

Political Theory as Both Philosophy and History: A Defense Against Methodological Militancy

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Abstract

This essay defends a broad, eclectic, and inclusive kind of political theory against methodological militants who would restrict political theory's permissible purview. It rejects the idea—frequently voiced by exponents of both analytic-philosophic and historicist methodologies—that philosophical and historical analyses are necessarily two separate enterprises that ought to be kept distinct, not just conceptually but as a matter of scholarly practice. Against the methodological militants, this essay explains the value of those forms of political theory that combine philosophy (the study of what should be done) with history (the study of what past authors thought about politics). It concludes by raising one further objection to the methodological militants: They fail to acknowledge the reality and importance of the “classic” work within the study of political thought.

INTRODUCTION

I begin these reflections on the methodology of political theory by confessing my deep suspicion of the idea of methodological rigor (i.e., that there is a single or privileged way of doing political theory) and therefore also of prolonged reflections about methodology detached from concrete concerns, questions, and problems. One of the real advantages of political theory relative to other, kindred disciplines is its thematic breadth and methodological eclecticism, and this salutary expansiveness should not be sacrificed for any dubious fastidiousness toward method. Moreover, in political theory (in contrast to disciplines like medicine), the risks of a bad methodology seem much lower than the risks of circumscribed authorial expressivity or imagination. And the numerous challenges facing a scholar of political theory—the combination of indifference and criticism likely to meet that scholar’s writing as well as the competition he or she must endure with other political theorists for scarce readership—are sufficient in my view to protect the broader intellectual community from suspect work. That is to say, one need not rely on a criterion of methodological rigor to police political theory and distinguish better from middling works, as this function already is being performed—imperfectly to be sure but not arbitrarily—by what has been called an “anthropological epistemology” (Bevir 1999, pp. 100–1), or, more colloquially, success in the marketplace of ideas.

It might seem that my suspicion of methodology presents me with a certain paradox: namely, that such an antimethodological standpoint is in the pure sense unsayable because arguments about the dangers of excessive attention to method are themselves only contributing to this attention. There is truth to this point, and it reminds us that the ultimate way to avoid methodology is to *practice* political theory rather than only reflect on it. Still, I believe there is at least one kind of antimethodological reflection that is immune to the accusation of paradox. This is the defense of a broad, expansive, and eclectic political theory from methodologically inspired critics who would seek to restrict its purview. To defend political theory from circumscribing methodologists is not precisely to engage in methodology but to resist its encroachment. It is this defensive relation to methodology that I pursue here.

Now who are the methodological critics who would restrict the scope of political theory? On the one hand, certain philosophers (i.e., those who seek correct answers to ongoing questions about what our political rights, duties, and institutions should be) doubt why the history of political thought, most of which is presumably incorrect when it comes to answering such questions, should play much of a role in contemporary political philosophy (Russell 1992 [1900], p. xix; Broad 1930, p. 2; Price 1940, p. 3; also see Sorell 2005a,b; Cottingham 2005). On the other hand, certain historians of political thought argue for studying past philosophical works as intellectual relics and not as invitations to the interpreter to philosophize through them and seek instruction for contemporary politics (Skinner 1988 [1969], pp. 66, 67; 1998, pp. 118–20). Although very different, both methodological critiques unite around the idea that history and philosophy are separate enterprises. Accordingly, at their most extreme, the one would reduce political theory to philosophy (the study of what should be done), the other to history (the study of what past authors thought about politics)—or, at the very least, both see philosophical and historical analyses as two enterprises that ought to be kept distinct, not only conceptually but also as a matter of scholarly practice (e.g., Bevir 1999, pp. 75, 122).

My argument is structured as follows. In the next section, I discuss the particular form of political theory that is most beleaguered by methodological militants from the philosophic and historicist camps: political theory that aims to practice both philosophy and history simultaneously. The following two sections then describe as well as resist the arguments of the two leading forms of methodological militancy. In the concluding section, I raise a further objection to these two

sets of methodological critics: They fail to acknowledge the reality and importance of the classic work within the study of political thought.

POLITICAL THEORY THAT IS BOTH PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY

To clarify the stakes of the issues at play it is helpful, at the outset, to consider the specific kind of political theory most threatened by the methodological critiques described above: namely, that form of political theory in which the history of ideas (what past authors thought) and philosophy (the search for normative direction) are mixed (Frazer 2013; Lockyear 1979, p. 201; Leslie 1970, p. 434). This mixing is not an alternation between philosophy and history but a more fundamental melding. Such an approach has a long pedigree and, among the classic works studied by generations of students of politics, can be located in such figures as Thucydides (1972, 1.22.4), whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* aims at disclosing ahistorical universal wisdom about politics through the study of a single historical event; Machiavelli (1996 [1517]), whose *Discourses on Livy*, however informative it might be about ancient Roman politics and Livy's political thought, relies on these for the extrahistorical purpose of propagating Machiavelli's own original insights about modern politics; and Tocqueville, whose *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1955 [1856]) and *Democracy in America* (2000 [1835, 1840]) attend to the recent and more distant past for edification about liberty and its protection in the contemporary world. Machiavelli's preface to the first book of the *Discourses*—which promises that his work will pursue “a path as yet untrodden by anyone. . . [which] will bring common benefit to everyone” but will do so above all by manifesting “a true knowledge of histories” (1996 [1517], p. 5)—might be considered a manifesto for political theory that is neither philosophy nor history, but both simultaneously.

More recently, this melding of history and philosophy—this simultaneous recovery of past authors and polemical intervention into the problems and concerns of the present—has been influentially exemplified by Isaiah Berlin, whose seminal essay “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1979) develops Berlin's own conceptual differentiation between positive and negative forms of liberty through continual appeal to past political writers (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx) who illustrate various forms of the two different liberties, their respective appeals, and their dangers. Not surprisingly, Berlin's argument has been the target of methodologically based critique (Skinner 1998, p. 116; 2002a, p. 265).

