

Three Methods of Political Theory: Historicism, Ahistoricism and Transhistoricism

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Ethics is the practice of determining what we are to do. Politics is the practice of determining what we are to do collectively. According to the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy, it is both our right and our responsibility to undertake these practices for ourselves—legislating morally for ourselves through individual reflection, and legislating politically for ourselves through democratic self-governance. In its most extreme form, the ideal of autonomy might seem to preclude any reliance whatsoever on outside authorities when determining our moral and political principles. Relying on authority is, under this view, an unforgivable form of cowardice and conformism.

Under a more moderate understanding of autonomy, however, legislating ethical or political standards for ourselves is wholly compatible with seeking the assistance of others. Those whose help we solicit have a kind of authority, but it is a form of authority fully compatible with our autonomy—an authority grounded in the presumption that they possess practical wisdom greater than our own. This presumption gives them a voice, but not a veto, in our decision-making. Often, we seek such guidance from individuals we know personally, and whose opinions we value—friends, family members, teachers or mentors. At other times, we may seek guidance from the traditions of our community or the official pronouncements of organizations we trust. Our very choice of whom or what to treat as authoritative in this way is itself one of the most important expressions of our autonomy. And there is no reason to limit our choice to living individuals or institutions. Through the power of the written word, we also have the ability to consult the wisdom of the long dead.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the role of the political theorist was generally agreed to be interpreting a canon of “great books,” helping both their students and the readers of their scholarly exegeses to apply the practical wisdom of these works to the political questions of the day. Although this is still roughly the model most political theorists follow with regard to teaching on the undergraduate level, since the late 1960’s and early 1970’s it has come into disrepute as an approach to scholarship. This attempt to reform political theory was a reaction to the “behavioral revolution” of a decade earlier, which sought to turn the study of politics into a value-free, data-driven enterprise on the model of a natural science. Insofar as theory would play any role in this model of political science, it would not be as a source of practical wisdom but as something more like theoretical physics. Under this view, theory was now to be understood as the formulation of value-neutral hypotheses (preferably in the formal language of mathematics) suitable for empirical testing. Political theorists successfully resisted the call to become mere hypothesis-generators for social scientists. At the same time, however, they were provoked into reframing their field in a way that, while not wholly abandoning the traditional concern for the canon and the normative questions it raises, nonetheless conceived of the theorist’s relationship to the canon in new ways. Their implicit goal was to lend political theory an appearance of scholarly rigor comparable to that of the new social sciences without reducing it to a branch of these sciences.

According to one now popular view, traditional political theory is to be bifurcated, divided into “the history of political thought” on the one hand and “contemporary political philosophy” on the other. The former of these enterprises is considered a branch of intellectual history, practiced in both history and political science departments. Its goal is to understand authors’ ideas in their unique historical context, without considering whether these ideas can be helpfully applied in any other context. The latter enterprise—practiced in philosophy and philosophically-oriented political science departments—is often considered a progressive, quasi-scientific and essentially ahistorical undertaking. In Britain, each of these approaches has become associated with one of the two ancient universities—with the intellectual historians of Cambridge working largely in isolation from the political philosophers of Oxford (or so, at least, the stereotype holds).

Intellectual historians have put forward a large methodological literature defending this model of a divided discipline—much of it by the so-called “Cambridge School” of historical contextualists such as Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock. Interestingly, there is no methodological literature of a similar scope and richness being put forward by those on the other side of the bifurcated model of political theory; Oxfordians have apparently seen less need to defend their ahistoricism than Cantabridgians have seen to defend their historicism. Regardless, thanks to the Cambridge School’s unrivalled methodological self-assuredness, the bifurcated model of political theory has achieved intellectual dominance. The scholarly approach formulated by Skinner, Pocock and their allies now wields hegemony within its self-proclaimed domain, one which includes all scholars of political thought who consider themselves historians, and pointedly excludes those who consider themselves philosophers.

As is often the case with a new division of labor, the bifurcated model of political theory has led to an explosion of scholarly productivity. No one would deny that scholars working in both the Cambridge and Oxford modes have produced some of the best political theory in recent decades—work as obviously rigorous as anything coming out of the social sciences. This is not to say that traditional political theory has disappeared. Many theorists simply carry out their work as before, ignoring doubts as to the legitimacy of their enterprise, or confining any discussion of method to a few lines in the introduction to their monographs. Insofar as traditional political theorists have discussed methodology at any real length, their response to arguments for a bifurcated discipline has been largely defensive in nature. There is no existing positive account of why and how we should seek normative guidance from the canonical thinkers of the past. The goal of my current research is to carry out precisely this positive project—to establish the scholarly legitimacy of a form of political theory which is neither historicist nor ahistorical but rather transhistorical—one which acknowledges that the past is past, and the present is present, but that the latter has much to learn from the former. Transhistorical political theory in this sense is not meant to displace either the history of political thought or contemporary political philosophy, but to stand alongside them as a third intellectual enterprise drawing on the insights of both.

