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MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

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My aim is to consider what I take to be the basic question which necessarily arises whenever an historian of ideas[1] confronts a work which he hopes to understand. Such an historian may have focused his attention on a work of literature — a poem, a play, a novel — or on a work of philosophy — some exercise in ethical, political, religious, or other such mode of thought. But the basic question will in all such cases remain the same: what are the appropriate procedures to adopt in the attempt to arrive at an understanding of the work? There are of course two currently orthodox (though conflicting) answers to this question, both of which seem to command a wide acceptance. The first (which is perhaps being increasingly adopted by historians of ideas) insists that it is the *context* "of religious, political, and economic factors" which determines the meaning of any given text, and so must provide "the ultimate framework" for any attempt to understand it. The other orthodoxy, however, (still perhaps the most generally accepted) insists on the autonomy of the *text* itself as the sole necessary key to its own meaning, and so dismisses any attempt to reconstitute the "total context" as "gratuitous, and worse."[2]

My concern in what follows will be to consider these two orthodoxies in turn, and to argue that both in effect share the same basic inadequacy:

1. For an analysis of the now confusing variety of ways in which this inescapable phrase has been used, see Maurice Mandelbaum, "The History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and the History of Philosophy" in *The Historiography of the History of Philosophy, Beiheft 5, History and Theory* (1965), 33n. I use the term here consistently, but with deliberate vagueness, simply to refer to as wide as possible a variety of historical inquiries into intellectual problems.

2. I take these quotations from one of the many confrontations in the debate among literary critics between the "scholars" and the "critics." The terms and issues of this debate seem to be repeated in an identical (though less conscious) manner in histories of philosophical ideas. It is from the latter disciplines, however, that I have mainly taken my examples. I have tried, moreover, in all cases to restrict my examples to works which are either classic or in current use. The fact that a majority of these are taken from the history of *political* ideas merely reflects my own specialism. The belief in "contextual reading" being voiced here is by F. W. Bateson, "The Functions of Criticism at the Present Time," *Essays in Criticism* 3 (1953), 16. The contrary belief in the text itself as "something determinate" is from F. R. Leavis, "The Responsible Critic: or the Functions of Criticism at any Time," *Scrutiny* 19 (1953), 173.

neither approach seems a sufficient or even appropriate means of achieving a proper understanding of any given literary or philosophical work. Both methodologies, it can be shown, commit philosophical mistakes in the assumptions they make about the conditions necessary for the understanding of utterances. It follows that the result of accepting either orthodoxy has been to fill the current literature in the history of ideas with a series of conceptual muddles and mistaken empirical claims.

The attempt to substantiate this assertion must necessarily be somewhat critical and negative. I undertake it here, however, in the belief that it can be shown to yield much more positive and programmatic conclusions; for the nature of the current confusions in the history of ideas points not merely to the need for an alternative approach, but also indicates what type of approach must necessarily be adopted if such confusions are to be avoided. I believe that this alternative approach would be more satisfactory as history, and moreover that it would serve to invest the history of ideas with its own philosophical point.

I

I turn first to consider the methodology dictated by the claim that the *text* itself should form the self-sufficient object of inquiry and understanding. For it is this assumption which continues to govern the largest number of studies, to raise the widest philosophical issues, and to give rise to the largest number of confusions. This approach itself is logically tied, in the history of ideas no less than in more strictly literary studies, to a particular form of justification for conducting the study itself. The whole point, it is characteristically said, of studying past works of philosophy (or literature) must be that they contain (in a favored phrase) "timeless elements,"[3] in the form of "universal ideas,"[4] even a "dateless wisdom"[5] with "universal application."[6]

Now the historian who adopts such a view has already committed himself, in effect, on the question of how best to gain an understanding of such

3. Peter H. Merkl, *Political Continuity and Change* (New York, 1967), 3. For the "perennial configurations" of the classic texts and their "perennial problems" cf. also Hans J. Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics* (Chicago, 1958), 1, and Mulford Q. Sibley, "The Place of Classical Theory in the Study of Politics" in *Approaches to the Study of Politics,* ed. Roland Yound (Chicago, 1958), 133, (a volume which includes many other similar claims).

4. William T. Bluhm, *Theories of the Political System* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965), 13.

5. G. E. C. Catlin, *A History of Political Philosophy* (London, 1950), x.

6. Andrew Hacker, "*Capital* and Carbuncles: the 'Great Books' Reappraised," *American Political Science Review* 48 (1954), 783.

"classic texts."[7] For if the whole point of such a study is conceived in terms of recovering the "timeless questions and answers" posed in the "great books," and so of demonstrating their continuing "relevance,"[8] it must be not merely possible, but essential, for the historian to concentrate simply on what each of the classic writers has *said*[9] about each of these "fundamental concepts" and "abiding questions."[10] The aim, in short, must be to provide "a re-appraisal of the classic writings, quite apart from the context of historical development, as perennially important attempts to set down universal propositions about political reality."[11] For to suggest instead that a knowledge of the social context is a necessary condition for an understanding of the classic texts is equivalent to denying that they do contain any elements of timeless and perennial interest, and is thus equivalent to removing the whole point of studying what they said.

It is this essential belief that each of the classic writers may be expected to consider and explicate some determinate set of "fundamental concepts" of "perennial interest" which seems to be the basic source of the confusions engendered by this approach to studying the history of either literary or philosophical ideas. The sense in which the belief is misleading, however, appears to be somewhat elusive. It is easy to castigate the assumption as "a fatal mistake,"[12] but it is equally easy to insist that it must in some sense be a necessary truth. For there can be no question that the histories of different intellectual pursuits are marked by the employment of some "fairly stable vocabulary"[13] of characteristic concepts. Even if we hold to the fashionably

7. I employ this unlovely expression throughout, since it is habitually used by all historians of ideas, with an apparently clear reference to an accepted "canon" of texts.

8. For the insistence that the study of "classic texts" must "find its major justification in relevancy," see R. G. McCloskey, "American Political Thought and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 51 (1957), 129. For the "timeless questions and answers" see all the textbooks, and, for a more general precept, see Hacker's article, cited in fn. 6, at p. 786.

9. For the need to concentrate on what each classic writer *says,* see for precept, K. Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* I (London, 1962), Foreword, and Leonard Nelson, "What is the History of Philosophy?" *Ratio* 4 (1962), 32-33. For this assumption in practice, see for example N. R. Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic* (Oxford, 1951), v, on "what Plato said"; Alan Ryan, "Locke and the Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie," *Political Studies* 13 (1965), 219, on "what Locke said"; Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (New York, 1948), 7, on Xenophon and "what he himself says."

10. For "fundamental concepts," see for example Charles R. N. McCoy, *The Structure of Political Thought* (New York, 1963), 7. For "abiding questions" see for example the Preface to *History of Political Philosophy,* ed. Leo Strauss and J. Cropsey (Chicago, 1963).

11. Bluhm, *Theories of the Political System,* v.

12. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York, 1966), 2. The remarks made in this Introduction, however, are extremely perceptive and relevant.

13. Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (London, 1961), 27. The opening chapter gives a sensitive account of "the vocabulary of political philosophy," esp. 11-17.

loose-textured theory that it is only in virtue of certain "family resemblances" that we are able to define and delineate such different activities, we are still committed to accepting *some* criteria and rules of usage such that certain performances can be correctly instanced, and others excluded, as examples of a given activity. Otherwise we should eventually have no means — let alone justification — for delineating and speaking, say, of the histories of ethical or political thinking as being histories of recognizable activities at all. It is in fact the truth, and not the absurdity, of the claim that all such activities must have some characteristic concepts which seems to provide the main source of confusion. For if there must be at least some family resemblance connecting all the instances of a given activity, which we need first of all to apprehend in order to recognize the activity itself, it becomes impossible for any observer to consider any such activity, or any instance of it, without having some preconceptions about what he expects to find.

The relevance of this dilemma to the history of ideas — and especially to the claim that the historian should concentrate simply on the text in itself — is of course that it will never in fact be possible simply to study what any given classic writer has *said* (especially in an alien culture) without bringing to bear some of one's own expectations about what he must have been saying. The is simply the dilemma, familiar to psychologists as the (apparently inescapable)[14] determining factor of the observer's mental *set*. By our past experience "we are set to perceive details in a certain way." And when this frame of reference has been established, "the process is one of being *prepared* to perceive or react in a certain way."[15] The resulting dilemma may be stated, for my present purposes, in the formally crucial but empirically very elusive proposition that these models and preconceptions in terms of which we unavoidably organize and adjust our perceptions and thoughts will themselves tend to act as determinants of what we think or perceive. We must classify in order to understand, and we can only classify the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar.[16] The perpetual danger, in our attempts to enlarge our historical understanding, is thus that our expectations about what someone must be saying or doing will themselves determine that we understand the agent to be doing something which he would not — or even could not — himself have accepted as an account of what he *was* doing.

This notion of the priority of paradigms has already been very fruitfully

14. Floyd H. Allport, *Theories of Perception and the Concept of Structure* (New York, 1955) illustrates the way in which the concept of set "ramifies into all phases of perceptual study" (240), and recurs in otherwise contrasting theories.

15. Allport, *Theories of Perception*, 239.

16. That this must result in a history of philosophy conceived in terms of our own philosophical criteria and interests (whose else?) is fully brought out in John Dunn, "The Identity of the History of Ideas," *Philosophy* 43 (1968), 97-98.

explored in the history of art,[17] where it has caused an essentially historicist story which traced the development of illusionism to yield place to a story which is content to trace changing intentions and conventions. More recently an analogous exploration has been made with some plausibility in the history of science.[18] Here I shall attempt to apply a similar set of concepts to the history of ideas. My procedure will be to uncover the extent to which the current historical study of ethical, political, religious, and other such ideas is contaminated by the unconscious application of paradigms whose familiarity to the historian disguises an essential inapplicability to the past. I do not, of course, seek to deny that the methodology which I am concerned to criticize has occasionally yielded distinguished results. I do wish, however, both to insist on the various ways in which to study simply what each classic writer *says* is unavoidably to run the perpetual danger of lapsing into various kinds of historical absurdity, and also to anatomize the various ways in which the results may in consequence be classified not as histories at all, but more appropriately as *mythologies*.

The most persistent mythology is generated when the historian is *set* by the expectation that each classic writer (in the history, say, of ethical or political ideas) will be found to enunciate some doctrine on each of the topics regarded as constitutive of his subject. It is a dangerously short step from being under the influence (however unconsciously) of such a paradigm to "finding" a given author's doctrines on all of the mandatory themes. The (very frequent) result is a type of discussion which might be labelled the mythology of doctrines.

This mythology takes several forms. First, there is the danger of converting some scattered or quite incidental remarks by a classic theorist into his "doctrine" on one of the mandatory themes. This in turn can be shown to generate two particular types of historical absurdity, one more characteristic of intellectual biographies and the more synoptic histories of thought, in which the focus is on the individual thinkers (or the procession of them), and the other more characteristic of actual "histories of ideas," in which the focus is on the development of some given "idea" itself.

The particular danger with intellectual biography is that of sheer anachronism. A given writer may be "discovered" to have held a view, on the

17. See esp. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London, 1960), from whom I adopt the vocabulary of "paradigms." Professor Gombrich has also coined the relevant epigram: only where there is a way can there be a will (75).

18. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962), esp. Ch. V, which takes over the notion of "the priority of paradigms." The conception is of course a familiar one, except to empiricists. Cf. the insistence that the thought of any period is organized according to "constellations of absolute presuppositions" in R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1940), esp. Ch. VII.

strength of some chance similarity of terminology, on some subject to which he cannot in principle have meant to contribute. Marsilius of Padua, for example, at one point in his *Defender of the Peace* offers some typically Aristotelian remarks on the executive role of a ruler, compared with the legislative role of a sovereign people.[19] The modern commentator who comes upon this passage will of course be familiar with the doctrine, important in constitutional theory and practice since the American Revolution, that one of the conditions of political freedom is the separation of executive from legislative power. The historical origins of the doctrine itself can be traced[20] to the historiographical suggestion (first canvassed some two centuries after Marsilius's death) that the development of the Roman Republic into an Empire demonstrated the danger to the liberty of subjects inherent in entrusting any single authority with centralized political power. Marsilius, of course, knew nothing of this historiography, nor of the lessons that were to be drawn from it. (His own discussion in fact derives from Book IV of Aristotle's *Politics,* and is not even concerned with the issue of political freedom.) None of this, however, has been sufficient to prevent a brisk and wholly meaningless debate on the question of whether Marsilius should be said to have had a "doctrine" of the separation of powers, and if so whether he should be "acclaimed the founder of the doctrine."[21] And even those experts who have denied that Marsilius should be credited with this doctrine have based their conclusions on his text,[22] and not at all by pointing to the impropriety of supposing that he *could* have meant to contribute to a debate whose terms were unavailable to him, and whose point would have been lost on him. The same anachronism marks the discussion which has centered around the famous *dictum* offered by Sir Edward Coke on Bonham's case to the effect that the common law of England may sometimes override statute. The modern (especially American) commentator brings to this remark all the much later resonances of the doctrine of judicial review. Coke himself — like everyone in the seventeenth century — knew nothing of such a doctrine. (The context of his own suggestion is very much that of a party politician assuring James I that the defining characteristic of law is custom, and not, as James was

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19. Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of Peace,* tr. and ed. A. Gewirth, 2 vols. (New York, 1951-56), 11, 61-67, esp. 65.