But perhaps the greatest recent exponent of this besieged form of political scholarship is Hannah Arendt. A reader of Arendt almost always gets two things simultaneously: knowledge of intellectual works from the past (what earlier authors thought and why they may have thought it) and Arendt's own original arguments and insights about political phenomena. Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues, for example, becomes under Arendt's (1971) interpretation the paragon of the thinking process itself. The Socratic dialogues reflect Arendt's own theory of thinking as dialogic, largely resultless when it leaps beyond the knowable, dissolvent of prevailing norms, yet vital both as a human need and as a source of resistance in times of evil. Greek thinkers, especially Aristotle, model for Arendt a classical understanding of the political as something that transcends mere economic concerns. In Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), Greek thought becomes the counterpoint to the modern blurring of the distinction between private and public. Hobbes' highly atomistic, competitive conception of human society is treated by Arendt (1951, pp. 139–47) not only as a premise informing Hobbes' theory of justice, but as a prediction, perhaps even an unwitting one, of the type of people that likely would be created in the modern, bourgeois, liberal-capitalist regimes only beginning to be formed in Hobbes' lifetime. Melville's story “Billy Budd” is, in Arendt's interpretation (1963, pp. 72–78), an allegory about the violence and speechlessness of pure goodness and thus of its exclusion from politics. These examples, of which there are countless

more, demonstrate how Arendt's style of political theory involves at once a recovery of historical texts and their use for her own, often original authorial voice.

Arendt was aware that she wrote political theory in a manner that was irreducible to either philosophy or history but integrated the two. With regard to history, as much as Arendt practiced careful scholarship in recovering the intentions of past authors, the meaning of intellectual works from the past could never be reduced to these intended meanings or their role in a specific historical context. Rather, she argued that such texts, perhaps because they had been infused with creative intelligence from their authors, had the capacity to generate new and original insights for contemporary interpreters making use of them (Arendt 1968, pp. 205–6).

With regard to philosophy, Arendt's insistence in a 1964 interview (2000 [1964], p. 3) that she be called a political theorist, rather than a philosopher, was based in part on her suggestion (Arendt 1958, p. 7) that whereas philosophy aspires to the study of man (the human being in its singular essence), political theory begins with the fact of plurality, "the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world." Students of Arendt are used to reading these well-known lines as part of her metaphysics of action (i.e., that action is something that only can be practiced by human beings in their plurality), but Arendt's interview suggests that the basic premise of plurality also has at least three methodological implications for the practice of political theory.¹

First, for Arendt the pluralistic character of politics means that the theoretical effort to find normative direction must be chastened by an epistemic modesty—albeit one that simultaneously explains the need for splendid erudition of the kind Arendt evinced.² Plurality limits expectations for final agreement in political matters. This does not prevent the political theorist from arguing for a privileged normative direction for political life, but it means that it is naïve for the theorist to think such arguments might be grounded on logic alone or that they might gain the assent of all parties in the debate. Plurality in this sense thus informs Arendt's general approach to normative reasoning, which proceeds by identifying a commitment believed to have normative worth (e.g., political participation) and then examining an illustrious array of prior authors who share elements of Arendt's commitment and themselves have reflected with subtlety about its value and the challenges associated with its pursuit. That is to say, Arendt's epistemically modest but richly erudite method accepts that, in a condition of plurality, normative argument works best by presenting a distinguished tradition of thought to which the reader is invited to subscribe, rather than by solely engaging in ahistorical, uninterpretative logical reasoning.

Second, plurality means that the mission of the political theorist cannot be simply to answer "what ought to be done?" because the pluralistic character of politics means that one's privileged ends will face opposition from counterforces that have their own kind of logic. Thus, even though Arendt's work is animated by clear normative commitments (action, thinking, a nontotalitarian world), her writing always includes profound efforts to make sense of the competing forces that prevent full realization of these commitments (the rise of the social, the reduction of thinking to knowing, and evil, respectively). When Arendt reflects that her methodology privileges understanding—"What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking

¹In the interview, Arendt (2000 [1964], p. 4) explains the distinction between philosophy and political theory in part on the basis that "there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics. That is, between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being." Because action, which for Arendt (1958, p. 7) presupposes human plurality, is part of what differentiates political theory from philosophy, I think Arendt's idea of plurality has methodological implications and should not be limited to her conception of action itself.

²It is fitting, then, that when Arendt disclaims the role of philosopher she does so modestly (i.e., with some sense that a philosopher possesses knowledge she lacks), saying to the interviewer, "I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers, as you so kindly suppose" (2000 [1964], p. 3).

this understanding, part of the process of understanding” (Arendt 2000 [1964], p. 5)—she seems to mean that political theory cannot rest with an abstract articulation of rights, duties, and responsibilities but must illuminate the larger contestation of forces in which these allegiances are situated.

Finally, the pluralism presupposed by political theory means, for Arendt, that authors of political-theoretical works cannot understand themselves as detached observers of politics, who simply see the truth; they must accept that political theory is not only theory about politics, but theory that is politicized. Whatever understanding one achieves about politics is conditioned, therefore, by one’s own polemical engagement, however subtle or indirect, about the matters under discussion. Arendt welcomes this engagement, if only because it is impossible to avoid. Whereas natural philosophers can be “objective with regard to nature,” the political thinker “cannot be objective with regard to politics.” Wanting “no part” in the “kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers,” Arendt desires “to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy” (2000 [1964], p. 4).

All three of these aspects of the pluralism informing Arendt’s conception of the methodology of the political theorist—persuasion grounded on the recovery of a tradition of likeminded allies rather than on mere logical analysis, understanding devoted to illuminating the contestation of forces rather than merely one’s chosen side in the struggle, and the politicized character of whatever theory is produced—require that the philosophical commitment to truth be infused by the history of political thought. History provides fellow travelers with whom to make one’s case, it helps reveal the configuration of forces arrayed against one’s privileged ends, and it provides the specific polemical setting that defines the politicized meaning of any concrete act of theoretical interpretation.