This essay is meant as a first step towards the completion of my larger project. At this early stage, my argument is essentially taxonomic, taking the lay of the academic landscape. Of course, there are many ways political theorists could be categorized—on the basis of factors ranging from the substance of their political commitments (conservatives, liberals, neo-republicans, radical democrats, etc.) to the names of their advisors or their advisors’ advisors (Straussians, Rawlsians, Skinnerians, Wolinians, etc.). Yet few would deny that categorizing political theorists according to their various relationships with the canon is one useful way to

organize the field. While every political theorist has his or her unique relationship with the past, it is nonetheless possible to construct a limited number of Weberian ideal types which capture the main cleavages in the field. As with all ideal-typical schemes, the goal here cannot be to capture all the subtleties of the range of phenomena being categorized. Rather, the idea is to give shape to an otherwise shapeless world by drawing rough boundaries around sets of phenomena which have more in common with each other than they do with those not classified under the ideal type. My argument is that, if we are to categorize types of political theory in this way, we need a tripartite rather than a bipartite division—a division between historicism, ahistoricism and transhistoricism, rather than between the first two alone. The division I propose is not merely a matter of the methods one is to use in achieving one's chosen intellectual goals; it is as much a matter of the end one chooses to pursue in the first place.

Historicism

The goal of a historian is to understand the past. Insofar as political theorists are historians of political thought, their goal is to understand the political-theoretical texts of the past. Some historians are interested in understanding these texts in terms of their readership and reception, such as their role in the development of popular political ideologies¹ or patterns of conceptual change over time.² Others, however, are more interested in understanding the texts themselves. For many, this aim is further specified as the aim of, in Leo Strauss's words, understanding "the thought of a philosopher exactly as he understood it himself."³ In other words, for many historians of political thought, the goal when interpreting a text is to recreate the author's intentions when writing that text.

Of course, we can question whether an appeal to authorial intention is the best way of making sense of the goal of understanding a text.⁴ Despite the considerable ink which has been spilled on the subject, the appeal to authorial intention is accepted by a surprisingly wide array of scholars.⁵ It is then not the goal of recreating an author's intention, but the appropriate means of achieving that goal, which is the subject of dispute. The Cambridge School is defined by its insistence that historians interpret the history of political thought as, in Pocock's words, "a multiplicity of language acts performed by language users in historical contexts."⁶ Pocock, Skinner and their colleagues emphasize study the context in which authors produced their work,

¹ This is the approach put forward by Michael Freeden, a notable exception to the general absence of historicists at Oxford. For a good summary of Freeden's methodology, see his contribution to the Oxford-dominated volume *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*. Edited by David Leopold and Marc Stears. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 196-215.

² This is the approach taken in the *Begriffsgeschichte* developed by Reinhart Koselleck, and applied by Melvin Richter and others. See Richter, *The History of Social and Political Concepts: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

³ Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959, p. 66.

⁴ For the classic collection of essays on this question, see James Tully, ed. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. For a monograph critiquing Skinner on this point, see Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁵ For the surprising similarity between Strauss and the Cambridge School in this regard, see Ian Ward, "Helping the Dead Speak: Leo Strauss, Quentin Skinner and the Arts of Interpretation in Political Thought," *Polity* 41:2 (April 2009), pp. 235–255 and Rafael Major, "The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Context of American Political Science," *Political Research Quarterly*. 58:3 (September 2005), pp. 477-485.

⁶ J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. viii. Much of the following discussion of Pocock's views first appeared in my review of this book in the *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (November 6, 2009). Online at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=18005>.

not as an end in itself, but out of their conviction that the intention behind a given language act can only be understood through appeal to the context in which the act was performed. Pocock uses the metaphor of “languages” to describe these relevant contexts; one simply cannot understand a text if one is not fluent in the “languages” in which it is written—jargons such as scholasticism, classical republicanism, and commonwealth radicalism, as well as natural, canon, civil and common law. “Much of the historian’s time,” Pocock writes, “is spent in... learning these languages, so that ‘he’ can recognize when it appears on the page before ‘him’ and can follow, and sometimes predict, where it will lead.”⁷ Years spent in the archives learning Pocockian languages is for intellectual historians what years spent learning mathematical methods is to the social scientist—an onerous burden, but one which gives them a special expertise and which lends their work a sheen of academic rigor.