20. As has been demonstrated in J. G. A. Pocock, "Machiavelli, Harrington, and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22 (1965), 549-583. Cf. also Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

21. Gewirth, I, 232.

22. For a bibliography, see Gewirth, I, 234n. For a purely textual dismissal of the claim, see for example A. P. D'Entrèves, *The Medieval Contribution to Political Thought* (Oxford, 1939), 58.

already claiming, the will of the sovereign.)[23] None of these historical considerations, however, have been enough to prevent the reiteration of the wholly meaningless question of "whether Coke actually intended to advocate judicial review,"[24] or the insistence that Coke must have *meant* to articulate this "new doctrine" and so to make this "remarkable contribution to political science."[25] Again, moreover, those experts who have denied that Coke should be credited with such clairvoyance have based their conclusion on the historico-legal re-interpretation of Coke's text,[26] rather than attacking the prior logical oddity of the implied account of Coke's intentions.

Besides this crude possibility of crediting a writer with a meaning he could not have intended to convey, since that meaning was not available to him, there is also the (perhaps more insidious) danger of too readily "reading in" a doctrine which a given writer might in principle have meant to state, but in fact had no intention to convey. Consider for example the remarks which Richard Hooker makes in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (I, x, 4) about the natural sociability of man. We might well feel that Hooker's intention (what he meant to do) was merely — as with so many scholastic lawyers of the time who mentioned the point — to discriminate the godly origins of the Church from the more mundane origins of the state. The modern commentator, however, who inescapably sees Hooker at the top of a "line of descent" running "from Hooker to Locke and from Locke to the *Philosophes*" has little difficulty in converting Hooker's remarks into nothing less than his "theory of the social contract."[27] Similarly, consider the scattered remarks on trusteeship which John Locke offers at one or two points (paras. 149, 155) in the *Second Treatise*. We might well feel that Locke merely intended to appeal to one of the most familiar legal analogies in the political writing of the time. Again, however, the modern commentator who sees Locke standing at the head of a tradition of "government by consent" has little difficulty in piecing together the "passages scattered through" the work on this topic,

23. As has been demonstrated in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge, 1957), esp. Ch. 11.

24. W. B. Gwyn, *The Meaning of the Separation of Powers*, Tulane Studies in Political Science, vol. IX (New Orleans, 1965), 50n.

25. Theodore F. T. Plucknett, "Bonham's Case and Judicial Review," *Harvard Law Review* 40 (1926-27), 68. For the claim that it was actually Coke's "own intention" to articulate the doctrine "which American courts today exercise," see also Edward S. Corwin, "The 'Higher Law' Background of American Constitutional Law," *Harvard Law Review* 42 (1928-29), 368. Cf. the same author's *Liberty against Government* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1948), 42.

26. For a purely textual dismissal, see S. E. Thorne, "Dr. Bonham's Case," *Law Quarterly Review* 54 (1938), 543-552.

27. Christopher Morris, *Political Thought in England: Tyndale to Hooker* (Oxford, 1953), 181, 197.

and emerging with nothing less than Locke's "doctrine" of "the political trust."[28] And similarly, consider the remarks James Harrington makes in *Oceana* about the place of lawyers in political life. The historian who is looking (perhaps, in this case, quite properly) for the views of the Harringtonian Republicans on the separation of powers may be momentarily disconcerted to find that Harrington ("curiously") is not even talking about public officers at this point. But if he "knows" to expect the doctrine among this group, he will have little difficulty in insisting that "this does seem to be a vague statement of the doctrine."[29] In all such cases, where a given writer may appear to intimate some "doctrine" in something that he says, we are left confronting the same essential and essentially begged question: if all the writers are claimed to have *meant* to articulate the doctrine with which they are being credited, why is it that they so signally failed to do so, so that the historian is left reconstructing their implied intentions from guesses and vague hints? The only plausible answer is of course fatal to the claim itself: that the author did not (or even could not) have meant after all to enunciate such a doctrine.

This same tendency for the paradigms applied to the history of ideas to cause its subject matter to mutate into a mythology of doctrines can also be illustrated, in a rather different way, from those "histories of ideas" in which the aim (in the words of Professor Lovejoy, a pioneer of the approach) is to trace the morphology of some given doctrine "through all the provinces of history in which it appears."[30] The characteristic point of departure in such histories is to set out an ideal type of the given doctrine — whether it is the doctrine of equality, progress, Machiavellism, the social contract, the great chain of being, the separation of powers, and so on. The particular danger with this approach is that the doctrine to be investigated so readily becomes hypostatized into an entity. As the historian duly sets out in quest of the idea he has characterized, he is very readily led to speak as if the fully developed form of the doctrine was always in some sense immanent in history, even if various thinkers failed to "hit upon" it,[31] even if it "dropped from sight" at various times,[32] even if an entire era failed (note the implication that they *tried*) to "rise to a consciousness" of it.[33] Similarly, the story of the development of such a doctrine very readily takes on the kind of lan-

28. J. W. Gough, *John Locke's Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 1950). On government by consent, Ch. III; on trusteeship, 145.

29. Gwyn, *Separation of Powers*, 52.

30. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Torchbook edn., New York, 1960), 15.

31. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (London, 1932), 7.

32. Corinne Comstock Weston, *English Constitutional Theory and the House of Lords* (London, 1965), 45.

33. Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London, 1964), 2.

guage appropriate to the description of a growing organism. The fact that ideas presuppose agents is very readily discounted, as the ideas get up and do battle on their own behalf. Thus we may be told that the "birth" of the idea of progress was quite easy, for it had "transcended" the "obstacles to its appearance" by the sixteenth century,[34] and so "gained ground" throughout the next hundred years.[35] But the idea of the separation of powers had a harder time, for though it nearly managed to "emerge" during the English civil war, it "never quite managed fully to materialize," so that it took another century "from the English civil war until the mid-eighteenth century for a threefold division to emerge fully and take over."[36]

The reification of doctrines in this way gives rise in turn to two kinds of historical absurdity, both of which are not merely prevalent in this type of history, but seem more or less inescapable when its methodology is employed. First, the tendency to search for approximations to the ideal type yields a form of non-history which is almost entirely given over to pointing out earlier "anticipations" of later doctrines, and to crediting each writer in terms of this clairvoyance. So Marsilius is notable for his "remarkable anticipation" of Machiavelli;[37] Machiavelli is notable because he "lays the foundation for Marx";[38] Locke's theory of signs is notable "as an anticipation of Berkeley's metaphysics";[39] Glanvill's theory of causation is notable for "the extent to which he has anticipated Hume";[40] Shaftesbury's treatment of the theodicy problem is notable because it "in a certain sense anticipated Kant."[41] Sometimes even the pretence that this is history is laid aside, and the writers of the past are simply praised or blamed according to how far they may seem to have aspired to the condition of being ourselves. Montesquieu "anticipates the ideals of full employment and the welfare state": this shows his "luminous, incisive" mind.[42] Machiavelli thought about politics essentially as we do: this is his "lasting significance." But his contemporaries did not: this makes their political views "completely unreal."[43] Shakespeare ("an eminently

34. Bury, *Idea of Progress*, 7.

35. R. V. Sampson, *Progress in the Age of Reason* (London, 1956), 39.

36. M. J. C. Vile, *Constitutionalism and the Separation of Powers* (Oxford, 1967), 30.

37. Raab, *English Face of Machiavelli*, 2

38. W. T. Jones, *Machiavelli to Bentham*, in *Masters of Political Thought*, ed. Edward M. Sait, 3 vols. (London, 1947), 50.

39. Robert L. Armstrong, "John Locke's 'Doctrine of Signs': A New Metaphysics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26 (1965), 382.

40. R. H. Popkin, "Joseph Glanvill: A Precursor of David Hume," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14 (1953), 300.

41. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment,* tr. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Beacon edn., Boston, 1955), 151. It sometimes seems in Cassirer's analysis as though the whole Enlightenment was striving to make Kant possible.

42. G. C. Morris, "Montesquieu and the Varieties of Political Experience," in *Political Ideas,* ed. David Thomson (London, 1966), 89-90.

43. Raab, *English Face of Machiavelli,* 1, 11. It is remarkable how far the metho-

political author") was skeptical about "the possibility of an interracial, inter-
faith society"; this is one of the signs of his value as "a text in moral and
political education."[44] And so on.

The second historical absurdity generated by the methodology of the his-
tory of ideas is the endless debate — almost wholly semantic, though posing
as empirical — about whether a given idea may be said to have "really
emerged" at a given time, and whether it is "really there" in the work of some
given writer. Consider again the histories of the doctrine of the separation of
powers. Is the doctrine, they ask, perhaps already "there" in the works of
George Buchanan? No, for he "did not fully articulate" it, although "none
came closer."[45] But is it perhaps "there" by the time of the Royalists' Defence
of 1648? No, for it is still "not the pure doctrine."[46] Or consider the histories
of the doctrine of the social contract. Is the doctrine perhaps already "there"
in the pamphlets of the Huguenots? No, for their ideas are "incompletely
developed" (note again the unargued assumption that they are *trying* to
develop the doctrine). But is it perhaps "there" in the works of their Catholic
rivals? No, for their statements are still "incomplete," although they are
"decidedly more advanced."[47]

The first form, then, of the mythology of doctrines may be said to consist,
in these various ways, of mistaking some scattered or incidental remarks by
one of the classic theorists for his "doctrine" on one of the themes which the
historian is *set* to expect. The second form of the mythology, to which I now
turn, may be said to be the converse of this mistake. Here a classic theorist
who fairly clearly *does* fail to come up with a recognizable doctrine on one
of the mandatory themes is then criticized for his failure to do so.

The historical study of ethical and political ideas is dogged currently by
a demonological (but highly influential) version of this mistake. Ethical and
political theory, it is said, is or ought to be concerned with eternal or at
least traditional "true standards."[48] It is thus thought appropriate to treat
the history of these subjects in terms of the "decided lowering of tone" said
to be characteristic of modern reflection "on life and its goals," and to take
as the focus of this history the assessment of blame for this collapse.[49]

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dological naivete underlying this and many other such assumptions has gone unnoticed
in the discussion of this greatly overpraised book. For another hostile but convincing
appraisal, however, see Sydney Anglo, "The Reception of Machiavelli in Tudor
England: A Reassessment," *Il Politico* 31 (1966), 127-138.

44. Allan Bloom with Harry C. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York, 1964),
1-2, 4, 36.
45. Gwyn, *Separation of Powers*, 9.
46. Vile, *Separation of Powers*, 46.
47. J. W. Gough, *The Social Contract*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1957), 59.
48. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1957), 12.
49. Bloom and Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics*, 1-2. For a general critique of this belief

Hobbes, or sometimes Machiavelli, is then made to stand condemned for man's first disobedience.[50] Their contemporaries are then suitably praised or blamed essentially according to whether they acknowledged or subverted the same "truth."[51] The chief proponent of this approach, confronted with Machiavelli's political works, thus "does not hesitate to assert" that Machiavelli's teaching is to be denounced as "immoral and irreligious."[52] He also does not hesitate to assume that such a tone of denunciation is perfectly appropriate to the stated aim of trying to "understand" Machiavelli's works.[53] Here the paradigm accepted for the nature of ethical and political thought determines the direction of the whole historical investigation. The history can only be reinterpreted if the paradigm itself is abandoned. Quite apart from the question of whether the paradigm is a suitable one to apply to the past, this is in itself an astonishing impasse for any historical investigation to have reached.

The main version, however, of this form of the mythology of doctrines consists of supplying the classic theorists with doctrines which are agreed to be proper to their subject, but which they have unaccountably failed to discuss. Sometimes this takes the form of extrapolating from what these great men said to some speculation about a topic they did not mention. Aquinas may not have pronounced on the subject of "foolish 'civil disobedience'," but surely "he would not have approved."[54] Similarly, Marsilius would surely approve of democracy, since "the sovereignty he espoused pertained to the people."[55] But Hooker "would not be entirely happy" with democracy, since "his own noble religious and spacious conception of law has been desiccated into the mere fiat of popular will."[56] Such exercises may seem merely quaint, but they could always have a more sinister undertone, as these examples may seem to suggest: a means to fix one's own prejudices on to the most charismatic names, under the guise of innocuous historical specu-

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in political philosophy as the articulation or recovery of certain "final truths" of this kind, see Arnold S. Kaufman, "The Nature and Function of Political Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 51 (1954), 5-22. The belief has been (perhaps somewhat intemperately) defended by Joseph Cropsey, "A Reply to Rothman," *American Political Science Review* 56 (1962), 353-359, the reply being to a critique of Leo Strauss's approach published by Stanley Rothman in the same number of that journal.

