Introduction

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Political philosophy is a peculiarly self-reflective discipline. Even more than their colleagues in other subjects throughout the humanities and social sciences, political philosophers regularly question the means and purpose of their practice.

In this volume we carve out a new approach to the identity of political philosophy by exploring a problem that is central to such disciplinary soul-searching: the problem of political philosophy's relationship with history. We do this in part because, according to whether they describe their approach to political philosophy as analytic, continental, Rawlsian, post-Rawlsian, pluralist, realist, post-structural, or indeed, outright historical, political philosophers of different stripes tend, amongst other things, to hold very different positions on this relationship, and that is a very curious pattern. We also do it because, as evinced by the following chapters, reflecting upon the significance of history for political philosophy soon leads to a host of new insights about the nature of our subject. But we also do it for another reason. We do it because, of the many accusations made of political philosophy over the last forty or so years, the claim that it is carried out in too 'ahistorical' a fashion has been not just one of the most prominent,[1] but also, interestingly enough, one of the least scrutinised.[2]

[1] Amongst other places, it can be found in the works of Isaiah Berlin, John Dunn, Raymond Geuss, John Gray, Charles Larmore, Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, Judith Shklar, Quentin Skinner, James Tully and Bernard Williams.

[2] Instead, one generally finds in the literature engagements either with those individual thinkers who have levelled this accusation, or with questions pertaining more to matters of methodology in the history of political thought, e.g. G. Graham, 'Macintyre's fusion of history and philosophy', in J. Horton and S. Mendus (eds.), *After Macintyre* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 161–75; M. Philp, 'Political theory and history', in D. Leopold and M. Stears, *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and R. Tuck, 'History', in R. E. Goodin and P. Pettit (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993).

The variation in content given to this charge against political philosophy – the charge that it somehow is or at least tries to be too ahistorical – is also a most curious thing. Sometimes, for instance, it involves the grand claim that we cannot know what political principles to follow until we know what universal human values underpin them, and cannot know those until we know first just what values have, as a matter of fact, been adhered to in all known historical periods. History, on this account, is invaluable because it gives us access to timeless moral knowledge. Alternatively, it might involve the more modest suggestion that even if the search for 'timeless' values is hopeless, history can nevertheless reveal the political principles upon which, it just so happens, humanity is steadily converging. History, in this case, might divine for us the *telos* towards which we are proceeding. A third suggestion, more modest still, would be that even if there is no such convergence, perhaps the historical record reveals that all but one set of principles, when politically enacted, end in disaster. History, in this case, would identify for us the only set of political principles worth implementing.

These are not, of course, the most plausible of all possible suggestions, although they have all been advanced, in various forms, by notable political thinkers down the ages.[3] The authors gathered in this volume, by contrast, have much more subtle and striking visions of the history-political-philosophy relationship in their sights. Yet what is really striking is that a clear set of shared concerns have emerged from their work. When we, as editors, first approached our authors, we asked them straightforwardly to write on the potential significance of history for political philosophy. Yet without exception, and without further prompting, they each homed in on either one or other of two themes: the first of which concerns the place of *universalism* in political philosophy, and the second of which concerns the place of *realism*. On the basis of these chapters, then, it has become clear to us that the best way to think about our subject is in response to these two challenges.

First is the challenge of – and to – universalism. Here political philosophers are required to find the right balance between understanding political principles as timeless prescriptions, applicable and determinate in all times and all places, and understanding them instead as theoretical

[3] For sustained discussion of both these and other possibilities, see J. Floyd, 'Is political philosophy too ahistorical?', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 12: 4 (2009).

distillations of whatever moral culture it is that we happen to find ourselves a part of. This presents a spectrum which ranges from understanding morality as a universal and singular blueprint to seeing it as composed of an incommensurable plurality of local codes; between understanding political concepts such as tolerance and justice as timeless and universally significant theoretical phenomena and understanding them as temporarily useful tools made available solely for the purpose of solving contingent and local problems; and between understanding values such as liberty and happiness as transcendent, intuitively knowable entities and understanding them as both by-products of contingent historical processes and as items which only interpretive historical enquiry will be able to discern. Here, in short, our task is to situate political philosophy between the potentially strident demands of universalism and contextualism.