Insofar as Strauss radically rejects the view that authorial intention is best understood through this sort of historical contextualization—and particularly insofar as he suggests that there is a single, timeless “esoteric” language hidden beneath ever-changing layers of “exoteric” languages—we can question whether Strauss qualifies as a historian of political thought. This is a subject to which I will have occasion to return in repeatedly in this essay, since the real (and perhaps hidden) goals of Strauss and his followers are famously inscrutable. Yet although he may or may not be a historian, Strauss is clearly not a *historicist*. To the contrary, Strauss uses the term “historicism” to describe the polemical object of his greatest intellectual animus.⁸ It is not clear whom specifically he wishes to tar with the historicist label—Martin Heidegger seems a more obvious candidate here than Friedrich Meinecke or other practicing intellectual historians. That said, if he can be imagined to have read the early methodological works of the Cambridge school in the last years of his life (a real possibility, and not a fanciful anachronism of the sort much despised at that ancient university), there is little doubt that Strauss would have classified Skinner and Pocock as historicists; Strauss’s followers certainly don’t hesitate to do so.

It seems incumbent here to define historicism in a way that will prove acceptable to both sides in the dispute between Chicago and Cambridge—in a way that the former will still angrily reject but that the latter will gladly embrace. I propose that we understand historicism—if only for purposes of a taxonomy of political theory—to be the view that the historian’s goals are to be pursued for their own sake, and not as a mere step on the path to the pursuit of some further end. An author’s intentions when writing a particular text—however canonical—is of interest simply as one historical datum in a universe of others data. It is worth knowing because it is true, not because it is useful. If anything, the fact that it is not useful in helping us achieve our purposes is a good indication of its truth. The past was very different from the present, after all, and if an alleged fact about the past is handy for some present purpose then there is a good chance that this alleged fact is actually an anachronism. Although Pocock admits that it is both possible and legitimate to read texts as something other than historical data—as sources of philosophical arguments or of practical wisdom, for example—in his view such readings are necessarily unhistorical, and must be clearly labeled as such. “The questions with which political philosophers come to deal may perhaps be perennial,” Pocock writes, “but precisely when they are, they cannot be historical.”⁹

⁷ Pocock, 2009, op. cit., p. 77.

⁸ For a review of Strauss’s many writings on this topic, see, Arthur Melzer, “Esotericism and the Critique of Historicism,” *American Political Science Review* 100:2 (May 2006), pp. 279-295.

⁹ Pocock, 2009, op. cit., p. 52.

Insofar as the work of Cambridge historiography intersects with our current concerns at all, it does so in a wholly negative way—debunking the pseudo-historical myths which normatively authoritative traditions tell to legitimate their authority. “The criticism of tradition,” Pocock claims, “is history.”¹⁰ After the criticism of tradition is complete, the past can no longer offer practical wisdom. Now, as Skinner famously put it, “we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves.”¹¹

Yet if gaining practical wisdom from great books is fundamentally unhistorical, perhaps the proper response is to conclude, “Well, so much the worse for history.” Cantabrigian historiography, as Pocock freely admits, is just one of many languages which human beings have used to talk about politics, no more or less privileged than Latin scholasticism or English common law. It is, moreover, a language designed by its creators to be incapable of offering practical wisdom, wisdom which was once provided by the traditions which such historiography has helped to undermine. While Pocock’s mode of scholarship is rife with intellectual excitement—the interpreter of Pocockian languages, like her academic rival the Straussian esotericist, is a kind of “code-breaker”¹²—it serves no constructive social purpose. “Professional historians,” Pocock writes, “rank among that irritating class of beings who may follow the logic of their discourse even at the cost of their loyalties to society.”¹³

Historicist history is, in this way, as value-free as social science. Yet while most contemporary social scientists see themselves as providing useful information about the contemporary world, Pocock sees himself as providing deliberately useless information about the long dead. And while social scientists may believe themselves to have privileged access to the truth through the methods akin to those of the natural sciences, Pocock has the consistency and humility to view himself as just another thinker in just another historical context. While this self-description may satisfy historians, philosophers and others seeking normative guidance may wonder whether Pocock’s has been a language game worth playing at all.

It is possible, however, that this suspicion is just a product of what Pocock calls the “first law of interdisciplinary communication... Nearly all methodological debate is useless, because nearly all methodological debate is reducible to the formula: You should not be doing your job; you should be doing mine.”¹⁴

Ahistoricism

The goal of philosophers is to find correct answers to questions of an abstract or general nature. Insofar as they are political philosophers, these are abstract questions about politics—typically questions about political concepts or categories rather than questions about any particular political phenomenon today. Since their high degree of abstraction renders such questions more or less timeless, there would seem to be no reason preventing political philosophers from drawing on the work of past thinkers addressing the same general problems. Strauss certainly seems to justify his quest to understand the philosophers of the past exactly as they understood themselves out of a conviction that this understanding will bring correct answers to certain timeless questions. Even if we do not accept Strauss’s “intellectual certainty that the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

¹¹ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8:1 (1969), pp. 3-53. Reprinted in Tully, ed., 1988, pp. 29-67, p. 66.

¹² Pocock, 2009, op. cit., p.32.