In both her work and her reflections on methodology, then, Arendt represents a kind of political theory that is both philosophy and history. This type of political theory is, I believe, what is most threatened by methodologists who would restrict the proper study of political thought either by reducing it to philosophy or history or, more commonly, by insisting on a sharp separation between these two endeavors. Although I do not think historians and philosophers need to relinquish their own methodological proclivities, the universalization of either of them—with the result of narrowing the scope of political theory and, specifically, undermining the integrity of political theorists like Arendt—strikes me as needlessly aggressive and unwise for reasons I elaborate below.

RESISTING THE PHILOSOPHER’S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL THEORY

One leading form of critique—which challenges on methodological grounds a broad, ecumenical, and capacious political theory and, especially, questions approaches that meld historical analysis of past texts with philosophical analysis of normative value—comes from certain philosophers who question why the study of the past should have any special connection to the contemporary search for answers about central normative questions, such as the meaning of justice and the nature of citizens’ rights, duties, and responsibilities. Although exponents of this critique rarely make the extreme argument that the study of the history of political thought is altogether pointless, they do argue against mixing history and philosophy on the grounds that doing so inhibits, muddles, or otherwise distracts from the central political-philosophical task: understanding the truth about a particular political problem or question.

This kind of critique, which for shorthand I refer to as the philosopher’s critique of political theory, is hardly new, even if it finds special emphasis today. Something like it can be found in the early modern period, when numerous humanist and later Enlightenment philosophers appealed to the natural light of human reason, or the *lumen naturale*, over and against deference to preexisting intellectual authorities (Cottingham 2005, p. 25). Writing in 1581, the Portuguese

thinker Francisco Sanches declared: “To say ‘thus spake the Master’ is unworthy of a philosopher; better to trust our own native wit” (1988 [1581], p. 93). A similar call for philosophers to dispense with direction from past thinkers—especially Aristotle—and rely instead on a careful, disciplined use of their own allegedly ahistorical rational faculty can be found in the writings of numerous other figures, including Joannes Vives, Descartes, and later Kant (Cottingham 2005, p. 25). Kant, for example, in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, writes that the purpose of his work is not “for the use of apprentices, but of future teachers, and indeed not to help them to organize the presentation of an already existing science, but to discover this science itself for the first time.” Kant explicitly dissociates his work in philosophy from the study of the history of past thought: “There are scholars for whom the history of philosophy (ancient as well as modern) is itself their philosophy; the present prolegomena have not been written for them.” Kant’s objection to the historians is twofold. On the one hand, they do not gain insight into new philosophical discoveries; instead “they must wait until those who endeavor to draw from the wellsprings of reason itself have finished their business, and [only] then it will be their turn to bring news of these events to the world.” On the other hand, historians have a tendency to downplay the genuine significance of new discoveries. Believing “nothing can be said that has not already been said before,” they show how “for anything new something old should be found that has some similarity to it” (Kant 2002 [1781], p. 53; 4:255).

In more recent times, the philosophical critique of mixing philosophy and history appears among defenders of so-called analytic approaches to political philosophy. By analytic philosophy, I mean less a highly specified method of philosophical analysis than a more general insistence that philosophy be considered as a purely logical exercise and that, accordingly, the evaluation of political-philosophical claims be conducted with an exactness approaching that of mathematics or formal logic.³ Concerned above all with evaluating the validity of assertions about politics, analytically minded political and moral philosophers sometimes have taken aim against the study of past philosophical works. As Sorell (2005a, p. 1) observes, “the techniques and predilections of analytic philosophy are not only unhistorical but antihistorical, and hostile to textual commentary.” Gilbert Harman, a well-known contemporary practitioner of analytic philosophy, notoriously put a sign on his office door: “Just say no to the history of philosophy.” In later explaining his reasons for doing so, Harman likened philosophy to the natural sciences, for which past findings allegedly have no relevance to contemporary researchers unless such findings are considered true: “I . . . think as an empirical matter that students of philosophy need not be required to study the history of philosophy and that a study of the history of philosophy tends not to be useful to students of philosophy. Similarly, it is not particularly helpful to students of physics, chemistry, or biology to study the history of physics, chemistry, or biology” (quoted in Sorell 2005b, p. 44). Harman here is but one of the most recent and brazen instances of the long-standing tendency of many analytic philosophers to differentiate the pursuit of truth from the study of history, to associate philosophy entirely with the study of truth, and therefore to voice deep suspicion about philosophical analysis that does not differentiate itself sharply from the textual analysis of past works (see Russell 1992 [1900], p. xix; Broad 1930, p. 2; Price 1940, p. 3).

There are many reasons to resist this kind of thinking. Perhaps the most obvious is that it is precisely the study of past thought that prepares and educates one to seek philosophical truth in

³ On the difference between more narrow renderings of analytic philosophy (such as “ordinary language philosophy,” which, as developed by figures like Wittgenstein, Ryle, or Austin, conceives of philosophy not as something that propounds theories but rather as something that engages in the logical reconstruction and clarification of concepts through attention to the meaning of words in their everyday use) and the more general rendering I pursue here, see Sorell (2005b, pp. 45, 58), Dummett (1994), and Føllesdall (1999, pp. 7–8).

the manner analytic philosophers suggest (a point few of them I think would deny). As Kant (2007 [1781], p. B866) after all acknowledged: “[W]e cannot learn philosophy; for where is it, who is in possession of it, and how shall we recognize it? We can only learn to philosophize, that is, to exercise the talent of reason, in accordance with its universal principles, on certainly existing attempts at philosophy, always, however, reserving the right of reason to investigate, to confirm, or to reject these principles in their very sources.” Precisely how the study of past political thought educates philosophically has been conceptualized in different ways, including the *didactic* faith that certain works of political thought are written by authors of sufficient intelligence and wisdom so as to be useful guides for students (Strauss 1953, pp. 28–30; 1973, pp. 242, 246), the *historicist* claim that studying past political thought and institutions reveals the contingency of political arrangements and thus motivates contemporary citizens to think for themselves and resist urges to naturalize the tradition and context in which they find themselves (Skinner 1988 [1969], p. 52), and the *critical-rational* aspiration that study of the principles and ideas that historically were employed to introduce or justify political arrangements become resources for criticizing and improving those arrangements so that they might more closely approximate their ideal potential (Habermas 1991, p. 88).