50. See, on Hobbes, Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953); on Machiavelli, Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1958).

51. See for example the attack on Ascham, and the defense of Clarendon, in these terms, in Irene Coltman, *Private Men and Public Causes* (London, 1962).

52. Strauss, *Machiavelli*, 11-12.

53. Strauss, *Machiavelli*, 14.

54. Maurice Cranston, "Aquinas," in *Western Political Philosophers*, ed. Maurice Cranston (London, 1964), 34-35.

55. Marsilius, ed. Gewirth, I, 312.

56. F. J. Shirley, *Richard Hooker and Contemporary Political Ideas* (London, 1949), 256.

lation. History then indeed becomes a pack of tricks we play on the dead. The most usual strategy, however, is to seize on some doctrine which a given theorist, it is in effect claimed, ought to have mentioned, although he failed to do so, and then to criticize him for this so-called omission. Perhaps the most remarkable evidence of the hold of this most essentialist approach is that it was never questioned, as a method of discussing the history of political ideas, even by the most anti-essentialist of all contemporary political theorists, T. D. Weldon. The first part of his book on *States and Morals* sets out the various "definitions of the State" which political theorists all "either formulate or take for granted." It is thus established that "all theories of the State fall . . . into two main groups. Some define it as a kind of organism, others as a kind of machine." Armed with this discovery, Weldon then turns "to examine the leading theories about the state which have been put forward." But here we find that even "those writers who are generally regarded as the leading theorists in the subject" let us down rather badly, for very few of them manage to expound either of the two theories without "inconsistencies or even contradictions." Hegel, indeed, turns out to be the sole theorist "completely faithful" to one of the two stipulated models which, we are reminded, it is the "primary purpose" of each theorist to expound. A less confident writer might well have wondered at this point whether his initial characterization of what all these theorists ought to be doing can possibly have been correct. But Weldon's only comment is that it seems "rather odd that, after more than two thousand years of concentrated thought" they are still in such complete confusion.[57] The exegetical literature is filled, moreover, with this type of more or less unselfconscious critical application of the mythology of doctrines. Consider, for example, the place in political thought of questions about the process of voting and decision-making, and public opinion generally — questions of some importance in recent democratic political theory, though of very little interest to theorists writing before the establishment of modern representative democracies. The historical caveat might scarcely seem worth adding, but it has not in fact been enough to prevent commentators from criticizing Plato's *Republic* for "omitting" the "influence of public opinion";[58] or from criticizing Locke's *Second Treatise* for omitting "all references to family and race," and for failing to make it "wholly clear" where he stands on the question of universal suffrage;[59] or from regarding it as remarkable that not one of "the great writers on politics and law" devoted any space to the discussion of decision-making.[60] Consider, similarly, the question of the social

57. T. D. Weldon, *States and Morals* (London, 1946), 26, 63, 64.
58. George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory,* 3rd edn. (London, 1951), 67.
59. Richard I. Aaron, *John Locke,* 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1955), 284-285.
60. C. J. Friedrich, "On Rereading Machiavelli and Althusius: Reason, Rationality and Religion" in *Rational Decision,* ed. C. J. Friedrich, *Nomos* VII (New York, 1964), 178.

basis of political power — a question of great importance, again, in current democratic theory, though of little relevance to the theorists of pre-industrial society. Again the historical caveat is obvious, but again it has not been sufficient to prevent commentators from offering it as a criticism of Machiavelli,[61] of Hobbes,[62] and of Locke,[63] that none of them offer any "genuine insights"[64] into this almost wholly twentieth-century discussion.

A scarcely less futile and even more prevalent form of this mythology consists in effect of criticizing the classic writers according to the — wholly a priori — assumption that they must have intended whatever writings they produced to constitute the most systematic contributions to their subject which they were capable of executing. If it is first assumed, for example, that one of the doctrines which Hooker (that most implausible runner in the classic race) must have been trying to enunciate in the *Laws* was an account of "the basis of political obligation," then it is doubtless a "defect in Hooker's political views" that he fails to devote any attention to refuting claims to absolute power.[65] Similarly, if it is first assumed that one of Machiavelli's basic concerns in the *Prince* is "the characteristics of men in politics," then it is not hard for a modern political scientist to go on to point out that as such, Machiavelli's poor effort is "extremely one-sided and unsystematic."[66] Again, if it is first assumed that Locke's *Two Treatises* include all the doctrines he might have wished to enunciate on "natural law and political society," then doubtless "it might well be asked" why Locke failed to "advocate a world state."[67] And again, if it is first assumed that one of Montesquieu's aims in *L'Esprit des lois* must have been to enunciate a sociology of knowledge, then doubtless "it is a weakness" that he fails to explain its chief determinants, and doubtless "we must also accuse him" of failing to apply his own theory.[68] But with all such alleged "failures," as with the converse form of this mythology, we are still — remembering that failing presupposes trying —

61. John Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, 2 vols. (London, 1963), I, 43, on Machiavelli's "great omission."

62. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1946), 578, on Hobbes's failure to "realize the importance of the clash between different classes." It is a matter of scholarly dispute as to whether Hobbes lived in a society in which such an issue could have seemed of the least importance.

63. Andrew Hacker, *Political Theory: Philosophy, Ideology, Science* (New York, 1961), noting this "great omission" in Machiavelli (192) as well as in Locke (285).

64. Max Lerner, "Introduction" to Machiavelli, *The Prince and The Discourses* (New York, 1950), on Machiavelli's lack of "any genuine insights into social organization as the basis of politics" (xxx).

65. E. T. Davies, *The Political Ideas of Richard Hooker* (London, 1946), 80.

66. Robert A. Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963), 113.

67. Richard H. Cox, *Locke on War and Peace* (Oxford, 1960), xv, 189.

68. W. Stark, *Montesquieu: Pioneer of the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, 1960), 144, 153.

left confronting the same essential and essentially begged question: the question of whether any of these writers ever intended, or even could have intended, to do what they are thus castigated for not having done.

I now turn to the second type of mythology which tends to be generated by the fact that the historian will be unavoidably *set* in approaching the ideas of the past. It may be (and indeed it very often happens) that a given classic writer is not altogether consistent, or even that he fails altogether to give any systematic account of his beliefs. If the basic paradigm for the conduct of the historical investigation has been conceived as the elaboration of each classic writer's doctrines on each of the themes most characteristic of the subject, it will become dangerously easy for the historian to conceive it as his task to supply or find in each of these texts the coherence which they may appear to lack. Such a danger is exacerbated, of course, by the notorious difficulty of preserving the proper emphasis and tone of a work in paraphrasing it, and by the consequent temptation to find a "message" which can be abstracted from it and more readily communicated. To write a textbook in the history of ideas, of course, is simply to fall prey systematically to this temptation — which, incidentally, is why textbooks in the subject are not merely poor things, but are actively misleading, and why this difficulty is not to be circumvented even by providing textbooks in which the "message" is given in the author's own words. The inevitable result — which can be illustrated from far more respectable sources than the synoptic and pedagogic histories — will still be a form of writing which might be labelled the mythology of coherence. The writing of the history of ethical and political philosophy is pervaded by this mythology.[69] Thus if "current scholarly opinion" can see no coherence in Hooker's *Laws,* the moral is to look harder, for "coherence" is surely "present."[70] If there is doubt about the "most central themes" of Hobbes's political philosophy, it becomes the duty of the exegete to discover the "inner coherence of his doctrine" by reading the *Leviathan* a number of times, until — in a perhaps excessively revealing phrase — he finds that its argument has "assumed some coherence."[71] If there is no coherent system "readily accessible" to the student of Hume's political works, the exegete's duty is "to rummage through one work after another" until the "high degree

    69. A similar point about the problem of accommodating different "levels of abstraction" has been made by J. G. A. Pocock, "The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry," in *Philosophy, Politics and Society,* Second Series, ed. Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Oxford, 1962), 183-202. This "scripturalist tendency" is also mentioned by Peter Laslett *sub* "Political Philosophy, History of," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Paul Edwards *et al.,* 8 vols. (New York, 1967), VI, 371.
    70. Arthur S. McGrade, "The Coherence of Hooker's Polity: The Books on Power," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963), 163.
    71. Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oxford, 1957), vii.

of consistency in the whole corpus" is duly displayed (again in a rather revealing phrase) "at all costs."[72] If Herder's political ideas are "rarely worked out systematically," and are to be found "scattered throughout his writings, sometimes within the most unexpected contexts," the duty of the exegete again becomes that of trying "to present these ideas in some coherent form."[73] The most revealing fact about such reiterations of the scholar's task is that the metaphors habitually used are those of effort and quest; the ambition is always to "arrive" at "a unified interpretation," to "gain" a "coherent view of an author's system."[74]

This procedure gives the thoughts of various classic writers a coherence, and an air generally of a closed system, which they may never have attained or even been meant to attain. If it is first assumed, for example, that the business of interpreting Rousseau's thought must center on the discovery of his most "fundamental thought," it will readily cease to seem a matter of importance that he contributed over several decades to several quite different fields of enquiry.[75] Again, if it is first assumed that every aspect of Hobbes's thought was designed as a contribution to the whole of his "Christian" system, it will cease to seem at all peculiar to suggest that we may turn to his autobiography to elucidate so crucial a point as the relations between ethics and political life.[76] Again, if it is first assumed that even Burke never essentially contradicted himself or changed his mind, but that a "coherent moral philosophy" underlies everything he wrote, then it will cease to seem at all unrealistic to treat "the corpus of his published writings" as "a single body of thought."[77] Some measure of the lengths to which such procedures of abstracting the variety of a man's thoughts to the level at which they can be said (all passion spent) to "attain" some coherence is provided by a recent study of Marx's social and political thought. Here it has seemed necessary, to justify the exclusion of Engels's thoughts, to point out that Marx and Engels were after all "two distinct human beings."[78] It does sometimes happen, of course, that the aims and successes of a given writer may remain so

72. John B. Stewart, The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume (New York, 1963), v-vi.

73. F. M. Barnard, Herder's Social and Political Thought (Oxford, 1965), xix. Cf. also 139.

74. E.g., J. W. N. Watkins, Hobbes's System of Ideas (London, 1965), 10.

75. Ernst Cassirer, The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau, tr. and ed. Peter Gay (Bloomington, Indiana, 1954), 46, 62. As Gay indicates in his Introduction, it may well have been salutary at the time when Cassirer was writing to have insisted on such an emphasis, but it remains questionable whether the somewhat a priori assumptions of the study are not misconceived.

76. F. C. Hood, The Divine Politics of Thomas Hobbes (Oxford, 1964), 28.

77. Charles Parkin, The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought (Cambridge, 1956), 2, 4.

78. Shlomo Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx (Cambridge, 1968), 3.

various as to defy even the efforts of such exegetes to find a coherent system in their scattered thoughts. Frequently, however, this merely generates the converse form of this historical absurdity: for such lack of system is then made a matter for reproach. It is thought, for example, to be a point of some ideological urgency as well as exegetical convenience that Marx's various pronouncements should be available under some systematic headings. Despite the efforts of his critics, however, such a system remains hard to find. We might ascribe this to his concern at different times with a wide range of different social and economic issues. But it has instead become a standard criticism in the textbooks that Marx never managed to work out what is supposed to be "his" basic theory in anything but a "fragmentary manner."[79] Such criticisms occur even more readily when the given writer is first classified according to a model to which he is then in effect expected to aspire. If it is first assumed that all conservative thinkers must hold some "organic" conception of the state, then doubtless Bolingbroke "should have had" such a conception, and doubtless it is odd that he did not organize his thoughts in this approved way.[80] Again, if it is first assumed that each philosopher who writes about justice may be expected to "contribute" to one of three "basic" views on the subject, then doubtless the fact that neither Plato nor Hegel did so can be taken to show that they "seem to resist taking a definite position" on the subject itself.[81] In all such cases, the coherence or lack of it which is thus discovered very readily ceases to be an historical account of any thoughts which were ever actually thought. The history thus written becomes a history not of ideas at all, but of abstractions: a history of thoughts which no one ever actually succeeded in thinking, at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained.

The objection is a very obvious one, but it has not in practice proved sufficient to forestall the development of this mythology of coherence in two directions which can only, in the most pejorative sense, be called metaphysical. First there is the astonishing, but not unusual, assumption that it may be quite proper, in the interests of extracting a message of higher coherence from an author's work, to discount the statements of intention which the author himself may have made about what he was doing, or even to discount whole works which would impair the coherence of the author's

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79. See for example Sabine, *Political Theory,* 642.

80. F. J. C. Hearnshaw, "Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke" in *The Social and Political Ideas of Some English Thinkers of the Augustan Age,* ed. F. J. C. Hearnshaw (London, 1928), 243.