The second challenge is that of – and to – *realism*. Here the demand is to situate political philosophy between utopianism and pessimism. Drawing less on the history of ethics and intellectual enquiry and more on the history of political practice, political philosophers are required to work out just how ambitious political philosophy ought to be in its prescriptions. In order to do this, we shall need to gain a better understanding both of the timeless features of politics – if any such exist – and of those features which are peculiar to politics in the here and now. With Raymond Geuss, for instance, we shall want to identify the ways in which the necessities of power always permeate and influence political possibilities, whilst with John Dunn we shall want to know just what trends and obstacles have to be particularly attended to in the face of the modern state, modern capitalism and democratic societies.[4] History, in this case, tells us both of those enduring and permanently problematic features of political life – such that political philosophy must take account of them or render itself irrelevant – and of those particular features of political life as it exists today, which, again, any political philosophy worthy of the name will have to come to terms with if it is to function as a guide to practical action.

We might further consider here that, when properly understood, the task of positioning ourselves in response to this second challenge

[4] See R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008) and J. Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).

requires not one choice but two, for what we shall have to do in this case is render political philosophy more realistic not just in terms of *what* it tells us to aim for but also in terms of *how* it tells us to achieve it. What we shall have to decide, in the light of what history tells us, is not just whether we ought to aim for something like Plato's *Kallipolis* or settle for a workable peace, but also whether we ought to try to achieve either of these things by violent or by peaceful means, by way of a permanent revolution or in accordance with the dictates of public reason, in support of a Malcolm X or a Martin Luther King, a Mao or a Gandhi. And the point now, to be clear, is not simply that there is an ethics of war and an ethics of peace, an ethics of good circumstances and an ethics of bad; it is instead that people will often need to act in morally regrettable yet politically necessary ways in the course of forging and preserving whatever forms of society they take to be desirable. Our task here, therefore, will be to frame the relationship between politics and political philosophy in just the right way, which means working with just the right kind of realism – neither too ambitious nor too pessimistic. We shall need to study what history tells us of the ineluctable necessities of political life, and then work out just what those necessities entail for the kinds of political prescriptions issued by political philosophers.

So, as political philosophers challenged by history we shall have on the one hand to locate ourselves on a spectrum between universal morality and a local ethics of context, whilst on the other on a spectrum between utopian idealism and political pessimism. It is with both of these tasks that the following chapters help us. Responding either to the suggestion that history tells us how *universalistic* political philosophy ought to try and be, or to the suggestion that it tells us how politically *realistic* it ought to become, the shared ambition of all of our authors is to see how, if at all, history may be used to get these balances right. Does history tell us something of what morality is? Does it tell us something of what politics permits? This is what we hope to find out.

The challenge of universalism

The chapters that follow begin by tackling history's challenge to universalism. Paul Kelly appropriately opens our volume with a history of the contextualist challenge to abstract universalism in political philosophy. His chapter begins by tracing the influence of R. G. Collingwood's claim

that 'philosophers must be historians, or at least historians of thought' on a generation of political philosophers, many of whom worked for long periods in Cambridge, including John Dunn, Raymond Geuss, Quentin Skinner and Bernard Williams. Kelly shows the ways in which this generation pushed Collingwood's arguments to new levels, moving beyond the claim that history usefully informs political philosophy to the far bolder assertion that historical investigation demonstrates the essential error in all efforts to transcend the 'particularities of our own experience' and discern a more objective, transcendental idea of 'political reason'. Having surveyed the scene with an admirable generosity of spirit, Kelly then mounts a spirited, even fierce, defence of the aspiration to objectivism in political philosophy. Finding an initially unlikely ally in the hermeneutic theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer, Kelly insists that the Cambridge School's critique is over-stated, deriving substantive conclusions that do not in fact follow from its persuasive premises. While it is important for political philosophers to be alert to the contingencies of time and place, Kelly thus concludes, such attention as they pay need not distract them from the deeper philosophical tasks of assessing the 'objectivity or rightness' of first-order claims about politics.