To these well-known claims about the pedagogical value of studying the history of political thought one more should be added, more modest but perhaps more fundamental insofar as it underlies the others. Both past and present works of political theory teach us about politics not only in the ideological sense (instructing what we should think and do, or how to challenge what institutions, leaders, and tradition tell us to think and do), but in the phenomenological sense. By this I mean that political theory provides the tools to perceive political reality with greater subtlety, precision, and attunement than might otherwise have been the case. If all of us were equally perceptive about political phenomena, then the history of political thought could make no such pedagogical claim. But this is patently not the case, as it is clear that writers about politics, even when they are wrong or unpersuasive in their central ideological claims, often tend to be uncommonly perceptive about politics in ways that are potentially eye-opening to readers. We must remember that the theorist, as the etymology of the word attests, is above all a seer—literally a seer of sights [theoros = *thea* (θεῖα) “a view” + *boran* (ὁρᾶν) “to see”]. And this root meaning of theory should be understood not in a mystical sense but in a phenomenological one: specifically as the capacity to perceive political reality more clearly, or in any case more originally and freshly, usually on the basis of certain felicitous distinctions. Indeed, part of what political philosophy is—and indeed thinking more generally—is the making of distinctions (see Kant 1999, pp. 4–6).

In more concrete terms, the value of a deservedly influential work of political theory is not limited to its argument but also includes the potential worth of the conceptual apparatus the author employs to make his or her case. One does not have to follow Plato’s (1992) specific recommendations for an ideal society to be educated by his fundamental distinction between city and soul and his suggestion that justice ought to have an isomorphic application in both realms. Weber’s (2004 [1919]) political theory has a use beyond its controversial defense of “plebiscitarian leader democracy”—as his definition of the state as the “monopoly of legitimate violence” and his distinction of three bases of legitimate domination (tradition, legal-rational authority, and charisma) have enabled subtle political analysis of various forms (e.g., Habermas 1985). Rawls, arguably the most dominant political thinker of recent times, likewise has value beyond his detailed defense of the institutions and ideas informing a just liberal-democratic regime. His distinction, for example, between formal equality of opportunity (in which educational, career, and political opportunities are unhampered by legalized discrimination) and the more rigorous criterion of fair equality of opportunity (in which similarly talented and motivated citizens may expect roughly equal educational and political opportunities regardless of their socioeconomic background) helps clarify two existing strands of liberalism (Rawls 1971, pp. 65–89). These are but a few of many

examples that demonstrate how the educational value of political theory is not limited to providing ideological direction but includes a more basic function of helping thinkers and citizens alike see more clearly the realities of the political situation they face. At its best, then, political theory perceives political reality with superior clarity, so that students of political-theoretic works can come to intellectually maneuver within the political world with greater perspicacity, effectiveness, and self-awareness.

In addition to the indispensable educative role the study of past philosophical texts plays for the cultivation of even analytic approaches to philosophy, another main reason to resist the philosopher's critique is to call into question the analytic philosopher's model of normativity—which in the words of one exponent is meant to “find what is true and what is false about ethics” (Broad 1930, p. 2; also see Sorell 2005b, p. 44). This model is naïve if it is taken to analogize philosophy with the natural sciences and in so doing exclude or denigrate the study of the history of past political thought. This naïvete can be seen in the following four respects.

First, there is something profoundly immodest about the analytic philosopher's idea of normativity. It presumes not only that the philosopher has already discovered some stable ethical truths but that these are of sufficient comprehensiveness so as not to need development. But most students of political thought know that little has been established with this kind of certainty. Certainly one struggles to find discoveries in what might be termed universal ethics—and it is worth recalling how the idea of political philosophy itself, especially in its origins, was theorized in dialectical tension with stable and complete knowledge (Green 2004, pp. 51–52). For those for whom philosophy is as much an ongoing and unfinished practice as a set of results, the diminishment of historical analysis seems unjustified. So long as I do not have full knowledge of ethics, I must be open to the philosophical attempts of others, past and present, either as possessing the truth I seek or as providing insights which, even if not true, can potentially guide my own examinations.

The pattern of renaissance is, after all, a profound and recurring structure within political thought. We find it not only in the civic humanist appeal to Cicero and other classical authors in the fourteenth century in Europe (Hankins 1999) but also in other retrievals, such as the recovery of Aristotle in the development of Scholastic theology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Rubenstein 2003) and the American Founders' critical engagement with classical authors and other previous political thinkers such as Locke and Montesquieu in their origination of a modern idea of representative government (Bederman 2008, Richard 1994). More recent examples of renaissance include Rawls' (1971) revival of the social-contract tradition, stripped of the metaphysical foundations it had had for Rousseau and Kant; neorepublican efforts to revive a so-called neo-Roman model of liberty (Skinner 1998, 2002a; Pettit 1997); and the appeal to Aristotle by contemporary defenders of “virtue ethics” (Darwall 2002). These retrievals are rarely simple mirrorings of past thought but are more often critical appropriations that transform, challenge, and only partially borrow from prior intellectual traditions. What emerges from these retrievals is still the autonomous philosophical voice of the retriever, but it is a voice expressed through and inspired by a modulated rehabilitation of earlier works in political thought. Could such philosophies be cleansed of their historical lineages and presented in ahistorical terms? Yes, it is most likely possible, but still not desirable insofar as both the novelty and significance of a work in political philosophy are more clearly established when the historical sources informing it are made explicit.