81. M. J. Adler, "Foreword" in Otto A. Bird, *The Idea of Justice* (New York, 1967), xi, and Bird, 22. The foreword includes the promise that the "Institute for Philosophical Research" will continue to "transform" [*sic*] the "chaos of differing opinions" on other subjects "into an orderly set of clearly defined points." The subjects are to include progress, happiness, and love (ix-xi).

system. The current literature on both Hobbes and Locke may be used to illustrate both these tendencies. In the case of Locke, it is now known that he was concerned, in his earliest works of ethical and political thinking, to set out and to defend a markedly authoritarian position.[82] Yet it is still apparently possible in the face of this knowledge to treat Locke's politics as a body of views which can simply be labelled the work of a "liberal" political theorist, without further consideration of the fact that these were at best the views which Locke held in his fifties, and which he would himself have repudiated in his thirties.[83] Locke at thirty is evidently not yet "Locke" — a degree of patriarchalism to which even Filmer did not aspire. As for Hobbes, it is known from his own explicit statements what character he intended his political thought to bear. *Leviathan,* as he put it in the Review and Conclusion, was written "without other design" than to show first that the "civil right of sovereigns and both the duty and liberty of subjects" could be grounded "upon the known natural inclinations of mankind," and second, that a theory so grounded would center on "the mutual relation of protection and obedience": a politics of rational calculation is thus predicated on something like an assimilation of politics to psychology.[84] Yet it has still seemed possible to insist that this "scientific part" of Hobbes's thought is nothing more than a rather ineptly detached aspect of a transcendent "religious whole." The fact, moreover, that Hobbes himself appeared unaware of this higher order of coherence provokes not retraction but counter-assertion. Hobbes merely "fails to make clear" that his discussion of human nature "in fact" subserves a religious purpose. It "would have been clearer" if Hobbes had "written in terms of moral and civil obligations" and thus brought out the "real unity" and basically religious character of his whole "system."[85]

The other metaphysical belief to which the mythology of coherence gives rise is that a writer may be expected not merely to exhibit some "inner coherence" which it becomes the duty of his interpreter to reveal, but also that any apparent barriers to this revelation, constituted by any apparent contradictions which the given writer's work does seem to contain, cannot be real barriers, because they cannot really be contradictions. The assumption, that is, is that the correct question to ask in such a doubtful situation is not whether

82. For the full demonstration see the Introduction to John Locke, *Two Tracts on Government,* ed. Philip Abrams (Cambridge, 1967).

83. See M. Seliger, *The Liberal Politics of John Locke* (London, 1968). These facts are alluded to only once (209-210), and only to be dismissed as not being his concern.

84. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* ed. M. Oakeshott (Oxford, 1946), 466-467. This characterization has, of course, been much disputed, and is doubtless too baldly stated here. For a full defense, see my article "Hobbes's *Leviathan,*" *The Historical Journal* 7 (1964), 321-333.

85. Hood, *Hobbes,* 64, 116-117, 136-137.

the given writer was inconsistent, but rather "How are his contradictions (or apparent contradictions) to be accounted for?"[86] The explanation dictated by the principle of Ockham's razor (that an apparent contradiction may simply *be* a contradiction) seems not to be considered. Such apparent incompatibilities, it is often said instead, should not simply be left in this unresolved state, but should be made to serve instead in helping toward "a fuller understanding of the whole theory"[87] — of which the contradictions, presumably, form only an unsublimated part. The very suggestion, indeed, that the "contradictions and divergences" of a given writer may be "supposed to prove that his thought had changed" has been dismissed by a very influential authority as just another delusion of nineteenth-century scholarship.[88] So it comes about that much current practice in the history of ideas deliberately endorses one of the more fantastic doctrines of the scholastics themselves: the belief that one must "resolve antinomies." The aim, for example, in studying the politics of Machiavelli need not therefore be restricted to anything so straightforward as an attempt to indicate the nature of the developments and divergences from the *Prince* to the later *Discourses*. It can be — and has been — insisted instead that the appropriate task must be to construct for Machiavelli a scheme of beliefs sufficiently generalized for the doctrines of the *Prince* to be capable of being *aufgehoben* into the *Discourses* with all the apparent contradictions resolved.[89] The recent historiography of Marx's social and political thought reveals a similar trend. Marx is not allowed simply to have developed and changed his views from the humanistic strains of the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* to the apparently very different, far more mechanistic, system outlined over twenty years later in *Capital*. Either it is assumed that the appropriate task must be to construct "a structural analysis of the whole of Marx's thought," so that the apparent divergences can be viewed as part of "one corpus,"[90] or else it is assumed that the very existence of the earlier material can be used as a basis for claiming that "the element of myth" must still somehow be present in the later works, that this shows Marx to have been "obsessed with a moral vision of reality" all the time, and that all of this can be used to discredit Marx's scientific

86. W. Harrison, "Texts in Political Theory," *Political Studies* 3 (1955), 28-44.

87. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962), viii.

88. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1952), 30-31.

89. For a survey of this approach amongst others, see Eric W. Cochrane, "Machiavelli: 1940-60," *The Journal of Modern History* 33 (1961), 113-136. The assumption appears in Chabod's as well as (especially) in Meinecke's work. For a critical survey of such assumptions, based on important scholarly discoveries about the relations between the *Prince* and *Discourses,* see Hans Baron, "Machiavelli; the Republican Citizen and the Author of the *Prince*," *English Historical Review* 76 (1961), 217-253.

90. Avineri, *Marx,* 2.

pretensions, since he "appears not as the scientist of society that he claimed to be, but rather as a moralist or a religious kind of thinker."[91]

It is true that this belief in the desirability of trying to resolve contradictions has recently received an explicit and interesting defense. The clue, it is suggested, to understanding any apparent "blunders" committed by any "master of the art of writing" lies in recognizing the effects of persecution on the art of writing. During any "era of persecution" it becomes necessary to hide one's less orthodox views "between the lines" of one's published work. ("The expression," one learns with relief, "is clearly metaphoric.") It follows that if "an able writer" in such a situation appears to contradict himself in setting out his ostensible views, then "we may reasonably suspect" that the apparent contradiction has been deliberately planted as a signal to his "trustworthy and intelligent" readers that he is really opposed to the orthodox views he may appear to hold.[92] The basic difficulty with this defense of the practice of resolving antinomies is that it depends on two a priori assumptions which, although they are extremely implausible, are not merely left unargued, but are treated as if they are "facts." First, the inquiry gains its whole direction from the unargued assumption that to be original *is* to be subversive. For this is the means by which we know when to look for writing between the lines. And second, any given interpretation based on reading between the lines is virtually insulated from criticism by the alleged "fact" that "thoughtless men are careless readers."[93] For this amounts to the (purely semantic) claim that to fail to "see" the message between the lines *is* to be thoughtless, while to "see" it *is* to be a trustworthy and intelligent reader. But if we now insist on some more genuinely empirical criteria for knowing when we are or are not dealing with one of the relevant "eras of persecution," and for knowing when in consequence we should or should not try to read between the lines, all that we find are two circular arguments. When should we *stop* trying to read between the lines? The only criterion given is "when it would be less exact than not doing so."[94] And what *constitutes* an era of persecution, such that we should expect to have to read between the lines? We are told on the one hand "that the book in question must have been composed during a period of persecution" if there is to be any

91. Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge, 1961), 7, 11, 21, and Ch. XI. This allows the useful conclusion, moreover, that the "relevance" usually accorded to the classic texts decisively stops short at Marx (that notoriously irrelevant writer), for his religious obsession means that he "has very little to say to us" about Capitalism (233), and "not only made no positive contribution but performed a very great disservice" in what he had to say about freedom (243).

92. This is the theory outlined in Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Quotations from 24-25 and 30, 32.

93. Strauss, *Persecution,* 25.

94. Strauss, *Persecution,* 30.

expectation that it does contain secret writing. And we are told on the other hand that a period of persecution is to be defined as one in which a heterodox writer will need to develop this "peculiar technique of writing" between the lines.[95] Despite this explicit defense, therefore, of the scholasticism of resolving antinomies, it remains hard to see how the whole enterprise of looking for the "inner coherence" of a given writer's doctrines can yield anything except a mythology of coherence — a mythology, again, in the sense that the history written according to this methodology can scarcely contain any genuinely historical reports about thoughts that were actually thought in the past.

II

Both the two mythologies I have discussed derive from the fact that an historian of ideas will unavoidably be *set,* in approaching any given writer, by some sense of the defining characteristics of the discipline to which the given writer may be said to have contributed. It may well seem, however, that even if such mythologies proliferate at this level of abstraction, they will scarcely arise, or will at least be very much easier to recognize and to discount, when the historian comes to operate on the level simply of describing the internal economy and argument of some individual work. It is indeed usual to insist that there can be nothing very problematic, at this more particular level, about the business merely of anatomizing the contents and arguments of some classic text. It is thus all the more necessary to insist that even at this level we are still confronted with further dilemmas generated by the priority of paradigms, and still confronted in consequence with a further set of ways in which historical exegesis can lapse into mythology.

In the first place, it is rather easy, in considering what significance the argument of some classic text might be said to have for us, to describe the work and its alleged significance in such a way that no place is left for the analysis of what the author himself meant to say, although the commentator may still believe himself to be engaged on such an analysis. The characteristic result of this confusion is a type of discussion which might be labelled the mythology of prolepsis. Such confusions arise most readily, of course, when the historian is more interested — as he may legitimately be — in the retrospective significance of a given historical work or action than in its meaning for the agent himself. A convenient example of the problem which then arises is given in an important recent discussion of such tensed situations. We might wish to say that with Petrarch's ascent of Mount Ventoux the age of the Re-

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95. Strauss, *Persecution,* 24, 32.

naissance began. Now this might, in a romantic sort of way, be said to give a true account both of the significance of Petrarch's action, and so of its interest for us. The point is, however, that no account under this description could ever be a true account of any action Petrarch intended, or hence of the meaning of his actual action. There could be no intention "to open the Renaissance," for "to give such a description requires concepts which were only available at a later time."[96] The characteristic, in short, of the mythology of prolepsis is the conflation of the necessary asymmetry between the significance an observer may justifiably claim to find in a given statement or other action, and the meaning of that action itself. One such prolepsis which has contantly been exposed, and yet has constantly recurred, has been the attempt to consider Plato's political views in *The Republic* as those of a "totalitarian party politician."[97] Another very similar case has been the attempt to insist that Rousseau's political views not only "provided the philosophical justification for the totalitarian as well as the democratic national state,"[98] but that the force of this "provision" is such that Rousseau should in effect be credited with just this *intention,* and should thus be "given special *responsibility* for the emergence of totalitarianism."[99] In both cases an account which might be true of the historical significance of the works becomes conflated with an account of what they were doing which could not in principle be true.

Such crude versions of this mythology, of course, are (and have been) very readily exposed. But this does not seem to have been sufficient to prevent the same type of prolepsis from continuing to recur, in a less noticeable fashion, in discussions of other admittedly influential political theorists, such as Machiavelli and Locke. Machiavelli, we are very often told, "was the founder of the modern political orientation."[100] With Machiavelli "we stand at the gateway of the modern world."[101] Now this may well provide a true account of Machiavelli's historical significance (though it seems to presuppose a somewhat naive view of historical causation). But it is also frequently used to preface discussions of the characteristically "modern"

96. Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, 1965), 169.

97. K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies,* 4th edn., 2 vols. (London, 1962), I, 169.

98. J. Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish, *The Western Intellectual Tradition* (London, 1960), 303.

99. J. W. Chapman, *Rousseau — Totalitarian or Liberal?* (New York, 1956), vii. My italics. For the judgments there discussed, see for example Alfred Cobban, *The Crisis of Civilization* (London, 1941), 67. And especially, J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1952), where it is actually claimed that Rousseau "gave rise to totalitarian democracy" (43).

100. Warren Winiarski, "Niccolo Machiavelli" in *History of Political Philosophy,* ed. Strauss and Cropsey, 247.

101. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, 1946), 140.

elements of Machiavelli's thought, and is even offered as an account of "the *intention* of Machiavelli's political teaching."[102] The danger here is not merely that of "seeing" far too readily the "modern" elements which the commentator has thus programmed himself to find; there is also the danger that such interpretations may part company with anything that could in principle be a plausible account of what Machiavelli's political writings were meant to achieve or intended to mean. Similarly with Locke, of whom it is so often said (doubtless correctly) that he was one of the founders of the modern empirical and liberal school of political philosophy. Such a characterization readily becomes elided into the claim that Locke was himself a "liberal" political theorist.[103] This only serves to turn a remark about Locke's significance which might be true into a remark about the content of his works which could not be true. For Locke can scarcely have intended to contribute to a school of political philosophy which, so this fashionable but muddled interpretation suggests, it was his great achievement to make possible.[104] The surest symptom, in short, of this mythology of prolepsis is that the discussions which it governs are open to the crudest type of criticism that can be levelled against any teleological form of explanation: the action has to await the future to await its meaning.

