a purely historicist history of political ideas, a style of political philosophy committed to political inconsequence by the self-conscious purity of its methods, and a political science ludicrously aping the sciences of nature and uninformed by any coherent conception of political value (and thus at the mercy of the most superficial of local ideological perspectives and sentiments). (Dunn, 1985, 2)

This is the broad justification for the continued study of the history of political philosophy over against the almost deliberately unhistorical political philosophy of Rawls and Habermas. The major significance of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* (1971) was that it established a form of political philosophy that confined itself to a sphere in which it was untroubled or uncomplicated by history and that, within the modern university, could exist alongside political science. Oakeshott once said that philosophy is "radically subversive" (Oakeshott, 1993,

141), but academic political philosophy is at best moderately subversive and at worst radically supportive of whatever is going on politically. Bevir and Adcock say that political philosophy has always been “the locus of hostility—whether conservative, radical or some curious blend of them—to the scientific aspirations of the discipline’s new mainstream” (Adcock and Bevir, 2010, 90). But this is only true of political philosophy when it is reinforced by the history of political philosophy. History to Rawls was no more than the conflict of Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century, and to Habermas little more than the newspapers and clubs of the eighteenth century. Both, of course, paid some attention to their own heritage: Rawls lectured on Hobbes, Kant, Sidgwick, and others, while Habermas has written about almost everyone from Hegel to Derrida. But this has all been a lot less reflective, and a lot less subversive, than the work of others—such as Oakeshott, Arendt, MacIntyre, Cowling, Dunn, and Geuss—who have seen history as less anticipatory of, or exemplary for, modern trends. My own view is that the theories of Rawls and Habermas are nothing but moments, or arrests, in what is possible—footnotes to Kant, say, or worth a page or two of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. Geuss (2008) has recently made this sort of claim respectable. The claim, in short, is that the political philosopher should not ignore the history of political philosophy. But it is never easy to see where the history of political philosophy points with any clarity (which is a particular matter of despair for any impatient academics who seek “outputs” and “impacts” from political philosophy): I think this is because an openness to history involves an openness to fundamental difficulties. It opens us to both the transcendent and the immanent, to both the universal and the particular, to both

enthusiasm and skepticism. It is necessary to say something about this.

In a short chapter, it is only possible to sketch some of the antinomies involved. These antinomies are not symmetrical, and do not form a logical set. They are the alternatives which arise as soon we attempt to reflect in the present on thought which is supposed to have come from the past. These antinomies cannot be resolved unless we settle for arbitrary compromises which only conceal the contradictions. It is more important to recognize contradictions than try to resolve them. So we have:

1. *Either* history is the objective past, *or* history is whatever the historian subjectively believes about the remains of the past.
2. *Either* history can be written of the entire past, *or* history can only be written of partial pasts.
3. *Either* history is concerned with the past for the sake of the present, *or* history is concerned with the past for its own sake.
4. *Either* history is conditioned by something which does not itself have a history because it exists outside of time and is eternal, *or* history is not conditioned by anything outside time, so history has to be understood only in terms of its own conditions.
5. *Either* not everything can be studied historically (not all objects are historical), *or* everything can be studied historically (all objects are historical).
6. *Either* the history of political philosophy is a form of study which is secondary to political philosophy: a mere retrospective study of the earlier attempts to generate a philosophical view of politics, *or* the history of political philosophy is a form of study which is inseparable from and therefore not secondary to political philosophy because it is the study of what constitutes political philosophy, perhaps

at any time, and certainly, now at a time when we suppose that everything is constituted by its history.

Some of these antinomies are very close—the fourth and fifth, for instance—and all are related. They raise great difficulties. To take only the second antinomy, we may ask whether it is possible to write a history of political philosophy for the entire world or only for part of it. If we suppose that the history of political philosophy is contingent and largely discontinuous, then it can include whichever elements we happen to find exemplary. These have always tended to be the “European” or “Western” traditions of Classical, Christian, and Enlightened thought, but there is no reason to exclude others if we are skeptical about the importance of our tradition. If the history of political philosophy is continuous and therefore constitutive of our current political philosophy, then the question is a much harder one. Yet it is possible to answer it, and again in terms of history. I mentioned earlier that a historical consciousness emerged in the eighteenth century. The impact of this on how philosophers saw the history of philosophy was total, whether or not they thought history was contingent or constitutive. By the time of Hegel and Schopenhauer, it was common to see philosophy historically. Both were interested in the discovery of other traditions besides their own. But Schopenhauer still saw history as contingent: indeed, of no significance at all. His philosophy was in large part a Western or Kantian reinterpretation of Buddhistic recognitions, as he himself saw: he took elements of Indian religion to be exemplary of a correct philosophical understanding. Much later, with less verve and more obscurity, Heidegger saw pre-Socratic philosophy as equally exemplary—a view which influenced not only