In any case, the point to stress is this: Until I have found the truth, my sense that past thought ought to be dismissed cannot be certain. To claim otherwise, to assert not just the incorrectness but irrelevance of the past without yet having discovered the answers one seeks, seems in my view an unjustified and obnoxious dogmatism.

Second, the naïvete of the analytic philosopher's conception of normativity—which imagines political philosophy simply as the ahistorical seeking of right answers about our rights, duties,

virtues, vices, and just institutions—stems also from its failure to attend to the way normative analysis tends to be situated within an ongoing context in which a certain way of thinking is already prevalent and thus in need either of support or critique. By context I mean less the way in which someone’s interpretation of a given text may be colored by the horizon of his or her own time [a point made forcefully by Gadamer (1989, pp. 159, 296)] than the fact that some texts—some ideas—will strike the interpreter as disproportionately authoritative relative to others at a present moment and thus as especially worthy of understanding and potential critique. Analytic philosophers may wish for an intellectual world where the search for right answers goes on in a depersonalized, strictly evidence-driven fashion, without bestowing authority on specific individuals. But this is manifestly not how the practice of political philosophy is experienced, as philosophers must reason within a given setting in which certain figures, theories, and modes of thought enjoy predominance. Historical analysis is therefore required as part of any effort to understand—let alone validate or challenge—the specific paradigms in which one’s political-philosophical reflections operate. Thus, even political thinkers working within a largely analytic mode still find themselves engaged in the historical task of documenting the prior traditions to which they respond. Rawls (1971), for example, does not reason about justice from some pure, contextless beginning point but situates his theory against what he takes to be a prevalent utilitarian model, which is encapsulated in the thought of Hume, Smith, Bentham, and Sidgwick, and which informally informs liberal-democratic regimes at the end of the twentieth century. Likewise, Nozick (1974) and Dworkin’s (1977) rival accounts respond explicitly to Rawls. And more recently, Parfit’s (2011) ambitious Triple Theory—his surprising claim about an ultimate confluence of Kantian deontology, consequentialism, and the contractualist account defended by T.M. Scanlon—requires that he engage in historical analysis of these three traditions of thought. Insofar as the normative meaning of a work of political philosophy is dialogic—i.e., responsive to some prior body of thought—then some element of the history of political thought is essential in locating this prior thought, presenting it in its starkest, most compelling light, and establishing its significance.

Third, the naïvete of analytic philosophers’ conception of normativity—to the extent it imagines philosophy as a dehistoricized search for truth—inheres in their overlooking of the fact that this search rarely goes on free from certain premises, premises which are taken as essential parameters informing any political-philosophical analysis, but which are difficult to prove convincingly via logical argument alone and therefore are properly buttressed by historical analysis demonstrating their widespread acceptance within a specific tradition of thought. For example, the idea of scarcity, which assumes the inescapability of work as well as the problem that the demand for resources within a polity always outstrips their supply, is taken as an unalterable fact by many analytic accounts of justice even if it cannot be fully established as a matter of logic. It is not surprising, then, to find philosophers appealing to previous political thinkers to help establish scarcity as a universal fact. Rawls (1971, pp. 127–28) appeals to Hume to ground the premise of “moderate scarcity.” Somewhat similarly, Hart (2012, p. 191) appeals to Hobbes and Hume to buttress the idea of the “minimum content” of the natural law as including citizens being driven “by the modest aim of survival.” Insofar, then, as analytic philosophy cannot escape certain less-than-fully-proved premises—and insofar as historical analysis can help establish the reasonableness of such premises—there is an important place for the history of political thought within analytic philosophy.

A fourth and final point regarding the naïvete of analytic philosophers’ vision of normativity is that it assumes students of political thought seek a universal ethics or the solution to some universally accepted problem. In fact, more usually, political theorists seek instead only a better way of understanding a bounded and particular—and thus historically mediated—set of values.

That is to say, rather than seek justice itself, political thinkers frequently seek more modest and more historically conditioned ends such as the right way of thinking about republicanism, the Enlightenment, romanticism, Marxism, liberalism, conservatism, the difference between ancient and modern political thought, and so on. In each of these cases, what is being defined is not (or not only) the difference between right and wrong generally, but the difference between correct and incorrect ways of reading a self-consciously circumscribed, historically bounded ethical tradition. Prior political historical thought is essential to these pursuits, both because the contemporary thinker means to intervene in a debate with other thinkers and because, more fundamentally, what is at stake is how to interpret a philosophical commitment initially formulated by a specific, clearly cognizable set of authors from the past.

These considerations do not demonstrate that all analytic philosophy must take into account the history of political thought, but they do show why hostility toward the history of political thought is misplaced and in fact debilitating toward philosophical ends of the analytic variety. A political theory attentive to these ends for which the mixture of history and philosophy is essential ought not, then, be denigrated.

RESISTING THE HISTORIAN'S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL THEORY

Another methodological critique that sometimes puts pressure on forms of political theory that integrate history and philosophy into a single practice comes from so-called "Cambridge School" historians of political thought. Exemplified by Pocock, Skinner, Dunn, and to a lesser extent Bevir, they both privilege historical over philosophical approaches in the study of political thought and, more fundamentally, differentiate historical and philosophical modes of interpretation. At their most methodologically confident and aggressive, these figures not only have defended the importance of interpreting texts in light of their historical context (i.e., of going beyond the text itself in uncovering the author's intention in writing it), but also have taken aim at numerous nonhistorical interpretative practices. The practices they criticize have included anachronism, prolepsis, the consultation of intellectual relics from the past as sources of wisdom, the assumption that there are perennial questions in political thought to which the classic works of political thought provide answers, and the tendency of interpreters unchastened by a historical methodology to have their interpretations of past works reflect the "individual biography of the historian" rather than attention to what the past works meant for their authors and past readers (Dunn 1980, p. 27, *passim*).