¹³ Ibid., p. 269.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

essential nature of all political situations has been revealed long ago,”¹⁵ past thinkers must have something helpful to say regarding abstract, philosophical questions. Their answers may not be perfect, but if nothing else they may save each generation from starting from scratch, endlessly reinventing the wheel. It is surprising, then, to find that so many who consider themselves philosophers behave as if nothing philosophically valuable was written more than about forty years ago, exhibiting what Hans-Johann Glock calls “historiophobia.”¹⁶

One way to justify this historiophobia might be to argue that authors who lived more than half a century ago were not actually addressing the same general questions that philosophers ask today. Skinner seems to hold something of this view. Although he does not deny “the possibility that there may be apparently perennial *questions*, if these are sufficiently abstractly framed,” he does insist “that what *counts* as an answer will usually look, in a different culture or period, so different in itself that it can hardly be in the least useful even to go on thinking of the relevant question as being ‘the same’ in the required sense at all.”¹⁷ The more common strategy among historiophobic philosophers, however, is to admit that past authors may indeed have been addressing the same abstract questions as philosophers today, but that the answers being provided today are simply superior to the answers which were provided in the past. Most philosophers, that is, believe philosophy to be a progressive enterprise in which knowledge is cumulative.

The claim that philosophy is a progressive enterprise is typically justified through analogy to similar claims about science. The widespread conviction is that, although philosophy in even its most analytic form is not itself a science, it at least is, in Daniel McDermott’s words, “an approach to gaining knowledge that falls into the same broad category as science.”¹⁸ Like scientists, McDermott explains, philosophers formulate theories, test them, and then provisionally hold onto those which are not falsified by such testing. It is true that theories about the abstract, often conceptual or normative questions of interest to philosophers cannot be tested empirically through experimentation or other means familiar from the natural or social sciences, but to believe that the term “‘test’ is synonymous with ‘*empirical test*’” is, in McDermott’s view, “a narrow and naïve understanding of what a test is.”¹⁹ Among philosophers, a general theory may be falsified by the construction of an imagined counter-example, or by a sound logical argument against it. As more and more theories fail these tests over time, those which remain form an ever larger body of cumulative knowledge. “I wouldn’t dare suggest that the amount of progress in political philosophy is comparable to that made in science,” McDermott concludes, “but I do believe (perhaps naively) that there has been significant progress.”²⁰ If such philosophical progress is real, then Richard Rorty is correct to conclude that “we should treat the history of philosophy as we treat the history of science. In the latter field, we have no reluctance in saying that we know better than our ancestors what they were talking about.”²¹

¹⁵ John H. Schaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, “Review Essay: *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics: A Critique*,” *American Political Science Review* 57:1 (March 1963), pp. 125-150, p. 150.

¹⁶ Hans-Johann Glock, “Analytic Philosophy and History: A Mismatch?” *Mind* 117:468 (October 2008), pp. 867-897

¹⁷ Skinner, 1969, in Tully, 1988, op. cit., p. 66.

¹⁸ Daniel McDermott, “Analytic Political Philosophy,” in Leopold and Stears, 2008, op. cit., pp. 11-28, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²¹ Richard Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,” in Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner., eds. *Philosophy in History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 49-76, p. 49.

This parallel between the progressive nature of science and that of philosophy can certainly be criticized on the basis of its understanding of the philosophy of science. “We find it difficult, if not impossible, to model philosophy on the traditional (i.e., ahistorical) paradigm of scientific research” Lorenz Krüger explains, because “science itself as a historical phenomenon has become a major subject-matter for philosophy.”²² This is why political theorists such as Sheldon Wolin have been drawn to philosophers of science like Thomas Kuhn, who might be interpreted to provide resources for a simultaneous critique of both behavioralist political science and ahistorical political philosophy.²³ A full discussion of the implications of the philosophy of science for attempts to draw parallels between the progressivity of science and the alleged progressivity of philosophy will have to wait for another occasion.

Yet regardless of what philosophers of science might believe, there can be no denying that almost all scientists practice their vocation ahistorically. Even though they are committed Darwinians, contemporary biologists almost never feel the need to read or discuss Darwin, let alone earlier biologists whose theories he displaced. Philosophical practice has never even approach this level of ahistoricity. No matter how widespread the historiophobia of modern analytic philosophy may become, there is little chance that Plato or Kant will go utterly ignored in philosophy departments any time soon.