In our second chapter, Jonathan Floyd, like Kelly, considers and rejects a number of suggestions made in recent times regarding the significance of historical context to political philosophy. Instead, he argues, we ought to examine the historical context, not of our contingently produced moral culture, but rather of political philosophy itself. His suggestion is that if political philosophers do find it difficult to produce plausible justifications for their particular proposed principles, then perhaps that difficulty derives not so much from their universalistic ambitions, as contextualists might think, but rather from certain aspects of the inherited method of enquiry they invariably adopt. This method Floyd calls 'mentalism', the defining assumption of which is that political principles, if they are to be justified, must be done so by reference to patterns in the way that we – that is, all human beings – think. As he points out, the suggestion that normative enquiry ought always to begin by reflecting upon how we think or feel about a simple and abstract situation – say, a boy drowning in a pond whom you could easily help if you chose to – before then moving on to consider just what our 'thinking' about that situation then 'means' for more complex and contested dilemmas, is one that is so established in our subject that it is hardly even

noticed *as* a method at all. For Floyd, however, this method not only exists but is deeply flawed, a point he then explains by providing a brief demonstration of its inability to perform the task required of it. Instead, he thinks, political philosophers should be more concerned with patterns in the way that we behave than patterns in the way that we think – a point which, interestingly enough, puts him on shared ground with much of the 'realism' discussed in the later part of this book.

This then takes us to our third chapter, in which Bruce Haddock both continues this focus on the role of context in political philosophy and reaches very different conclusions from those drawn by either Kelly or Floyd. For Haddock, as humans living with others, we constantly enquire as to how we can establish terms of co-operation with others. The precise terms of that question change through time and space, Haddock insists – hence contingency – even whilst the general approach to providing an answer – what Haddock calls 'hard thinking' – does not. And we think best, he continues, when we are able to draw on our historical experience and the historical experience of others. Seen this way, the study of the history of political thought, of political philosophy, and even of political action itself, are divided not so much by their metaphysical or methodological underpinnings but rather by their relative distance to the necessities of action; by, as Haddock puts it, their 'urgency'. Other attempts to divide these forms of thinking from each other are always mistaken, Haddock concludes. Try as we might, we cannot but be substantive philosophers, historians and political actors all at the same time.

Gordon Graham's final chapter of Part I also draws our attention to the tension between universalism and contextualism in political philosophy. Insisting that the study of this subject must be clearly distinguished from the practices of the sciences, social or otherwise, Graham points out that whereas the sciences seek explanations and causal patterns – drawing on data, testing hypotheses and establishing 'results' as they do so – philosophy, and especially political philosophy, is concerned instead with a different kind of pursuit of truth. There is no 'progress' as such in philosophy, he argues; no movement towards 'demonstrably right answers'. Instead, there are questions that are posed differently by different generations, to which we sometimes return and from which we sometimes depart. On this account, we return to history in the form of studying the great texts of the past, at least when it can help us think about the questions that currently trouble us. The texts that we

examine, and the way that we do so, are thus driven by our recognition of them as potential repositories of wisdom and sources of inspiration, even though we accept that the task of translating their arguments from their authors' time to ours is always a difficult one. Difficulty is not the same as impossibility, though, and Graham implores political philosophers to remember that.