It is difficult, however, to summarize the Cambridge School in terms that include all its alleged members. Not only are there certain disagreements among its central figures, but its leading exponents have altered their methodological theories over the course of their careers, usually in the direction of more tolerance and ecumenism.⁴ Such changes have led Bevir (2011, pp. 19, 22), among others, to criticize Skinner and Pocock for not sufficiently clarifying their later methodological thinking and how it coheres with or departs from earlier work. Although such problems might seem to call into question the very idea of a unified Cambridge School, such a degree of skepticism would be excessive, I think, insofar as all its members are explicitly engaged in a historicist-based methodological critique of political theory, often recognizing each other as

⁴In a 1988 revision of his seminal 1969 article, for example, Skinner no longer claims to "establish and prove the case for [his historicist] methodology" (1988 [1969], p. 64) but asserts only that his argument "goes some way toward establishing a case for this methodology," though he still refers to it in terms of "the necessary conditions for the understanding of utterances" (Skinner 2002b, p. 87). Likewise, Dunn (1969, p. x) initially argued that it was impossible to derive from Locke insights of contemporary relevance (suggesting this circumstance applied to other political theory from the past as well), whereas he later (Dunn 1990, pp. 9, 13, 25) formally retracted this statement.

fellow travelers (Pocock 2004, p. 129), and insofar as this critique exerts real disciplinary pressure on contemporary practitioners of political theory. Even if it is somewhat abstracted and stylized, then, it is better to operate with some notion of what the Cambridge School stands for—or has been taken to stand for—than to jettison the idea because of the diversity, fluidity, and occasional vagueness that have hampered its clear exposition.

What should be emphasized about the Cambridge School thinkers—and what I label the historian’s critique of political theory—is the privileging of historical over philosophical modes of interpretation of past texts and, with it, the separation of these forms of analysis that thereby rules out the melding of history and philosophy in the manner of Arendt and other similarly engaged political theorists. To be sure, this privileging of historical kinds of interpretation has taken different forms. In its strongest versions, it amounts to the claim that *only* historical modes of interpretation (which examine what a work meant for the author who wrote it, why the author wrote, and what meaning it had for other readers in the past) are valid, whether because non-historical readings are indeterminate (they cannot be adjudicated on an objective basis) or because non-historical readings allegedly are parasitic on the false idea of there being perennial questions in political theory. Skinner (1988 [1969], p. 29) implies this strong historicism when he concludes, after considering two alternatives to historical modes of interpretation, that “neither seems a sufficient or even appropriate means of achieving a proper understanding of any given literary or philosophical work.” He implies it too when he adds: “to understand a text must be to understand both the intention to be understood, and the intention that this intention should be understood, which the text itself as an intended act of communication must at least have embodied. The essential question which we therefore confront, in studying any given text, is what its author, in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance” (Skinner 1988 [1969], p. 63). Reading historical texts in light of how they might help solve present-day problems is, Skinner states, “to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error” (1988 [1969], p. 67).

In other cases, the privileging of history over philosophy takes a weaker form, meaning not that historical interpretations are solely permissible, but that historical analysis is a necessary prefatory step to any credible nonhistorical interpretation (Dunn 1996, pp. 23–25, 26), or that historical interpretation must be a part of any viable interpretation of a text (Skinner 2002b, p. 101; Skinner 1988 [1974], pp. 99–102), or that historical modes of analysis provide a valuable remedy for philosophical uses of past texts that tend to be mistaken, narrow, or otherwise naïve (Pocock 1980, pp. 54–55, 58–60, 62–64). This privileging of historical modes of interpretation over philosophical ones is also reflected in the substantive, non-methodological work of the Cambridge School thinkers, which tends much more to illuminate past authors, discourses, and events than to make philosophical arguments about contemporary politics.⁵

Importantly, in both the strong and weak forms there is a sharp separation of history from philosophy: When philosophy occurs at all, it is not integrated with historical analysis, but comes *after* or in any case *separately from* historical analysis. Thus, to the limited extent Cambridge School theorists support doing both normative theorizing and history, the combination does not take the form of melding. Even when Dunn argues that historical and philosophical interpretations are best “pursued together” (1980, p. 14), his notion of philosophy is quite thin, since it does not involve

⁵ Skinner’s embrace of a neo-Roman model of liberty, for example, is highly circumscribed, as Skinner’s (1998, pp. 118–20) ultimate normative conclusion is that contemporary citizens should decide for themselves which form of liberty is best to adopt. Dunn’s (2005, pp. 149–88) defense of democracy is similarly tepid.

autonomous philosophical insight on the part of the interpreter so much as evaluation as to the correctness of arguments from past authors (1980, pp. 18–20). Indeed, in the same essay Dunn argues that “much of the incoherence and implausibility in the history of ideas stems from the failure to separate [historical and philosophical interpretations] adequately” (1980, pp. 19–20). Pocock, it is true, does sometimes espouse combining philosophy and history more deeply than other Cambridge School figures (see, e.g., 1996), but he still continually differentiates philosophical and historical analysis and defends a methodology that would rule out certain forms of interpretation (e.g., anachronism and prolepsis) which would enable a more thorough integration (2004, p. 129). Philosophers who fail to abide by these strictures earn sharp rebuke from Pocock (2004, p. 139): “In the United States, infested by the disciples of Leo Strauss, the claims of philosophers to know what history is still need rebuttal.”