Even when all these necessary historical considerations have been given their due weight, the correct description simply of the contents and arguments of a given classic text still poses a problem. For there is still the possibility that the observer may misdescribe, by a process of historical foreshortening, both the sense and the intended reference of a given work. The result is then a mythology of parochialism. This danger must arise, of course, in any kind of attempt to understand an alien culture or an unfamiliar conceptual scheme. If there is to be any prospect that the observer will successfully communicate his understanding within his own culture, it is obviously dangerous, but it is equally inescapable, that he should apply his own familiar criteria of classification and discrimination.[105] The danger is then that the observer may "see" something apparently (rather than really) familiar in the course of studying an alien argument, and may in consequence provide

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102. Winiarski in Strauss and Cropsey, 273. My italics.

103. As is assumed in the works of Gough, Plamentaz, and Seliger (as well as others) already cited.

104. For a complete analysis of this confusion, and a corrective to it, see John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge, 1969).

105. Otherwise it is hard to see how there can be any *understanding* at all. It is the force of this difficulty which seems to be ignored in the analysis by Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964), 307-324. For a corrective, in anthropology, see Martin Hollis, "Reason and Ritual," *Philosophy* 43 (1968), 231-247.

a misleadingly familiar-looking description. The writing of the history of ideas is, in fact, marked in particular by two examples of such parochialism. First, there is the danger that the historian may misuse his vantage-point in describing the apparent *reference* of some given statement in a classic text. An argument in one work, that is, may happen to remind the historian of a similar argument in an earlier work, or may appear to contradict it. In either case the historian may mistakenly come to suppose that it was the intention of the later writer to refer to the earlier, and so may come to speak misleadingly of the "influence" of the earlier work. Now there is no doubt that the concept of influence, while extremely elusive (if it is to be distinguished from a cause) is far from being empty of explanatory force.[106] The danger is, however, that it is so easy to use the concept in an apparently explanatory way without any consideration of whether the conditions sufficient, or at least necessary, for the proper application of the concept have been met. The (very frequent) result — for example, in the history of political ideas — is a story which reads like nothing so much as the first chapters of Chronicles, though without the genetic justification. Consider, for example, the alleged genealogy of Edmund Burke's political views. His aim in his *Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontents,* we are told, was "to counteract the influence of Bolingbroke."[107] Bolingbroke himself is said to have been under the influence of Locke.[108] Locke in turn is either said — despite appearances — to have been much influenced by Hobbes, to whom he must "really" have been intending to refer in the *Second Treatise,*[109] or else is said to be concerned there to counter Hobbes's influence.[110] And Hobbes in turn is said to have

106. Here I argue against myself, for it now seems to me that in my critique of the influence-model in my article, "The Limits of Historical Explanations," *Philosophy* 41 (1966), 199-215, I perhaps stressed too much the impossibility of making the model work, rather than its sheer elusiveness. I would still wish to insist, however, that it can very rarely be made to work, and that when it can be, there is scarcely ever any point in doing so.

107. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., *Statesmanship and Party Government* (Chicago, 1965), 86. Cf. also 41, 66, 80. For the corresponding claim that Bolingbroke "anticipates" Burke, see J. Hart, *Viscount Bolingbroke, Tory Humanist* (London, 1965), 95, 149, etc.

108. Mansfield, *Statesmanship and Party Government,* 49, etc. Textbooks on eighteenth-century thought find "the tradition of Locke" indispensable as a way of accounting for some of the most recurrent features of the period. See for example Harold J. Laski, *Political Thought in England: Locke to Bentham* (Oxford, 1961), 47-53, 131.

109. For this assumption see esp. Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* and Cox, *Locke on War and Peace.*

110. This is the theory in general circulation. E.g., even Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* for the insistence that "a careful reader cannot fail to see" that Locke was refuting Hobbes (26). The assumption figures in most textbooks of early modern political thought. See for example Kingsley Martin, *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1962), 120.

been influenced by Machiavelli,[111] by whom indeed everyone is said to have been influenced.[112]

Most of these explanations are purely mythological, as can readily be demonstrated simply by considering what the necessary conditions would have to be for helping to explain the appearance in any given writer B of any given doctrine, by invoking the "influence" of some earlier given writer, A. Such a set of conditions would at least have to include (i) that there should be a genuine similarity between the doctrines of A and B; (ii) that B could not have found the relevant doctrine in any writer other than A;[113] (iii) that the probability of the similarity being random should be very low (i.e., even if there is a similarity, and it is shown that it could have been by A that B was influenced, it must still be shown that B did not as a matter of fact articulate the relevant doctrine independently). Now consider the example above in terms of this not very stringent model. It is arguable that the alleged influence of Machiavelli on Hobbes, and of Hobbes on Locke, even fails to pass test (i). Certainly Hobbes never explicitly discusses Machiavelli, and Locke never explicitly discusses Hobbes. It is demonstrable that the alleged influence of Hobbes on Locke, and of Bolingbroke on Burke, both fail to pass test (ii). (Burke might equally well have found all the doctrines of Bolingbroke by which he is said to have been influenced in a whole range of early eighteenth-century pamphlets.)[114] Locke might similarly have found all the doctrines said to be characteristic of Hobbes in a whole range of 1650's *de facto* political writings — which, indeed, Locke is at least known to have read, while it is not at all clear that he read Hobbes's works.)[115] And, finally, it is clear that none of the examples cited can be made to pass test (iii). (It is indeed clear that the issues raised by test (iii) have not even been faced in any of these cases.) It is

111. See for example Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* for the claim that Hobbes "accepted" (where?) "Machiavelli's critique of traditional political philosophy" (48).

112. See, as well as Raab's *English Face of Machiavelli*, the studies of Albert Cherel, *La Pensée de Machiavel en France* (Paris, 1935) and Guiseppe Prezzolini, *Machiavelli*, tr. G. Savini (London, 1968), esp. Ch. VI.

113. This condition is mentioned by P. P. Wiener, "Some Problems and Methods in the History of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961), 531-548. The relevant (somewhat jaunty) paragraph is at 537. I have not elsewhere seen the problems raised by the use of the concept of "influence" discussed. But cf. my own article, cited in fn. 106 above.

114. For the large number and general drift of these, see for example Archibald S. Foord, *His Majesty's Opposition, 1714-1830* (Oxford, 1964), esp. chs. III and IV.

115. For the group of *de facto*-ists, and their relation to Hobbes, see my own article, "The Ideological Context of Hobbes's Political Thought," *The Historical Journal* 9 (1966), 286-317. For Locke's reading, see Peter Laslett, "Introduction," to *The Library of John Locke* (Oxford Bibliographical Society Publications, 13), ed. John Harrison and Peter Laslett (Oxford, 1965).

thus scarcely an exaggeration[116] to say that this whole repertoire of *einfluss-studies* in the history of ideas is based on nothing better than the capacity of the observer to foreshorten the past by filling it with his own reminiscences.

The other form of conceptual parochialism which particularly marks the history of ideas is that the observer may unconsciously misuse his vantage-point in describing the *sense* of a given work. There is always the danger, that is, that the historian may conceptualize an argument in such a way that its alien elements are dissolved into an apparent but misleading familiarity. This danger arises pre-eminently in social anthropology, of course; there it has become the object of considerable and self-conscious attention by both theorists and practitioners. But it also arises scarcely less seriously in the history of ideas, in which a similar self-consciousness seems damagingly absent. The resulting misinterpretations are many: two very obvious examples must here serve to illustrate the point. Consider, for example, the case of an historian who decides (perhaps quite rightly) that a fundamental feature of radical political thinking during the English Revolution was a concern with the extension of the right to vote. He may then be led to conceptualize this characteristically "Leveller" demand in terms of an argument for democracy. The danger arises, however, when the concept of a "philosophy of liberal democracy"[117] is then used as a paradigm for the description and understanding of the Leveller movement. First, the paradigm makes it unnecessarily difficult to account for some of the most characteristic features of Leveller ideology. For if we are programmed to think in terms of the "republican secularism" of the movement, it is not surprising that their agonizings over the Monarchy and their appeals to religious sentiment begin to look somewhat baffling.[118] And second, the paradigm of "democracy" will tend to lead the historical investigation in rather inappropriate directions. Some anachronistic concept of "the welfare state"[119] has to be found in Leveller thought, as well as a belief in "manhood suffrage," which they never in fact held.[120] Or consider, similarly, the case of an historian who decides (again perhaps quite rightly) that the arguments in Locke's

116. I have tried to demonstrate this in detail for one recent case of this type of non-history. See my article, "More's *Utopia*," *Past and Present* 38 (1967), 153-168, esp. 163-165.

117. This is the paradigm applied even in the best recent scholarly study. See H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution,* ed. Christopher Hill (London, 1961), 118.

118. Brailsford, *Levellers,* 118, 457, etc.

119. Brailsford, 233.

120. That this is so was made clear by Petty at the Putney Debates. See A. S. P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty* (London, 1938), 83. The point has recently been emphasized by Macpherson in *Possessive Individualism,* Ch. III.

Second Treatise about the right to resist tyrannical governments are related
to his arguments about the place of consent in any decent political commu-
nity. He may then be led to use the notion of "Government by consent" as
a paradigm for the description of Locke's argument.[121] The same danger
then arises. When *we* speak of government by consent we usually have in
mind a theory concerned with the best organization of government. It is
thus natural, or rather fatally easy, to turn with this conceptualization in
mind to Locke's text, and duly to find some such theory rather bunglingly
set out there. There is decisive evidence,[122] however, that when Locke spoke
of government by consent this simply did not happen to be what *he* had in
mind at all. It is now clear that Locke's concern with the concept of consent
arises solely in connection with the *origin* of legitimate societies. This is
hardly what we should regard as an argument for consent, but it happens
to be Locke's argument, and the only result of failing to start from this
point is to misdescribe the whole theory, and so to accuse Locke of having
bungled an account which he was not, in fact, trying to write. The point is
that even when an historian of ideas addresses himself solely to the descrip-
tion of a text, and even when his paradigms reflect genuinely organizing
features of the text, the same essential danger still remains: the danger
that the very familiarity of the concepts the historian uses may mask some
essential inapplicability to the historical material.

The perennial difficulty with which I have been concerned throughout is
thus that while it is inescapable, it is also dangerous in these various ways
to empirical good sense for the historian of ideas to approach his material
with preconceived paradigms. It will by now be evident, moreover, that the
point at which such dangers arise is the point at which the historian in effect
begins to ignore certain general criteria, logical as well as empirical, which
must necessarily apply to the whole enterprise of making and understanding
statements. A consideration of the nature of these issues may thus serve
to summarize as well as to corroborate the methodological lessons on which
I have sought to insist.

The relevant logical consideration is that no agent can eventually be said
to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept
as a correct description of what he had meant or done. This special authority
of an agent over his intentions does not exclude, of course, the possibility
that an observer might be in a position to give a fuller or more convincing
account of the agent's behavior than he could give himself. (Psychoanalysis
is indeed founded on this possibility.) But it does exclude the possibility
that an acceptable account of an agent's behavior could ever survive the

121. As for example Gough does in *John Locke's Political Philosophy*, Ch. III.
122. Presented by John Dunn, "Consent in the Political Theory of John Locke,"
The Historical Journal 10 (1967), 153-182.

demonstration that it was itself dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself. For if a given statement or other action has been performed by an agent at will, and has a meaning for him, it follows that any plausible account of what the agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing. Otherwise the resulting account, however compelling, cannot be an account of *his* statement or action.[123] It will be evident by now that it is precisely this consideration which is so readily ignored whenever a given classic writer is criticized by an historian of ideas for failing to enunciate his doctrines in a coherent fashion, or for failing to enunciate a doctrine on one of the allegedly perennial issues. For it cannot (logically) be a correct appraisal of any agent's action to say that he failed to do something unless it is first clear that he did have, and even could have had, the intention to try to perform *that* action. To apply this test is simply to recognize that many of the questions with which we have been concerned (questions such as whether Marsilius of Padua enunciated a doctrine of the separation of powers, and so on) are not merely scholastic, but strictly speaking void for lack of reference, and so meaningless. For there is no means of reformulating any such questions in terms that could in principle have made sense to the agent himself. (A fourteenth-century anti-papalist pamphleteer can scarcely have been *intending* to contribute to an eighteenth-century French constitutionalist debate.) The same test equally makes it clear that all claims about "anticipations," all remarks such as the claim that "we may regard Locke's theory" of signs "as an anticipation of Berkeley's metaphysics" are meaningless.[124] For there is no point in so regarding Locke's theory if the aim is to say anything at all about what Locke himself was doing. (It can scarcely have been Locke's *intention* to anticipate Berkeley's metaphysics.) And if such historical studies are not to be studies of what genuine historical agents did think (or at least could have thought), then they might as well be turned into fiction by intention, for they must certainly be fiction by attainment. History (notwithstanding a fashionable attitude among philosophers) cannot simply consist of stories: a further feature of historical stories is that they are at least supposed to be true.[125]

The relevant empirical considerations amount to little more than com-

123. For a superb statement of these themes, see Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London, 1959), esp. 135-136, 153-155, 213-216. Some kindred issues are developed in Part I of Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London, 1964).