Arendt but also Derrida. On the other side, Hegel was equally fascinated with Indian and Chinese philosophy, and incorporated both of the great Eastern civilizations of China and India into his philosophy of history and even, although more as preliminaries than anything else, into his history of philosophy. Schopenhauer, on the one hand, suggested that there is a dilemma: we have to choose either a Pelagian, ethical, or world-affirming form of philosophy, or an Augustinian, antinomian, or world-denying form. Hegel, on the other hand, suggested that there was a dialectic whereby the simple unities of Chinese thought were logically opposed by the simple multiplicities of Indian thought and whereby both were reconciled through the complicated unity-in-multiplicity of Greek thought into the distinctive and familiar tradition of the Christian West. These are two magnificent and influential myths, and we have not entirely abandoned them. It is of course significant that Hegel and Schopenhauer wrote in a century when it was thought that the history of humanity could be told as one story. If we scale down our ambition, as we have tended to do since what Thomas Mann called the “bad nineteenth century,” then a story less tendentious is necessary. Perhaps the best available one is the one sketched in *The Nomos of the Earth*, where Schmitt argued that there was no unity in history until there was unity in geography. It was the contingent achievement of the Europeans to unite the world geographically. (Hegel would have said it was a constitutive achievement.) But we could say, with Schmitt, that this achievement, though contingent, was imaginatively decisive. There was a consciousness which arose in Europe, which was taken across the world so that the unity of the world was forged in relation to it, and which then was separated from its origin to become a complete world

consciousness, and which has been reflected back into Europe (Schmitt, 2003). There is reflexivity here: this consciousness is now no longer that of Europe, but that of the world; yet, for contingent reasons, the European story is the only one into which all other traditions can be placed to form a unity. It is common for writers of the history of political philosophy to emphasize that they are writing about the Western tradition only: but this is, for the most part, just good manners. For the moment, the Western tradition is the only unitary tradition. Everything else, so far, is partial (Dunn, 1996, 15). This does not mean that there could not be alternative traditions, say, Confucian or Vedic or Islamic. But these would involve revolutions in thought of which there is as yet no sign. Europe is to the World what Greece was to Rome. Indeed, there is good historical justification for the claim that the Greeks invented politics, that the Romans invented law—that is, they invented the habit of treating them separately from religion, ethics, and each other—and that Europeans conveyed these two paradigms of politics and law to the world, along with, eventually, a third paradigm of a separately treated economics (McCloskey, 2010, Schiavone, 2012, 11). But we have to admit that there is nothing in this dual or triple legacy which prevents an evangelical interruption of the sort which came with Christianity—although it could come in the future from Islam, Buddhism, or elsewhere.

The point is that the antinomies are inescapable: we exist between simple and coherent positions which we cannot possibly entirely adopt. The most immediately relevant antinomy here is of course the sixth. This is the question of whether we suppose the history of political philosophy is simply an additional way of reflecting upon texts we already reflect upon philosophically, or is

something deeper, more intractable. I think it is fair to say that the first ends in triviality and the second absurdity, taken separately. According to the former, the history of political philosophy would simply be a category into which we collect anything and everything which remains of earlier thought: a category of the relics of political philosophy perhaps modified by the insistence that we understand them historically. This certainly would not require any of the historical subtlety we have acquired since the eighteenth century. According to the latter, the history of political philosophy would depend on something like a philosophy of history. Here history would be unified not through facts, but in terms of a theory or event which relates everything—a theory such as, say, natural selection or historical materialism, or an event such as crucifixion-resurrection. If any theory or event of this sort were to be believed, then clearly it would change our idea of history, which would no longer be “one damned thing after another” but many damned or saved things, one after another, or, at least, many things ordered according to one structuring principle. The point is that such a theory or event would not itself be historical but abstract or timeless or eternal. “Modern historians have always reacted, understandably, against philosophies of history,” comments Perry Anderson. But philosophies of history “have not gone away, and are unlikely to, as long as the demand for social meaning over time persists” (Anderson, 1992, 284–285). It seems that historians of political philosophy are always in danger of turning into philosophers of history—or turning back into mere historians.

In this situation, I think we have to admit that there is no way to legislate for the history of political philosophy which is not arbitrary. Yet if philosophy without history

is a desert, and history without philosophy is a jungle, then we certainly need something of both. There is certainly nothing to be gained by being too concerned with historical or philosophical correctness. To some extent, the “methodological” writings of the last half century came out of anxiety caused by the requirement to be exact. Skinner was too subtle to simply encourage a mindless concern with “historical context” but there is no question that at least part of his legacy is the view that we should not look at philosophical works without some historical awareness of context (Tully, 1988). What he left to one side was, as Leavis put it, that “context, as something determinate is, and can be, nothing but [the historian’s] postulate; the wider he goes in his ambition to construct it from his reading in this period, the more it is *his* construction (in so far as he produces anything more than a mass of heterogeneous information alleged to be relevant)” (Leavis, 1968, 293). Oakeshott famously suggested in his introduction to Hobbes’s *Leviathan* that if Hobbes had written a masterpiece, as he had, then its context should be nothing other than the entire history of political philosophy (Oakeshott, 1991, 223). If we agree with this, then we end up in circularities, for the history of political philosophy is whatever we suppose it to be.