For the most part, then, history according to the Cambridge School is either what excludes the interpreter’s philosophical voice or helps that voice live up to its own autonomy, but it is rarely the basis of philosophical reflection. The Cambridge School seems to rule out not just a didactic approach to past authors but, more broadly, those forms of political theory—evinced in great figures like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Tocqueville, Berlin, and Arendt—in which the interpretation of past texts and events and the reflection on contemporary norms are so deeply intertwined as to be inseparable. This historicist-based methodological critique would reduce, or at least regulate, the manner in which students of politics engage with the history of political thought. In resisting this critique, my defense of a broad, diverse, methodologically unencumbered political theory is guided by four considerations.

First, historicists like the Cambridge School authors presume, but do not sufficiently prove, the severity of the costs and drawbacks of being what they so clearly wish to avoid being: a bad historian. In Skinner’s (1988 [1969]) seminal historicist tract, no fewer than 34 times is the word “danger” invoked to describe the alleged problem of interpreting texts according to nonhistorical “mythologies” (e.g., using anachronism and prolepsis). In a similarly ponderous tone, Dunn (1996, p. 26) claims it is “both impertinent and ludicrous” not to assume that nonhistorical interpretations ought to be preceded by careful historical analysis. Pocock, too, speaks of the “well-deserved ridicule” (2004, p. 129) Skinner leveled against ahistorical fallacies. But the advantages of reading texts “correctly”—of avoiding allegedly naïve and misguided forms of interpretation—remain insufficiently substantiated. Perhaps the point is only that historians cease to be historians when they no longer interpret texts primarily in light of their authors’ intentions and the historical context in which they were written. But this only begs the question: whether political theorists should limit themselves according to the dictates of good historical scholarship. If the point is that nonhistorical modes of interpretation are less objective—because once we read texts nonhistorically, there is no limit to how they might be understood—I would reply that the fear of indeterminacy is hyperbolic. For one thing, historical interpretations must face their own kind of limitlessness because there is no end to the number of ways one might frame the historical context informing an author’s reasons for writing a given text (Bevir 1999, pp. 191, 210). For another, there are standards by which to evaluate nonhistorical interpretations, including success in a competitive marketplace of interpretations and conceptual, as opposed to temporal, linkages of the ideas under investigation (Green 2012, pp. 103–6). To the extent that historicist methodological critics fail to detail the costs of being a bad historian, one should be suspicious whenever their methodological reflections inhibit the creativity, imagination, authorial expressivity, or any other latitude enjoyed by contemporary students of political thought in their free and joyful engagement with political texts of the past.

Second, and more specifically, the frequent charge made by historicists against a broader, more capacious study of past political writings—that such study, if unhinged from strictly historical

matters, must presuppose an allegedly suspect belief in the reality of “perennial questions” in the history of political thought (see Skinner 1998, pp. 102, 106; 2002b, pp. 5, 88, 176)—strikes me as entirely unpersuasive. For one thing, it is impossible to be supremely confident that there are no such questions. In fact, some sympathizers with the Cambridge School (Bevir 1994) have actually argued that, properly construed in sufficiently abstract terms, there are perennial questions (also see Pocock 1980, p. 52; Frazer 2013). Furthermore, in my view it is a non sequitur to assert that any scholar who deviates from a strictly historical methodology (i.e., from the study of the meaning texts had for their authors and the historical context in which they were written) must therefore subscribe to the universality of perennial questions and problems. It may be the case that those who read a past work in light of contemporary concerns are presupposing only that the particular given text has relevance for a particular contemporary issue, not that all texts indiscriminately do. Historicists ironically fail to think historically when they suggest that all past texts are equally foreign to the problems and concerns of the present.

Third, it is wrong to assume that nonhistorical interpretations of past political works consult those works only in order to seek answers to some set of problems and concerns. It strikes me that what these works also do, in addition to answering questions, is to ask them: i.e., they provoke, problematize, unsettle, and challenge the political and social thinking of contemporary readers. To read Nietzsche unhistorically today, for example, is not simply to accept or reject his brazen ethical code, but to open oneself to the problem Nietzsche insists on: that traditional moral norms not only lack objective grounding but stem from weakness. To read a social-contract theorist like Hobbes as a contemporary nonhistorical reader is not simply to seek guidance from Hobbes about how to order a liberal-democratic regime, but to take seriously the difficulty Hobbes seems to insist on: that previously accepted sources of normative direction—divine authority, Nature, reason, and tradition—have little or no legitimating capacity in the modern ordering of political communities. The classics of political theory may not have originated, or possess a monopoly regarding, the problems that they pose, but they tend to state such problems with uncommon clarity and persuasiveness, so as to rightly become well-relied-on articulations of ongoing philosophical concerns.

Of course, sometimes thinkers do seem to own the problems that they pose, authoring both a set of concerns and a distinct language for examining them. Later thinkers who work within such pre-existing paradigms and seek to develop them—as in the effort of contemporary Marxist thinkers to draw upon yet go beyond Marx (Harvey 2010), Žižek’s ongoing appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalytical concepts to understand and critique the structure of contemporary ideological reasoning (e.g., 1989), and the bevy of thinkers who rely on Heidegger’s highly idiosyncratic terminology to make sense of contemporary politics (e.g., Spanos 1999)—demonstrate a use of past works that is neither naïvely didactic nor, for that matter, merely historical. Although analytic philosophers might object to this mode of political theory and wish that all philosophical problems be treated in a neutral language cleansed of idiosyncratic jargon, there appears to be no basis for historicist critics to object to this kind of philosophy other than the tautological claim that such efforts to build on the works of past authors are no longer strictly history. But such critics fail to even acknowledge the existence of this kind of political theory when they assume that nonhistorical modes of textual interpretation can only take the form of didacticism (the seeking of answers from great texts) or indeterminacy (the chaotic appropriation of past texts for arbitrary purposes), thereby overlooking forms of political thought that occur as extensions or developments of a paradigm stemming from, and written in the idiom of, an influential prior author.