124. Armstrong, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26 (1965), 382.

125. For an elaboration of this point and of its implications for the suggestion that history is essentially to be defined as narrative, see Maurice Mandelbaum, "A Note on History as Narrative," *History and Theory* 6 (1967), 413-419.

monplace, but amazingly elusive, facts about the activity of thinking. The
first is that it is surely at least a "fact about many people" (and a fact
with which the moralist needs to reckon)[126] that they may *consciously* adopt
incompatible ideals and beliefs in different moods and at different times.
And even if it is insisted that there may be thinkers whose ideals and beliefs
remain in a more or less steady state, there is still a second consideration,
that to think at all is surely to engage in an "effortful activity,"[127] and not
just to manipulate effortlessly some sort of kaleidoscope of mental images.
The attempt to think out problems, as a matter of common introspection
and observation, does not seem to take the form of, or to be reducible to,
a patterned or even a uniformly purposive activity. It is surely empirically
commonplace that we engage rather in an often intolerable wrestle with
words and their meanings, that we characteristically spill over the limits of
our intelligence and get confused, and that our attempts to synthesize our
views may in consequence reveal conceptual disorder at least as much as
coherent doctrines. It will be evident by now that it is precisely this con-
sideration which is ignored whenever an interpreter insists on collecting the
regrettably "scattered" thoughts of some classic writer and presenting them
systematically, or on discovering some level of coherence at which the efforts
and confusions which ordinarily mark the activity of thinking are made to
disappear.

III

It may seem by now that the argument which I have so far presented is open
to a crucial objection. To illustrate the various dangers of writing historical
nonsense by concentrating on what each classic writer *says* about each given
doctrine is scarcely the same, it might be argued, as to prove the conceptual
impossibility of writing good history by adopting this approach. It is surely
true, in any case, that there are at least *some* writers (Hobbes perhaps
springs to mind) who may fairly be said to have articulated a fully coherent
set of doctrines, even a "system of ideas."[128] If the tendency, moreover, for
the study simply of a writer's doctrines to generate mythologies is only to
be classified as a *danger*, it is surely one which, with sufficient self-conscious-
ness, the historian may well hope to avoid. And if such dangers *can* be
avoided, the demand for a wholly different approach to studying the history
of ideas must begin after all to seem somewhat alarmist and unjustified. The
answer to such objections is of course that it is not the existence of doctrines

126. See P. F. Strawson, "Social Morality and Individual Ideal," *Philosophy* 36
(1961), 1-17, insisting on the tendency to underestimate this fact, as well as on the
wide importance of its implications.
127. See the start of Dunn, *Philosophy* 43 (1968), esp. 87-88 on this point.
128. Cf. the title of Watkins's recent book: *Hobbes's System of Ideas.*

in the history of thought which is in question. What is in question — even
in the case where a given writer may appear to have articulated a system
of doctrines with complete coherence — is the possibility, the conceptual
propriety, of treating such a system as a self-sufficient object of inquiry and
understanding. In considering this issue, moreover, I now wish to advance
a thesis complementary to, but much stronger than, the one I have just
argued. I have argued that the danger of writing historical nonsense, in
direct consequence of concentrating on the text in itself, is often incurred,
and indeed very seldom avoided altogether in current practice. I now wish
to claim that even if all the dangers I have outlined could be avoided (as
they doubtless could, though they seldom are) the underlying assumption
of this whole approach — that one should focus simply on the texts them-
selves, and study what each classic writer has to *say* about each given
doctrine — must necessarily remain a wholly inadequate methodology for
the conduct of the history of ideas. I shall seek to argue this claim, more-
over, with reference both to intellectual biography, where the doctrines of
a given writer are in question, and to "histories of ideas," where the mor-
phology of the doctrine itself is traced out. It can be shown in both cases
that while the study of the texts and their doctrines in themselves may often
appear to yield quite satisfactory results, the methodology remains incapable
in principle of considering or even recognizing some of the most crucial
problems which must arise in any attempt to understand the relations
between what a given writer may have *said,* and what he may be said to
have meant by saying what he said.

Intellectual biography (as well as the more synoptic histories of thought
built on the same model) is subject first of all to the obvious difficulty that
the literal meanings of key terms sometimes change over time, so that a
given writer may say something with a quite different sense and reference
from the one which may occur to the reader. Consider, for example, the
reception of Berkeley's immaterialism at the hands of his contemporary
critics. Both Baxter and Reid remarked on the "egoism" of Berkeley's out-
look, and it was under this heading that Berkeley appeared in the *Encyclo-
pédie.*[129] It is thus of some consequence to know that if Berkeley's contem-
poraries had intended to accuse him of what we should mean by egoism,
they would have been much more likely to refer to something like his
"Hobbism." When they spoke of his "egoism," what they meant was some-
thing much more like what we should mean by solipsism.[130] Such reminders

129. For Andrew Baxter on Berkeley, see *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human
Soul,* 3rd edn., 2 vols. (London, 1745), II, 280. For Thomas Reid, see *Essays on the
Intellectual Powers of Man,* ed. A. D. Woozley (London, 1941), 120. For the *Ency-
clopédie,* see vol. V, *sub* "Egoisme."

130. On this issue generally, see Harry M. Bracken, *The Early Reception of Berkeley's
Immaterialism, 1710-1733* (The Hague, 1965), 1-25, 59-81.

perhaps provide the most convenient means of countering the Fregean assumption that meanings must somehow be timeless. A more interesting and intractable objection however to the attempt to make the text in itself a self-sufficient object of understanding is suggested by the various oblique strategies which a writer may always decide to adopt in order to set out and at the same time to disguise what he means by what he says about some given doctrine. Such obliqueness may also be the result, of course, of ignorance or inadvertence. (It is possible, for example, consistently to say something other than what I mean to convey, perhaps due to a misunderstanding of the meanings of the words I use.) Some such examples can be important (for instance in translating), but I shall concentrate here on the central and simpler case of using oblique reference as a deliberate strategy. To take a necessarily simplified example (for the issue itself is plainly very complex), consider the case of the doctrine of religious toleration, as it presented itself to English intellectuals at the time of the English Toleration Act. There is no doubt that the various contributions to the discussion all reflect a common intention and thus a common theme. It could only be as the result, however, of a most sophisticated historical investigation (whose character remains to be delineated) that we could come to recognize, say, that Defoe's proposed *Experiment* for dealing with dissenters, Hoadly's *Letter* to the Pope about the powers of the Church, and Locke's *Letter concerning Toleration* all reflect a common intention to say something very similar about the doctrine involved. A study simply of what each writer said about the doctrine would more or less guarantee blank misunderstanding of Defoe, and at least considerable confusion about Hoadly. Only Locke seems to say anything resembling what he seems to mean, and even here we might wish (perhaps remembering Swift) to find some means of assuring ourselves that no irony was intended. The problem is not to be resolved, moreover (*pace* Professor Strauss) simply by saying that this must be a case in which the writers were *unable* to say what they meant (so that their meaning must be decoded by reading between the lines). The problem is rather that we need to understand what strategies have been *voluntarily* adopted to convey their meaning with deliberate obliqueness. And the point is that it is hard to see how any amount of reading the text "over and over again," as we are exhorted to do,[131] could possibly serve as the means to gain this understanding.

The most intractable form of this problem about oblique strategies — and the form most inimical to the view that a given writer's text can serve as an autonomous object of understanding — arises when there is some question as to whether it is "historically more credible" to say of a writer that he "believed what he wrote" than to suggest that what he said was insincerely

131. See Plamenatz, *Man and Society,* Introduction, I, x.

meant, that he "wrote with his tongue in his cheek."[132] It has indeed been recently suggested in an important discussion that "our conviction as to an author's sincerity" is perhaps the issue with most "particular relevance" to any discussion about the place of intentionality in the understanding of works of literature. No examples, however, of the issues thus raised were given in this discussion.[133] It seems appropriate, therefore, to give some more consideration to this issue as it arises in practice, especially as the question has recently been posed by historians of ideas in a notable way in the exegetical literature on two important figures, Hobbes and Bayle. In the case of Hobbes, the doctrine he enunciated about the laws of nature included both the claim that the laws of nature are the laws of God, and that men are obliged to obey the laws of nature. It has been traditional to dismiss these overt sentiments as the work of an arch-skeptic slyly pressing a familiar vocabulary into the most heterodox use. The trend in much recent exegesis, however, has been to insist (the form of words is very revealing) that Hobbes must after all have "meant quite seriously what he so often says, that the 'Natural Law' is the command of God, and to be obeyed because it is God's command."[134] Hobbes's skepticism is thus treated as a disguise: when it is shrugged off, he emerges as the exponent of a thoroughly Kantian doctrine. Similarly with Bayle, whose *Dictionary* contains most of the doctrines appropriate to a Calvinist theology of the most rigorous and unforgiving kind. It has again been traditional to dismiss this overt message by appealing to the presence of a desperate, systematic irony. Again, however, the trend of the best recent literature has been to insist that so far from being the prototype of the sneering *philosophes,* Bayle must be seen as a genuinely religious thinker,[135] a "man of faith"[136] with "solid roots in the religious tradition."[137]

I am not concerned here to ask directly which of these interpretations may be said to offer the best account of Hobbes's or Bayle's texts. I am concerned only to point out the inadequacy of the methodology by which these new interpretations have been guided and established. It has been

132. Hood, *Hobbes,* vii.

133. Frank Cioffi, "Intention and Interpretation in Criticism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 64 (1963-64), 103.

134. A. E. Taylor, "The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes," *Philosophy* 13 (1938), 418. The best recent analysis to take up a similar position is Warrender, *Hobbes.* A similar but more extreme statement is Hood, *Hobbes.*

135. The main work dedicated to this assumption is Elisabeth Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle,* Tome II: *Heterodoxie et rigorisme* (The Hague, 1964). See esp. Ch. XII on "The Problem of Evil," discussing Bayle's articles on David and on Manichaenism (346-386).

136. See P. Dibon, "Redécouverte de Bayle" in *Pierre Bayle, le philosophe de Rotterdam: études et documents,* ed. P. Dibon (Paris, 1959), xv.

137. H. Dieckmann, "Pierre Bayle: Philosophe of Rotterdam," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961), 131. A review article of the work ed. Dibon, cited fn. 136.

insisted that "a close study of the texts,"[138] a concentration on the texts
"for themselves"[139] will be sufficient to make the case for the new interpre-
tations. It does not seem to have been recognized, however, that the accep-
tance of these interpretations as textually correct entails the acceptance of
some much less obviously correct assumptions about Hobbes, Bayle, and
the age in which they both lived. First, both Hobbes and Bayle were accepted
not only by the *philosophes* as their great predecessors in iconoclasm (a
verdict also recorded on Hobbes by Bayle himself) but were also under-
stood in the same way by all their contemporary opponents and sympa-
thizers. It was never doubted that each had intended to deal both ironically
and destructively with the prevailing theological orthodoxies. (Nor is there
any difficulty in principle about accepting that both had the capacity to deal
in sustained irony in the necessary way. Even if Hobbes's tone in the fourth
Book of *Leviathan* is not certain, there can be little doubt about the ironic
form of a work like Bayle's *Various Thoughts on the Comet.*)[140] It is
possible, of course, though very difficult, to dismiss this point by insisting
on the (very remarkable) coincidence that all of Hobbes's and all of Bayle's
contemporary opponents were all equally, and in exactly the same way,
mistaken as to their real intentions. The point is, however, that to accept
this unlikely assumption is merely to raise a second peculiar difficulty, about
Hobbes and Bayle themselves.[141] Both had particular cause to recognize
that religious heterodoxy was a very dangerous commitment. Hobbes lived
for a time in dread (according to Aubrey) lest the Bishops bring in "a
motion to have the good old gentleman burn't for a heretique."[142] Bayle
even suffered the ironic fate of having his professorship at Sedan removed
for being anti-Catholic, and later of having his professorship at Rotterdam
removed for not being anti-Catholic enough. If it is still true, then, that both
these writers intended their works to propagate orthodox religious sentiment,
it becomes impossible to understand why neither of them removed from
later editions of their works — as both could have done, and Bayle was
even asked to do — those portions which were apparently so completely

138. Hood, *Hobbes,* vii.

139. Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle,* x.

140. For Bayle's irony here, especially his emphasis on the ludicrous superstitions
uncovered by news of the comet's appearance, see his adoption of the device of a
series of questions allegedly put by a worried Catholic to a Doctor of the Sorbonne.
Bayle's intentions here are discussed in Walter Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious
Controversy* (The Hague, 1965).

141. For a fuller account of the difficulties raised in the case of Hobbes, see my
article "The Ideological Context of Hobbes's Political Thought," cited in fn. 115 above.
For the case of Bayle there is a brief but usefully skeptical review article on some of
the recent work in D. P, Walker, "Recent Studies of Pierre Bayle," *The New York
Review of Books* 8:5 (23 March, 1967), 20-23.

142. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives,* ed. Andrew Clark, 2 vols. (London, 1898), I, 339.

misunderstood, and why neither of them spent any time in attempting to correct the apparent misconceptions which immediately arose and were publicized[143] about the intentions of their works. The importance of these implications is of course that they suggest how far the texts of both Hobbes and Bayle raise issues which a study simply of the texts themselves then becomes quite inadequate to resolve. If we are now led by these implications to doubt that the texts do convey in what they say what they were intended to mean, this is to adopt an interpretation on the strength of evidence quite outside the texts themselves. But if we now wish to go on insisting that the texts do mean what they say, we are now left with the problem of trying to account for the peculiar implications of this view. The point is that whichever view we now take, the text in itself is shown to be insufficient as the object of our inquiry and understanding.

Any attempt, in intellectual biography, to concentrate on the texts themselves thus completely fails to deal with the problems raised by what I have called oblique strategies. I turn now to the analogous type of inadequacy which marks the method of concentrating instead on the "idea" itself as a "unit,"[144] and so of "tracking a grand but elusive theme" either throughout a period, or even "over many centuries."[145] The danger that such an approach may simply engender empirically false claims has already been skillfully pointed out for at least one classic case of this tendency to find what has been called "spurious persistence."[146] The mistake which is involved, for example, in trying to insist that the thirteenth century and the Enlightenment were both pre-eminently "ages of faith" (and thus have much more in common than the *philosophes* themselves would have cared to admit)[147] is clearly the mistake of taking the word for the thing. For to speak of an age of faith, it has been neatly observed, may equally well be to speak of an age of submission (faith rather than argument) or an age of confidence (faith in oneself).[148] The notion that any fixed "idea" has persisted is spurious. My concern here, however, is not empirical but conceptual: not to insist that such histories can sometimes go wrong, but that they can never go right. My point is that even if we restrict the study of an "idea" to a

143. See, for Hobbes, S. I. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan* (Cambridge, 1962), and for Bayle, Howard Robinson, *Bayle the Sceptic* (New York, 1931).

144. Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being,* 15ff. sets out the notion of "unit ideas" as objects of study.

145. Sanford A. Lakoff, *Equality in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), vii.

146. The phrase was coined by Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity* (London, 1964), 191, in his discussion of Becker.

147. This is the argument of Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, 1932), esp. 8 and 30-31.

148. Gay, *Party of Humanity,* 193.

given historical period — so that the problem raised by this type of changed connotation is ruled out — there is still an underlying conceptual confusion in any attempt to focus on a idea itself as an appropriate unit of historical investigation.

Consider for example the attempt to write the history of the idea of *nobilitas* in the Renaissance — a quite plausible enterprise, very similar to many that have been carried out. The historian might begin, quite properly, by pointing out that the meaning of the term is given by the fact that it was used to refer to a particularly prized moral quality. Or he might, equally properly, point out that the same term was also used to denote membership of a particular social class. It might not in practice be clear which meaning we are to understand in a given case. When Bacon remarked, for example, that nobility adds majesty to a monarch, but diminishes power, we might, remembering his admiration for Machiavelli, think of the first meaning as readily as we might, remembering his official position, think of the second. A further problem, moreover, is raised by the fact that this ambiguity sometimes seems to have been used by Renaissance moralists in a studied way. Sometimes the aim is to insist that one might have noble qualities even if one lacked noble birth. This possibility that men might rightly be called noble "more for remembrance of their virtue than for discrepance of estates" is a frequent paradox in Renaissance moral thought.[149] But sometimes the aim is rather to insist that while nobility is a matter of attainment, it happens to be invariably connected with nobility of birth. This possibility, indeed, was understandably even more commonly pointed out.[150] It was always open to the moralist, moreover, to turn the basic ambiguity against the concept of *nobilitas* itself, in order to contrast nobility of birth with accompanying baseness of behavior. It can be argued, for example, that when More in *Utopia* speaks of the behavior of the military aristocracy as being fittingly noble, he intends to bring the whole concept of nobility into disrepute.[151]

The example is obviously excessively simplified, but it is still sufficient, I believe, to bring out both the two essential criticisms of the project of studying histories of "ideas" on which I wish to insist. First, it becomes clear that if we wish to understand a given idea, even within a given culture and at a given time, we cannot simply concentrate, à la Lovejoy, on studying the forms of words involved. For the words denoting the idea may be used,

149. Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor*, ed. S. E. Lehmberg (London, 1962), 104.

150. For example in the ambiguous discussion in Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, tr. and ed. Charles S. Singleton (New York, 1959), 28ff.

151. J. H. Hexter makes the point in "The Loom of Language and the Fabric of Imperatives: The Case of *Il Principe* and *Utopia*," *The American Historical Review* 69 (1964), 945-968.

as the example indicates, with varying and quite incompatible intentions. We cannot even hope that a sense of the context of utterance will necessarily resolve this problem. For the context, as Bacon's remark indicates, may itself be ambiguous. Rather we must study all the various situations, which may change in complex ways, in which the given form of words can logically be used — all the functions the words can serve, all the various things that can be done with them. The great mistake lies not merely in looking for the "essential meaning" of the "idea" as something which must necessarily "remain the same," but even in thinking of any "essential" meaning (to which individual writers "contribute") at all.[152] The appropriate, and famous, formula — famous to philosophers, at least — is rather that we should study not the meanings of the words, but their use. For the given idea cannot ultimately be said in this sense[153] to *have* any meaning that can take the form of a set of words which can then be excogitated and traced out over time. Rather the meaning of the idea must *be* its uses to refer in various ways.[154]

My second and explicitly critical claim clearly follows from this. If there is good reason to insist that we can only study an idea by seeing the nature of all the occasions and activities — the language games — within which it might appear, then there must be correspondingly good reason to insist that the project of studying histories of "ideas," *tout court,* must rest on a fundamental philosophical mistake. That this is indeed the case, and that it gives rise in practice to unavoidable confusions, can now be readily illustrated. The underlying confusion itself may perhaps be most conveniently characterized, by adopting an extension of the basic distinction between meaning and use, as the result of a failure to distinguish between the *occurrence* of the words (phrases or *sentences*) which denote the given idea, and the *use* of the relevant sentence by a particular agent on a particular occasion with a particular intention (*his* intention) to make a particular *statement.*[155] To

152. For this explicit statement of the assumption, see Bateson's article in *Essays in Criticism* 3 (1953), cited in fn. 2 above.

153. The implication that there are two senses of "meaning" which have been confused by this approach could perhaps be demonstrated in a manner analogous to the way in which the confusions about meaning have been pointed out in the case of Russell's theory of descriptions. On this see Alan R. White, "The 'Meaning' of Russell's Theory of Descriptions," *Analysis* 20 (1959), 7-8.

154. For the classic statement of this commitment, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953), esp. para. 43; and for its application as a means of attacking the idea of fixed meanings, see esp. para. 79 *et seq.*

155. The need for the historian to distinguish in this way between sentences and statements is suggested in a rudimentary way in R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1939), Ch. V, esp. 34-35. The classic elaboration of the distinction between sentences, and statements as sentences used to refer, is owed to P. F. Strawson, "On Referring," *Mind* 59 (1950), 320-344. For applications, see also P. F. Strawson, *An Introduction to Logical Theory* (London, 1952), esp. 4, 9-12, 210-212. I am aware, of

write the history of an idea, it may be said, is obviously to write, in effect, the history of a sentence. It is undoubtedly characteristic of such histories that statement-making agents appear more or less only because the relevant ideas — the social contract, the idea of Utopia, the great chain of being, and so on — can be shown to occur in their works, so that they can be said to have contributed to their development. What we learn from such important, the given idea may have played in the thought of any individual thought. But if this is all that even Lovejoy is really telling us, it is surely something that we could have found out or guessed for ourselves. What we cannot learn from any such history is in the first place what part, trivial or important, the given idea may have played in the thought of any individual thinker who happened to mention it, or what place, characteristic or unusual, it may have taken in the intellectual climate of any given period in which it appeared. We may perhaps learn that the expression was used at different times to answer a variety of problems. But what we still cannot learn — to cite Collingwood's very important point[156] — is *what* questions the use of the expression was thought to answer, and so what reasons there were for continuing to employ it. It follows from this that we could never grasp from such a history what *status* the given idea may have had at various times, so that we cannot eventually be said to have gained any proper historical understanding of its importance and value. And in the second place, we cannot learn from such histories either what *point* a given expression might have had for the agents who used it, or what range of uses the expression itself could sustain. And it follows from this that we can never really grasp from such a history what meanings the given expression may have had, so that we cannot eventually be said to gain from such studies any understanding even of the occurrence of the idea itself.

The nature of the criticism to be made of such histories is not merely that they seem perpetually liable in this way to lose any point. It is rather that as soon as we see there *is* no determinate idea to which various writers contributed, but only a variety of statements made with the words by a variety of different agents with a variety of intentions, then what we are seeing is equally that there *is* no history of the idea to be written, but only a history necessarily focused on the various agents who used the idea, and on their varying situations and intentions in using it. Such a history, moreover, can hardly be expected even to retain the form of the history of an idea. If an

course, that the distinction has been criticized by W. V. Quine, "Mr. Strawson on Logical Theory," *Mind* 62 (1953), 433-451, on the grounds (amongst other things) that the "statements" proposed here look like reified entities. I dare to hope that the historical examples themselves help to cast doubt on the validity of such a criticism. But cf. also the more formal defense of Strawson's theory in J. Xenakis, "Sentence and Statement," *Analysis* 16 (1955), 91-94.

156. See Collingwood, *Autobiography*, Ch. V: "Question and Answer," esp. 31ff.

historian, for example, who studies the idea of Utopia comes to see that the uses to which the idea has been put are bewilderingly various, then it would seem little more than a very misleading fetishism of words to go on trying to make any sort of historical study out of focusing on the "idea" of Utopia itself — or progress, equality, sovereignty, justice, natural law, and so on and on. For the persistence of such expressions tells us nothing reliable at all about the persistence of the questions which the expressions may have been used to answer, or of the intentions generally of the various writers who may have used the expressions. The only history to be written is thus a history of the various statements made with the given expression. This — rather than the history of the sentence itself — would of course be an almost absurdly ambitious enterprise. But it would at least be conceptually proper, whereas the sentence itself, apart from the statements which various agents may choose to make with it, is simply not a proper object of study — not even by the logician, it has been argued,[157] and certainly not by the historian.

IV

The second of the two methodologies which I mentioned at the outset may well appear at this point to reveal decisive advantages as a way of studying the history of ideas. If it is conceptually improper, in the ways I have suggested, to concentrate simply on a given idea or a given text in itself, perhaps the best approach does consist — as the methodologists themselves increasingly insist — in recognizing instead that our ideas constitute "a *response* to more immediate circumstances,"[158] and that we should in consequence study not the texts in themselves, but rather "the *context* of other happenings which *explains* them."[159] It is true that this alternative methodology has been very consciously resisted, in particular by historians of philosophy and by political scientists, both anxious to insist on the autonomy of textual study. For if the point of studying the classics of these disciplines is conceived in terms of their "timeless wisdom," then it is absolutely essential, as I have already hinted, to be able to insist that even though they may

157. For it is a crucial implication of Strawson's theory, of course, that truth and falsity are functions of statements, not sentences. It has been questioned whether these distinctions apply as well in logic as they do in ordinary discourse. See E. J. Lemmon, "Sentences, Statements and Propositions" in *British Analytical Philosophy,* ed. Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (London, 1966), 87-107. Since my concern here, however, is obviously only with ordinary discourse, I am not concerned with the very complex issues thus raised, nor is my use of the distinctions affected by the possible validity of such criticisms.

158. D. Crabtree, "Political Theory" in *Political Science,* ed. H. Victor Wiseman (London, 1967), 158. My italics.

159. J. Higham, "Intellectual History and its Neighbors," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15 (1954), 341. My italics.

be "grounded in the social reality" of their age, they "are also ageless,"[160] "surpassing" the need to consider any such contingent "reality."[161] The whole point is endangered unless the "historical, biographical and logical baggage which surrounds the 'Great Books' " can if necessary be "ruthlessly thrown overboard."[162] Nevertheless, the advantage of insisting instead that the baggage of "social context" will be crucially needed on the voyage seems clear. To adopt this alternative approach is indeed to put oneself in a position to avoid or even to solve many of the exegetical problems I have sought to raise. A knowledge of the social context of a given text seems at least to offer considerable help in avoiding the anachronistic mythologies I have tried to anatomize. And I have already to some extent invoked the need for such knowledge in considering the conceptual inadequacy of purely textual studies. Thus if it is true that an understanding of any idea requires an understanding of all the occasions and activities in which a given agent might have used the relevant form of words, it seems clear that at least a part of such understanding must lie in grasping what sort of society the given author was writing for and trying to persuade. And if it is true that the understanding of a text presupposes the capacity to grasp any oblique strategies it may contain, it is again clear that the relevant information (as I have already sought to prove in the case of Hobbes and Bayle) must at least in part be concerned with the constraints of the given social situation.