Awareness of what we are doing is not the same as doing it. But it is important to be aware of different ways of carrying out the history of political philosophy. Rorty distinguished, first, “rational reconstruction”: which is the study of older ideas in terms of their truth, with the intention of saying them better; secondly, “historical reconstruction”: which is the study of older ideas, whether or not we consider them true, in terms what they meant at the time of writing; thirdly, “*geistgeschichte*”: by which he meant a form

of study concerned to establish speculatively why the ideas came in the form that they did; and, fourthly, “doxology”: by which he meant simply textbook history. Rorty did not think much of the fourth, although it is still by far the most common. (Consider any “History of Political Thought” you have ever read.) He thought the third is the most interesting, since it “meets needs which neither unphilosophical history nor unhistorical philosophy is likely to fulfil,” since it establishes the nature of the canons of our ideas. It is “parasitic on, and synthesises, the first two genres.” He even added a fifth, which is the general intellectual history or history of ideas which offers the “raw material” for the other four (Rorty, 1984, 59, 61). In a different register, MacIntyre has distinguished, first, “encyclopaedia,” an unhistorical form of understanding in which systematic order is sought, on the belief that all knowledge is related to all other knowledge; secondly, “genealogy,” a historical form of understanding in which everything is to be explained in terms of contingent continuities and discontinuities, especially in terms of uses and powers; and, thirdly, “tradition,” which is a form of understanding neither straightforwardly historical nor unhistorical, in which everything is to be explained in relation to a tradition which has a truth at its core (MacIntyre, 1990). The first is enlightened: it requires history to be treated as no more than a set of cases. The second is critical: it requires history to be treated as a set of past particulars. The third is neither enlightened nor critical: it requires history to be taken seriously enough to see whether we can find any certainties there that can survive enlightenment and criticism. To take the second, the most influential now, Nietzsche claimed that history as genealogy was a weapon to be used against other forms of history for the

sake of our present unhistorical ends. In his later writings, he did not quite answer the question he had posed in his earlier writings, which is whether to think historically is to think ironically and therefore to damage our capacity to act. But in his earlier writings he also suggested that we might write history for any of three reasons: and, following him, we could say that we might write the history of political philosophy for these three same reasons: because it inspires us to strive to write great works of political philosophy, it enables us to preserve the older traditions of political philosophy we revere, or it enables us to overcome our suffering in politics by studying historically the means of delivering ourselves philosophically from it (Nietzsche, 1997, 67).

Much is still written in all of these categories in our time by those who seek some authority in the history of philosophy for their explanations, justifications, and prescriptions. We might ignore this if we were only to follow a narrow contextualist method or limit ourselves to a study of Skinner's or Pocock's methodological writings. The tension between historical and unhistorical approaches to political philosophy is still a great matter of concern to political philosophers. This is not only because history puts the certainties of philosophy into question, but also because for some time it has seemed as if the unhistorical political philosophy of Rawls and Habermas has failed to adequately theorize politics as it really is (Floyd and Stears, 2011). Arguments about these matters are likely to be repeated, especially by those who do not know how old they are. The truth is, of course, that "the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure" (Nietzsche, 1997, 63). But the history of political philosophy will always face questions about the adequacy of

the relations between its different elements. Even the great philosophers in our tradition did not always know how to relate them. Just to take one instance, Hume and Hobbes were rather untroubled by hypocrisy in politics when writing philosophically, but were far more censorious about it when writing historically (Runciman, 2008, 17).

The distinctions I have drawn in this chapter should indicate that history discloses no simple attitude to political philosophy. We are torn, finally, between two main theoretical possibilities:

Either the history of political philosophy is simply an assemblage of useful or amusing materials about politics: written to amuse and edify readers, and used, when we are neither amused nor edified, by sociologists, protestors, journalists, politicians and dictators as evidence for the particular points they want to make: it is a fragmentary set of materials, valuable because exemplary.

Or the history of political philosophy is the only correct way to understand the continuing fragility of our attempts to impose political order on the world by ordering it philosophically: it is not fragmentary but complete, even if impossible, since it is a bringing into consciousness of the highest elements of the history by which our own thought about politics is constituted.

In short, it may be exemplary or constitutive: we may study it to find examples of great political philosophy, or we may study it because the history of philosophy is a conscious emanation of some philosophy of history. In the first our relation to the past is discontinuous, in the latter it is continuous. These seem the only wholly coherent possibilities, even if one risks triviality, the other

absurdity. There is no way to completely harmonize them. Compromises will continue to be sought, and contradictions will continue to be found. The history of political philosophy is both the recollection of our former attempts to understand politics philosophically and the explanation of why we no longer fully understand it philosophically. It is not political philosophy, but political philosophy is nothing without it.

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