Those who believe in the progressive nature of philosophy, however, have little difficulty explaining this fact of philosophic practice. Rorty, for example, explains that “we want to imagine conversations between ourselves... and the mighty dead.... not simply because it is nice to feel one up on one’s betters, but because we would like to be able to see the history of our race as a along conversational interchange. We want to be able to see it that way,” he explains, “in order to assure ourselves that there has been rational progress in the course of recorded history that we differ from our ancestors on grounds which our ancestors could be led to accept.” The result is a “conversation with the re-educated dead,” the sort of conversation “one has with somebody who is brilliantly and originally right about something dear to one’s heart, but who exasperatingly mixes up this topic with a lot of outdated foolishness.”²⁴ Or, as Ian Hacking puts it, the great philosophers of the past become “pen-pals across the seas of time, whose words are to be read like the work of brilliant but underprivileged children in a refugee camp, deeply instructive but in need of firm correction.”²⁵

This process of correction or re-education—“rational reconstruction” is the preferred term—does not leave its victims recognizable as the individuals they once were. Rorty writes: Each of these imaginary people, by the time he has been brought to accept such a new description of what he meant or did, has become ‘one of us.’ He is our contemporary, or our fellow-citizen, a fellow member of the same disciplinary matrix... Honesty here consists in keeping in mind the possibility that our self-justifying conversation is with creatures of our own fantasy rather than with historical personages, even ideally re-educated historical personages.²⁶

²² Loren Krüger, “Why do we Study the History of Philosophy,” in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, ed., 1984, op. cit., pp. 77-102, p. 97.

²³ See Sheldon Wolin, “Paradigms and Political Theories,” in Preston King and Bhikhu Parekh, eds. *Politics and Experience*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp. 125-152. Reprinted in William L. Richter, ed., *Approaches to Political Thought*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, pp. 132-140.

²⁴ Rorty in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, ed., 1984, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

²⁵ Ian Hacking, “Five Parables,” in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, ed., 1984, op. cit., pp.103-124, p. 103.

²⁶ Rorty in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, ed., 1984, op. cit., pp. 51-52, p. 71.

When philosophers discuss the “Plato” or “Kant” of their rational reconstructions, they are not really discussing Plato or Kant—nor should they be. Philosophers therefore do not need to know anything about what these historical individuals were like or what their texts actually mean. Jerry Fodor, for example, proudly admits his utter “ignorance of the history of philosophy,” and is unashamed to have written a “book about Hume without actually knowing anything about him.”²⁷ This, Glock complains, “amounts to historiophobia by the backdoor.”²⁸

Whether philosophers ignore their illustrious predecessors or “rationally reconstruct” them, the claim that the average philosophy professor today has greater knowledge of timeless, abstract truths than that possessed by the greatest authors of the past seems remarkably hubristic. A more modest defense of their ahistoricity might instead begin with the premise that philosophers seek not timeless truths but self-knowledge. “The starting point of philosophy is that we do not understand ourselves well enough,” Bernard Williams writes. “Philosophy’s methods of helping us to understand ourselves involve reflecting on the concepts we use, the modes in which we think about these various things; and it sometimes proposes better ways of doing this.”²⁹ To understand philosophy in this way is not necessarily to abandon all analogies with science; our intuitions or pre-theoretical judgments might play a role for philosophers akin to the role that raw data plays for scientists.³⁰ Under this view, however, the theories which result do not give us access to timeless truth, but merely bring our pre-existing concepts and convictions into greater coherence. Since philosophers in other times and places began with different pre-theoretical worldviews, it need not concern us that they came to rather different theories than philosophers do today. There is no conflict here, since (appearances to the contrary) their theories were really about them, and our theories today are about us. But just as there is no conflict here, there is little reason to believe that philosophers of the past would have much to contribute to our self-understanding today.

Even under this conception of philosophy as self-understanding, however, there may be good reason to draw on history to some degree. Glock, for example, considers the claim that history may aid our self-understanding in two ways.³¹ First, we may gain increased understanding of the possible articulations of our worldview and its presumptions suggested in the past through the history of philosophy. Second, we may gain a better understanding of the development of our worldview and presumptions themselves (through some form of *Geistesgeschichte*). Glock argues that while both of these forms of history might sometimes be helpful in our quest for self-understanding, neither is strictly necessary, Hegelian claims to the contrary notwithstanding, History may help us become better explicit articulators of our implicit beliefs, but may distract us from work which is more properly introspective than historiographical. History may also help us see the alternative worldviews available to us, but these alternatives can be the results of creative imagination rather than historical recreation—hence the love of science fiction among historiophobic philosophers. Ultimately, Glock concludes that “any philosophical insights to be gained from studying the past can be discovered *independently* at least in principle,” and “can be developed without sustained historiography.”³²

²⁷ Jerry A. Fodor, *Hume Variations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 1.

²⁸ Glock, 2008, op. cit., p. 883.

²⁹ Bernard Williams, “Why Philosophy needs History,” *London Review of Books* (October 17 2002), pp. 7–9, p. 7.

³⁰ This is how David Miller interprets Rawls’s approach. See David Miller, “Political Philosophy for Earthlings,” in Leopold and Stears, eds., 2008, op. cit., pp. 29-48, p. 41.

³¹ See Glock, 2008, op. cit., pp. 875-882.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 870.