Fourth, what is perhaps most objectionable about the Cambridge School critics of a political theory that is both history and philosophy is not their effort to separate historical attention to past authors’ intended meanings from the contemporary pursuit of normative direction, but the

feebleness of the alleged moral benefit of such a separation: the benefit that reflecting on the contingency and context of past philosophical texts (and their supposed incapacity to speak helpfully to contemporary problems and concerns) discloses a present generation's responsibility to think for itself. As Skinner summarizes the moral lesson of historicism: "We must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves" (1988 [1969], p. 66)—a dictum that appears to survive changes in his later work (see 1998, pp. 116–20). Not only is such a moral purpose an unjustified thinning of the contemporary objectives one might pursue in attending to past political philosophy, but it is a goal that at a certain point becomes self-refuting. Once I have learned the lesson that I must think for myself—that no set of intellectual commitments is natural or inescapable—what moral purpose can be achieved in the further study of political thought? Skinner's own enduring fascination with the history of political thought in fact reflects, in recent work at least, an appreciation that the moral purposes of studying past political thought are wider than the highly circumscribed, binary one he mostly has affirmed. Uncovering past traditions not only discloses the contingency and self-responsibility of our contemporary efforts to think politically, but can also uncover fruitful suggestions from the past about how contemporary thinking might proceed (e.g., Skinner 2008, pp. 360–64).⁶ To the extent the historicist goal of thinking for oneself is ultimately corrosive of historical study, and to the extent it is not completely affirmed by the historicists themselves, we must learn a different lesson: to think *for* but not *by* ourselves—i.e., to think through critical engagement with thinkers from the past and to recognize that we always have done so.

THE POLITICAL THEORIST AS A SHEPHERD OF THE CLASSICS

I have defended the integrity of a political theory that melds philosophy and history against two forms of methodological critique. One wider implication of my analysis is that it affirms, and helps to specify the nature of, the reality of the "classic" work of political theory. The classic is a work that, though written in a specific historical context, continually demonstrates an ability to productively inform the training, thinking, perception, and perhaps commitments of readers situated in dramatically different times and places from those of the author. We know of the idea of a classic from at least three main sources. First, certain authors are explicit in their ambition to write classics. Thucydides, for example, explains of his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1972, 1.22.4) that it "is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever." Machiavelli (1998 [1513], p. 61) declares of his purpose in authoring *The Prince*: "my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it." J.S. Mill (1986 [1854], pp. 141–42) contemplated that certain work written by himself and his wife Harriet Taylor might become "a sort of mental pemmican, which thinkers, when there are any after us, may nourish themselves with." Second, certain readers have described what they take to be the singular experience of reading classics, as opposed to other works. Calvino (1999, pp. 5, 7), for instance, defines the classic in part as a book that when reading it for the first time "gives the sense of rereading something we have read before," and when rereading it "offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading." The classic is thus "a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers," and, further, it is "a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it." And third, institutions such as universities instantiate the idea of the classic insofar as there are certain clearly identifiable works that have been taught within their halls for generations to a vastly disproportionate degree.

⁶After excavating numerous historical conceptualizations of the modern state, for example, Skinner privileges one conceptualization, the "fictional theory" of the state, as "in need of reappraisal and indeed of reinstatement" (2008, p. 362).

Because the classic appears to be, both in its actuality and in the kind of reading it inspires, concrete evidence of the existence, and indeed vitality, of a form of thinking that mixes history and philosophy—i.e., that is at once historically situated and unusually capable of achieving a trans-historical contemporary valence—it is not surprising that the two forms of critique I have resisted in this essay both implicitly diminish the idea of the classic. This minimization is a mistake, I believe.

The analytic philosopher objects to the classic on epistemological grounds. Unless so-called classics have a monopoly on the truth regarding political ethics and institutions, and further, unless they express such truth in terms that cannot be translated into a modern idiom, there is no logical reason to consider such works as having any special authority. But, as I have argued, outside of providing final answers to fundamental questions, past works of political thought also provide the contexts, postulates, and smaller yet vital traditions through which normative reasoning takes place. Those past works that are repeatedly and disproportionately invoked in these regards ought to be—and indeed are—studied as classics.

The historian's critique of the classic is ontological. The very existence of the classic is called into question both because it is doubted that a historically bounded work can speak meaningfully to a different future context and because what is considered canonical at any given time is contingent, constructed, and not at all intrinsic to the work itself. But even if historians are correct to remind us of the constructed nature of the canon, this does not mean that the phenomenon of canonicity does not exist. Some works really do go through long periods of being read in trans-historical fashion.⁷ Although it is always possible to debunk a work's classical status, it is no less legitimate to celebrate and validate its trans-historical potential by being part of the latest generation to once again find something of vital contemporary significance within it. And further, it is this very contest between the debunkers and celebrants that makes a classic's endurance meaningful. A classic does not live unperturbed and worshipped but only exists by surviving each generation's active critique and potential indifference. As Coetzee (2001, p. 18) has argued, the reality of a classic only inheres in a work's ability to successfully maintain itself within a longstanding "tradition of testing" in which it continues to demonstrate its usefulness in training professionals and introducing students to a field. If this criterion de-essentializes the classic (a classic today might not be one tomorrow), it also defines the classic in a way that makes clear its reality and importance.

In distinction to these two critics, the political theorist—especially of the type that combines philosophy and history in the manner I have defended here—is self-consciously and unapologetically at home among the classics. Whether in the form of maintaining through using, testing through criticizing, developing through adjusting, celebrating through understanding, or in exceptional instances enlarging through contributing, political theorists shepherd the classics. In so doing, they are living proof that—and the human bridges on which—a living tradition of political thought moves and maintains itself.

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⁷Pocock, to be fair, does acknowledge the reality of the classic conceived in this sense (1987, p. 116). Skinner (1988 [1974], p. 101), by contrast, tends to reduce the classic to a work "around which it might seem appropriate to organize some of our historical researches."

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