The challenge of realism

In the wake of this final call to attend to the texts of the past, whilst not leaving them to fester in their own contexts, our chapters shift from the challenge of universalism to the challenge of realism. The problem now becomes that of identifying the extent to which history determines the level of optimism or pessimism that informs our political philosophising. Iain Hampsher-Monk's chapter opens this section and relates it directly back to the earlier debate. For Hampsher-Monk, it is vitally important for scholars and practitioners to distinguish between three separate endeavours: first, political philosophy, which rightly seeks to discern 'truths about the political realm'; second, the history of political thought, which tells the story of how such philosophising has changed across time; and, third, rhetoric, which is the practice of shaping political attitudes and actions through the use of argument. Rhetoricians, he concludes, are intimately concerned with ascertaining the limits of the 'actually possible' in political attitude and action, whilst political philosophers are not. It is not the task of the philosopher, on this account, to try to change the world, just to understand it, and, as long as we understand this distinction, then political philosophy should best proceed in ignorance of the limits that actually existing political beliefs might bring to bear in the hurly-burly world of 'real politics'.

Andrew Sabl, in Chapter 7, disputes exactly this separation. For Sabl, the very best kind of political philosophy is that which bridges the distinction between 'is and ought', and which employs subtle historical understanding in order to do so. Political philosophy, on this reading, should strive to be 'realist', and will be most realistic when it becomes most historical. In developing this argument, Sabl draws heavily on the Harvard School of realist political philosophers, led most notably by Judith Shklar. Such realists, he notes, are often criticised for being too conservative or pragmatic, with their attentiveness to the contingencies of time and place leading them to be too willing to cut their

philosophical coat according to their historical cloth. This, Sabl insists, is an error because it relies upon the assumption that a philosophy that is attentive to the limitations of actual times and places is incapable of advancing convincing political arguments. Such is simply not the case, Sabl argues. Rather, if philosophers are really to make persuasive arguments, then they must be open to refutation, and the set of refutations that one can draw on must include claims derived from historically informed accounts of the realistic limits of political possibility. The fear that such refutations will limit the scope and ambition of our philosophising is natural, Sabl concludes, but does not make that fact avoidable.

Whereas Sabl emphasises the constraining role that realistic historical understanding should play in political philosophising, Melissa Lane's chapter emphasises instead its potential liberating characteristics. Although she agrees with Sabl that the very best of political philosophy is informed by realistic assessments of the politically possible, she also insists that such assessments can sometimes provoke more, rather than less, ambitious forms of political thinking. Historical reflection on actual politics can, she argues, provide exemplars of particular forms of behaviour, both good and bad, and can also lead philosophers to consider recommendations that they would otherwise have either rejected or failed to consider. John Rawls, she suggests, became far more open to the role of religion in public argumentation after he had spent time considering the actual practices of the anti-slavery movement in the nineteenth-century United States. Far from being solely a constraint, then, or an invitation to pessimism, well-informed historical reflection might actually make political philosophers bolder in their aspirations, perhaps even more utopian.

This theme is taken up further in Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears's closing chapter. Tracing the development of realist political philosophy over the last two decades, Honig and Stears detect both pessimistic and optimistic strands in this development, just as exemplified by Sabl and Lane in this volume. Neither of these strands, they go on to insist, deserves the name of 'realism', for their invocation of the 'real' is necessarily always partial, informed as much by their substantive political positions and by their own constructed narratives as by any observation of the rich and complex historical record of which realists claim to be so attentive. The solution, however, Honig and Stears conclude, is not to abandon the attempt to embed political philosophising in history and

its stories of the politically possible, but instead to accept that such efforts will never overcome the complexities and dilemmas with which political philosophers are always faced. It is crucial, therefore, that political philosophy be 'real', yet also vital that we recognise that this reality will always itself be contested.

Conclusion

The chapters assembled in this volume offer new insights into the questions both of whether political philosophy is too ahistorical and of what would happen if it were to cease to be so. It is no surprise that our contributors disagree, sometimes ferociously so. Yet what we hope is clear from all of them is that these questions are far from trivial, far from being merely of 'methodological interest', and far from being tied irrevocably to the future of the Cambridge School and its approach to the history of political thought. They are instead crucial to the endeavour in which all political philosophers are engaged. We can, of course, never expect complete agreement on whether political philosophy should pursue universal truths or local knowledge, or on whether it should be constrained or liberated by assessments of political possibility. What we can expect is that those who read the following chapters will be much better informed in their decisions about such things than they would have been had they not done so.