Regardless of whether Glock is correct, there is no doubt that many self-identified philosophers today proceed in their various forms of ahistoricism in the belief that he is.

Transhistoricism

If we were to draw a sharp line between philosophy and political theory, then we might say that the goal of philosophy is abstract truth, while the goal of political theory is practical wisdom.³³ The question of relevance or application is not necessarily one which needs to be raised in philosophy, while it is inescapable in political theory. If they cannot help us navigate the problems we face in actual political life, political theorists feel they have not lived up to the demands of their vocation. While this demand does not necessarily involve appeal to past thinkers, political theorists often find themselves turning to a canon of great books. While these texts may contain a considerable degree of abstract truth, political theorists value them more for the normative guidance they can provide. The goal of transhistorical political theory is to reclaim their practical wisdom for application today.

My distinction between abstract truth and practical wisdom is the familiar Aristotelian distinction between *sophia* and *phronesis*; Aristotle explicitly considers political science a branch of the latter rather than the former.³⁴ The philosopher is a lover of *sophia*, while the political theorist might be called (to coin an admittedly hideous neologism) “philophronetic.” Unlike *sophia*, *phronesis* is necessarily dependent on context. It is not just a matter of formulating the right general normative principles—insofar as they are abstract and general, such principles are a matter of *sophia*—but also a matter of applying these principles properly in particular situations. Yet I must take issue with David Miller when he concludes on these grounds that “principles of social justice that apply within societies of a certain kind” cannot “be abstracted from that context and applied elsewhere—to the world as a whole, for example.”³⁵ Admittedly, merely abstracting principles from the context in which they were formulated will not allow us to apply them for our purposes today. Each situation we face—each context for practical deliberation—is unique, but none is entirely unique. Since all are the kinds of situations in which human beings can find themselves, all share certain common features of the human condition, allowing parallels to be drawn between what practical wisdom requires in even apparently quite different socio-historical contexts. When we seek to reclaim the practical wisdom of another time or place for use in our own, we must carefully map out the similarities and differences between their situation and ours. In order to make this claim more concrete, consider that Skinner once argued that:

...in most of the cases investigated by historians of ideas, the suggestion that we need to consider the truth of the beliefs under examination is I think likely to strike an historian as strange. Take for example... Machiavelli’s firmly held belief that mercenary armies always jeopardize political liberty. Perhaps there is nothing to stop us from asking whether this is true. But the effect of doing so will be somewhat analogous to asking

³³ I am hesitant to draw this distinction here because the same distinction might better be drawn between political philosophy and other forms of philosophy. David Miller, for one, takes it as axiomatic “that political philosophy is a branch of practical reason—it is thought whose final aim is to guide action, as opposed to having a merely speculative purpose.” See Miller in Leopold and Stears, eds., 2008, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. English Translation by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926/1994, VI.viii.1, p. 347.

³⁵ Miller in Leopold and Stears, eds., 2008, op. cit., p. 46.

whether the king of France is bald. The best answer seems to be that the question does not really arise.³⁶

A year after Skinner wrote these words in 1988, the “private military company” Executive Outcomes was founded in South Africa, and soon came to play a central role in civil conflicts across the developing world. Although Executive Outcomes was dissolved in 1998, “PMCs” experienced explosive growth over the last two decades—most notably Blackwater USA, now renamed Xe Services. While France may no longer have a king, bald or otherwise, there is little doubt that mercenaries are still with us. The question of whether they still pose the threat to liberty which Machiavelli believed them to can only be answered through a careful comparison between the mercenaries fighting the intercity wars of ancient and Renaissance Italy and those fighting the global conflicts of the twenty-first century. Machiavelli, in his application of the practical wisdom of the ancients in a Renaissance context, might even serve as a good methodological model for the application of his insights to our era.³⁷

Pocock’s metaphor of historical contexts as “languages” is helpful in elucidating what this process involves. Extending his metaphor, transhistorical political theory is a matter of “translating” practical wisdom of the past into something we can use today. This extended metaphor is hardly original; any understanding of what has been said in any social, cultural or historical context has long been seen to involve something analogous to translation. Mere immersion in the Pocockian “languages” of the past is insufficient. As Skinner himself has admitted (alongside his co-authors Richard Rorty and J. B. Schneewind) “it is one thing to fall in with another’s language-game, and another to translate her language into yours.”³⁸ To say that the translations which result from this process are anachronistic is, as Skinner and his co-authors admit, “true but pointless. They are *supposed* to be anachronistic.”³⁹ This is because translations are meant to speak to their own time and place. As Alasdair MacIntyre observes, Chapman’s Homer is no better or worse than Pope’s two centuries later or Fitzgerald’s two centuries after that. “The notion of a timelessly best translation,” he concludes, “makes no sense.”⁴⁰

No historicist would deny that a history of Latin scholasticism should be written in the language of contemporary historiography rather than in the jargon of the scholastics themselves. “The historian learns a language in order to read it, not to write in it,” Pocock explains. “His own writings will not be composed of pastiches of the various languages he has learned... but of languages of interpretation, which he has developed and learned to write, each designed to bring out and articulate, in a kind of paraphrase, the assumptions, intimations, etc. explicit and implicit in one or more of the languages he has learned to read.”⁴¹

Yet translating the meaning of a text into terms that we can understand is one thing; translating the practical wisdom this meaning conveys for use today—its significance, as opposed to its mere meaning, in E. D. Hirsch’s distinction⁴²—is another still. Once we accept

³⁶ Skinner, “A Reply to My Critics,” in Tully, ed., 1988, p. 256.

³⁷ Machiavelli’s contemporary Guicciardini is even more self-conscious about the care necessary when applying ancient wisdom to present circumstances. On Guicciardini’s method, see Conal Condren, *The Status and Appraisal of Classic Texts: An Essay on Political Theory, Its Inheritance and the History of Ideas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. pp. 280-281.

³⁸ Editors’ Introduction in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, eds., 1984, op. cit., p. 4.

³⁹ Editors’ Introduction in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, eds., 1984, op. cit., p. 6.

⁴⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past,” in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, eds., 1984, op. cit., pp. 31-48, p. 33.

⁴¹ Pocock, 2009, op. cit., pp. 94-95.

⁴² E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 2ff.

that texts can be paraphrased in languages other than those in which they were written, however, there is no reason to stop our inquiry once we have ascertained what authors meant to say in their own historical contexts. It is as legitimate to translate their insights as it is to translate their speech-acts, and hence to learn *from* and not merely *about* them.⁴³ If we do not take this additional step, we may wonder what the point was in attempting to understand their ideas in the first place. As Glock put it, “The problems, arguments and claims of remote philosophical theories must be intelligible to *us* so that we can assess them for their *trans-historical merits*... The ideal result is a dialogue, a ‘fusion of horizons.’ In approaching a foreign text or culture, we must keep in mind the possibility that we might have something to learn.”⁴⁴

Simply understanding what authors meant to say is difficult enough. Applying practical insights developed in one context to our own rather different context is more difficult still. If it is easy to go wrong in our historical interpretation, the chances of error when we move to transhistorical application are greater still. Such application is an art rather than a science. There is no foolproof method available to insure that we arrive at practical wisdom, in keeping with Aristotle’s injunction that we must not expect of our study greater exactness than the subject matter will allow.⁴⁵ As a result, our efforts will lack the appearance of rigor which is the source of such pride among practitioners of mathematized social science, archival history and philosophical logic alike.

Why, then, make the attempt at all? Why not rely on our own reserves of practical wisdom rather than going through the unsure process of translating the practical wisdom of the past? Our reason can only be because we are convinced that the practical wisdom of the past exceeded our own—indeed, that it exceeded our own to such an extent that the uncertain process of transhistorical reclamation is actually more reliable than any attempt to “do our own thinking for ourselves.”

If our belief in the practical wisdom of the past were merely a matter of cowardice—a fear of autonomous reflection which keeps us in a state of self-incurred immaturity, a fear of Enlightenment in Kant’s sense of the term⁴⁶—then Skinner would be right that “to demand from the history of thought a solution to our own immediate problems is... to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error.”⁴⁷ Perhaps this is why transhistoricist political theorists from across the ideological spectrum—from Wolin and Arendt to MacIntyre,

⁴³ For another take on this sort of translation, see Mark Philp, “Political Theory and History,” in Leopold and Stears, eds., 2008, op. cit., pp. 128-149, especially pp. 137-8.

⁴⁴ Glock, 2008, op. cit., p. 885, p. 892. The notion of a “fusion of horizons” is, of course, from Hans-Georg Gadamer. There are important parallels between the features that Gadamer believes *must* hold for all understanding—especially that “the problem of *application*... is to be found in all understanding”—and that I maintain *can* and *should* hold for transhistorical political theory. (See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Second, Revised Edition. Translation revised by Joel Winsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1989, especially pp. 302-306; the quotation from the previous sentence is on p. 306.) Gadamer’s views would seem to preclude the possibility of either Cantabrigian intellectual history or Oxfordian ahistorical philosophy, while I wish only to defend the legitimacy of a third mode of intellectual inquiry alongside these two. A fuller account of the similarities and differences between Gadamer’s views and my own will have to wait for a future occasion. It is, however, interesting to note that Strauss shared my suspicion of universal hermeneutic theories such as Gadamer’s. See Leo Strauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Correspondence Concerning *Warheit und Methode*,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978), pp. 5-12, especially pp. 5-6.

⁴⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, op. cit., I.iii.1, 1094b, p. 7.

⁴⁶ See Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* 1784. Translated by Mary J. Gregor in *Practical Philosophy*. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Translated and Edited by Mary J. Gregor. General Introduction by Allen Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 11-22.

⁴⁷ Skinner, 1969, in Tully, ed., 1988, op. cit., p. 67.

Voegelin and (here I reveal where I believe he should actually be categorized) Strauss—describe our current situation as one of “crisis.” They turn to the past not out of cowardice or fear, but out of hope—hope that, although our present political world is fundamentally on the wrong track, it can be saved through the reclamation of some form of forgotten practical wisdom.⁴⁸ Whether radicals or reactionaries (if there is actually any difference between the two), their goal is not to interpret the world, but to change it. They reject both historicism and ahistoricism because both antiquarian history and anachronistic rational reconstruction, as MacIntyre puts it, “may help to reinforce the prejudices of the present by insulating us from that in the past which would most disquiet us.”⁴⁹

Yet one need not be a radical who believes that the present is in a state of grave crisis in order to see the value of political theory as transhistorical reclamation. One only needs to believe that there is practical wisdom to be gained through the transhistorical study of past authors that cannot be gained on the basis of individual effort alone. This belief does not seem unreasonable, especially since practical wisdom cannot be won through the application of some specifiable intellectual method, but only through prolonged reflection and extensive experience. We naturally expect to find such wisdom among our teachers and our elders.⁵⁰ No one makes his or her way in the world alone; Pocock and Skinner, for example, learned their historicism from Herbert Butterfield and Peter Laslett. Yet there is no reason to rely solely on living teachers or elders with whom we are acquainted personally. Unfortunately, for those of my generation, Butterfield and Laslett are now confined to the pages of the history of historiography. If it was permissible for Pocock to learn from them when they were alive, surely it is still permissible for me. And if it is permissible for us both to learn from Butterfield, then surely we can both also learn from R. G. Collingwood; and if it is permissible for us to learn from Collingwood, then surely it is also permissible for us to learn from F. H. Bradley; and if it is permissible for us to learn from Bradley then it is surely also permissible to learn from Hegel—and backward the sequence goes until we reach Socrates and Plato, who have been teachers to us all.

Yet if we deny that we can learn from the past, we are not only denying the youth of today the opportunity to learn from our dearly departed teachers. We are denying future generations the opportunity to learn from us. MacIntyre observes that “for any particular philosophical generation its occupation of the present can only be temporary; in some not too distant future it will have been transmuted into one more part of the philosophical past... So the philosophical nullifying of the past... turns out to be a way of nullifying ourselves in advance.”⁵¹

These are not meant to be arguments against practicing either historicism or ahistoricism. They are, however, reasons why devoting one’s scholarly life to either strikes transhistorical political theorists as deeply unappealing. They may also be reasons why it is difficult for even the most committed historicists to refuse to learn from as well as about the objects of their study. As Skinner admits, “the decisions we have to make about what to study must be our decisions, arrived at by applying our own criteria for judging what is right and significant.”⁵² Any author from the distant past still worth studying today is likely to be in possession of some piece of

⁴⁸ For more on these “crisis” theorists, see John G. Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Winthrop Publishers, 1979, especially pp. 33-59.

⁴⁹ MacIntyre in in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, eds., 1984, op. cit., p. 34.

⁵⁰ On the occasional presence of *sophia* but the general absence of *phronesis* among the young, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, op. cit., VI.viii.5-7, 1142a, pp. 349-351.

⁵¹ MacIntyre in in Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, eds., 1984, op. cit., pp. 39-40.

⁵² Skinner, “Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action,” *Political Theory* 23 (1974), pp. 277-303. Reprinted in Tully, ed., 1988, op. cit., pp. 97-118, pp. 100-101.

practical wisdom worth translating and reclaiming. As a result, even those who explicitly reject transhistorical political theory often end up practicing it implicitly. Consider the republican revival spearheaded by Skinner in the later decades of his career—a paradigmatic example of translating political ideals from one historical context to another if there ever was one.⁵³ This essay has been a first attempt to defend his practice of theory against his theory of the practice⁵⁴—to begin to return methodological respectability to an activity that political theorists cannot seem to abandon even when they try.

⁵³ There is a real question as to whether Skinner has been consistent in applying the principles of his early, methodological essays over the course of his career. When recently revising and republishing these essays, Skinner admitted that while he may “no longer entirely endorse what I originally wrote” and has “toned down the noisy polemics I used to enjoy” (p. vi), he is still committed to the idea that “if we want a history of philosophy written in a genuinely historical spirit, we need to make it one of our principal tasks [though not our only task or our most important task?] to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts as enable us to make sense of what their authors were doing in writing them” (p. 3). See Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume I: Regarding Method*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁵⁴ Charles Taylor raised the possibility of a conflict between Skinner’s methodological theory and his scholarly practice in “The Hermeneutics of Conflict,” in Tully, ed., 1988, op. cit., pp. 218-228, p. 218.