The belief that this method of "contextual reading"[163] does provide the appropriate methodology for the history of ideas, literary as well as philosophical, appears in practice to be becoming increasingly accepted.[164] It is usual now for even the most synoptic histories of classic texts to include both some concession about knowing "something of social and political conditions,"[165] and some gesture toward paying "due regard" to "the historical conditions" which "produced" the texts themselves.[166] And the systematic adoption of this approach has of course produced its own distinctive and increasingly distinguished literature. In the histories of economic and even scientific thought, the method has been classically applied in the form

160. Plamenatz, *Man and Society,* vol. I, xxi.

161. Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers,* vol. I (tr. London, 1962), viii.

162. Hacker in *American Political Science Review* 48 (1954), 786.

163. The phrase is Bateson's summary of his recommended methodology in "The Functions of Criticism." See *Essays in Criticism* 3 (1953), 19.

164. Even "something of shibboleth": see J. G. A. Pocock's remarks, à propos Raab's book, on this point in a review article in *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* 12 (1965), 265-296. The approach there recommended is much more like the one I wish here to advocate (see esp. 267-269).

165. Plamenatz, *Man and Society,* vol. I, ix.

166. Hacker, *Political Theory,* vii.

of the claim that the social context of Puritan attitudes explains the rise both of the spirit of capitalist enterprise[167] and of scientific inquiry[168] in the seventeenth century. Similarly, in the histories of social, ethical, and political ideas, much has been written about the theory that modern developments in these spheres of thought mirrored and followed the changes and developments of the social context. Such histories usually begin with the social structure of the Renaissance,[169] and reach their climax with that of seventeenth-century England. The hero of the story is thus Thomas Hobbes, the first as well as the greatest of the distinctively bourgeois philosophers.[170] And the truth of the story is at this point best corroborated, it is said, by considering the position of James Harrington, the first theorist of the "opportunity state."[171] (We are still faced, of course, with the purely historical embarrassment that the commentators have been unable to agree on whether the class of which Harrington was the ideologist was rising or falling in power. But it is essential to recognize that even Professors Tawney and Trevor-Roper agreed on one essential point about the gentry: that Harrington was "their champion,"[172] and that the key to understanding what Harrington must have been saying is thus to be found in the study of the social structure which he analyzed.) When this point in the story is reached, moreover, the rest of its development, up to the time when capitalism is said to have caused the characteristic alienation of the intellectuals, typically consists of a story essentially about whether and how far each classic writer accepted and so reflected the new social structure. The explanation of Locke's thought is thus that he accepted the new structure with enthusiasm: this explains what he has to say about property.[173] The explanation of Bolingbroke's thought is that he was more enthusiastic about the social structure which was passing away: this explains his "politics of nostalgia."[174] The explanation of Adam

167. The classic study in English (based in part, it has been argued, on a misunderstanding of the nature of the connection Weber himself claimed to have established) is R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1926).

168. Here the classic post-Weberian study is R. K. Merton, "Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth-Century England," *Osiris* 4 (1938), 360-632.

169. See the literature on Renaissance Humanism, and especially on More (from Kautsky to Ames). For bibliographical references, see my article, "More's *Utopia*," *Past and Present* 38 (1967), esp. 153-155.

170. For a bibliography for this judgment, as well as a challenge to it, see Keith Thomas, "The Social Origins of Hobbes's Political Thought," *Hobbes Studies*, ed. K. C. Brown (London, 1965), 185-236, esp. 185-186n.

171. So called by Macpherson in *Possessive Individualism*, Ch. IV.

172. H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The Gentry, 1540-1640," *Economic History Review Supplements*, 1, 50.

173. See Macpherson's chapter in *Possessive Individualism*.

174. Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and his Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (London, 1968). See esp. Ch. III.

Smith's thought is that he accepted the new structure, but for reasons unconcerned with its own ends: this explains the apparent contradictions as well as the real (moral) message of his thought.[175]

If it is true that the relations between the context of any given statement (or any other action)[176] and the statement itself do take the form, in this way, of a relation between antecedent causal conditions and their results, then it is clear that the independent life of ideas in history must be correspondingly in danger.[177] One paradoxical result of the widespread acceptance of this methodology of contextual study has in consequence been to panic the historians of ideas into the suspicion that their subject may not really "exist" after all.[178] And the main result has been to commit even the best current practitioners to a formula which quite simply begs all the questions: the social context, it is said, helps to cause the formation and change of ideas; but the ideas in turn help to cause the formation and change of the social context.[179] Thus the historian of ideas ends up by presenting himself with nothing better than the time-honored puzzle about the chicken and the egg, while the more hard-headed historian of "reality" congratulates himself on having devalued such an unprofitable exercise.[180]

It is my essential contention, however, that none of this panic or equivocation is at all well-judged, since the methodology of contextual reading, in both its Marxist and Namierite versions (they are oddly similar) can itself be shown to rest on a fundamental mistake about the nature of the relations between action and circumstance.[181] Despite the possibility, therefore, that

175. Joseph Cropsey, *Polity and Economy* (The Hague, 1957).

176. The fact that to make a statement *is* to perform an action has been most clearly emphasized by J. L. Austin in his discussion of how to *do* things in and by saying things. Cf. fn. 193, below.

177. Cf. the parallel and immensely influential attempt by L. B. Namier to use the concept of a pre-existing political structure of interests both to explain political behavior and to dismiss as of secondary significance in such an explanation the force of the ideas by which the actors might seem to have been moved. The ideas themselves ("flapdoodle") are treated as at best the reflections and attempted rationalizations of the given structure of power, and thus of no independent interest in the attempt to explain the pursuit of power itself. This classic interpretation, as applied to eighteenth-century England, has been much criticized on the grounds that the "life of the mind" has been left out. But the precise nature of the conceptual error involved in the Namierite type of explanation has not I think so far received any proper *philosophical* attention. Recent critics have sought instead to raise the ghost of "the influence of Bolingbroke," surely a ghost definitely laid by Namier himself. See Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "Sir Lewis Namier Considered," *Journal of British Studies* 2 (1962), 28-55.

178. See for example Crane Brinton, "Introduction" to *English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Torchbook edn., New York, 1962), 3.

179. See Gay, *Party of Humanity,* xiii.

180. As L. B. Namier does in his essay "Human Nature in Politics" in *Personalities and Powers* (London, 1955), 1-7.

181. For a parallel assertion concerning the relations between belief and action see Alasdair MacIntyre, "A Mistake about Causality in Social Science" in *Philosophy,*

a study of social context may *help* in the understanding of a text, which I have conceded, the fundamental assumption of the contextual methodology, that the ideas of a given text should be understood *in terms of* its social context, can be shown to be mistaken, and to serve in consequence not as the guide to understanding, but as the source of further very prevalent confusions in the history of ideas.

The fact that a knowledge of the context of a given text does *help* in understanding it reflects the fact, surely undeniable, that for the performance of any action — and the making of statements is surely to be appraised as a *performance*[182] — it will always be possible at least in principle to discover a set of conditions either such that the action (the statement made) might have been different or might not have occurred in their absence, or even such that the occurrence of the action might have been predicted from their presence. There seems no question that for every statement there must be *some* explanatory context, for every action *some* set of antecedent causal conditions.[183] To concentrate instead on the alleged affective states of the agent as the means to provide an *alternative* (teleological) mode of explantion of a given statement or other action seems at the very least to ignore[184] a good deal of information which is bound to be relevant to any attempted explanation. Conversely, the hypothesis that the context of a text can be used to explain its content may be said to illustrate, but also to gain strength from, the more general and increasingly accepted hypothesis that actions performed at will are to be accounted for by the ordinary processes of causal explanation.[185]

Politics and Society, Second Series, ed. Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Oxford, 1962), 48-70. It will readily be seen how much I owe to this discussion. As will also be clear, however, I do not wholly agree with Professor MacIntyre's formulation, and still less with his re-formulation in "The Idea of a Social Science," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* supplementary volume 41 (1967), 95-114.

182. For this distinction between actions and performances (the latter as actions taking time) see Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London, 1963), esp. Ch. VIII.

183. I am aware that this comes very close to raising one of the traditional difficulties about determinism. I am content, however, that it does not in fact raise the issue, and that I do not here need to do so.

184. Which seems very much to happen in such analyses as Raziel Abelson, "Because I Want To," *Mind* 74 (1965), 540-553, with its demand for "expunging pseudo-mechanistic concepts from the purposive language of human affairs" (541).

185. One of the best recent discussions is Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," *Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1963), 685-700. See also A. J. Ayer, "Man as a Subject for Science" in *Philosophy, Politics and Society,* Third Series, ed. Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Oxford, 1967), 6-24. And see Alasdair MacIntyre, who has changed his mind on this point, "The Antecedents of Action" in *British Analytical Philosophy,* ed. Williams and Montefiore (London, 1966), 205-225. See generally the excellent bibliography on this topic now available in Alan R. White, ed., *The Philosophy of Action* (Oxford, 1968).

It may still be strenuously doubted, however, whether a knowledge of the causes of an action is really equivalent to an understanding of the action itself. For as well as — and quite apart from — the fact that such an understanding does presuppose a grasp of antecedent causal *conditions* of the action taking place, it might equally be said to presuppose a grasp of the *point* of the action for the agent who performed it. It is a striking fact about current discussions of the claim that actions are caused that they tend to be mounted in terms of such excessively simple and routine examples — always things like putting on one's coat,[186] never things like writing the *Iliad*[187] — that the question of the *point* of the action is very easily made to seem wholly transparent, or quite unimportant. And it is a further striking fact that the examples which have made it seem most plausible to suppose that puzzles about actions may be resolved simply by stating the conditions of their occurrence have often been those in which a lawyer would speak of diminished responsibility, and in which we might more colloquially speak of behaving *pointlessly* — cases of being drunk or drugged, of losing one's temper, and so on.[188]

It is true of course that a somewhat scholastic device can be applied at this point to rescue the claim that even fully intended and complex actions are best understood as the results of causes. For a motive or an intention, it is said, is *itself* a cause, in the sense that it is antecedent to and contingently connected with the resulting action.[189] I may intend to do something, but never do it. This is said to discredit any Wittgensteinian notion to the effect that there can be any closer "logical" connection (perhaps of a syllogistic character)[190] between intentions and actions. This riposte has been regarded as deadly,[191] but it appears to rest on two crucial misconceptions about the procedures by which we may be said to come to an understanding at least of that subset of actions — the making of statements — with which I am here concerned. It is thus my central claim that a consideration of these two misconceptions in turn will serve to discredit the notion that a study of the contextual conditions of making statements can in any sense be regarded as a sufficient or even appropriate methodology for the understanding of statements made.

186. See the sorts of examples in Ayer's essay cited in fn. 185, e.g., at 16-17.

187. An instance of a performance, according to Kenny's typology. See *Action, Emotion and Will*, 165.

188. See, for the use of this sort of example, MacIntyre "Antecedents of Action," e.g., 222-223.

189. For a skillful performance of this manoeuvre, see Ayer's essay cited above.

190. For the use of the practical syllogism to elucidate intentionality, see the discussion, to which I am much indebted, in G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford, 1957).

191. See for example T. F. Daveney, "Intentions and Causes," *Analysis* 27 (1966-67), 23-28.

First, the notion that intentions are contingently connected with actions seems to rest on a pun or confusion between two different senses in which the concept of intention can validly be applied. Suppose that Defoe, in writing about toleration, had stated, as he might have done, his intention to compose a whole series of pamphlets on the subject. As he never did so, what we have here is a stated intention unaccompanied by any resulting action: the best proof that the relation between the two concepts must be of a contingent, and so can be of a causal, character. Suppose however that Defoe had stated, as again he might have done, that his intention in the pamphlet which he did write on toleration was to promote this cause by parodying the arguments against it. What we have here is an intention not antecedent to and contingently related with his actual statements at all: rather the statement of intention serves to characterize the action itself. And it is purely scholastic to reply that even this intention must precede the action, and thus might still be treated as an antecedent condition. For statements of intention of this kind can quite validly be made to characterize an action *after* it has been performed. The distinction, in short, is between an intention *to do x* which may never successfully issue in an action — though it is not made clear what we should say if such prior statements of intention *never* issued in actions — and an intention *in doing x,* which not merely presupposed the occurrence of the relevant action, but is logically connected with it in the sense that it serves to characterize its *point.* The significance of this claim for my present argument will by now be clear. Every statement made or other action performed must presuppose an intention to have done it — call it a cause if you like — but also an intention in doing it, which cannot be a cause, but which must be grasped if the action itself is to be correctly characterized and so understood.

It might perhaps be claimed, however, that this argument is insufficient to cope with the strongest form of the contextual thesis.[192] It is in effect an argument about what a given agent may have *meant by* making a given statement. But the claim made on behalf of the study of contexts was precisely that they can in themselves serve to yield what the text must mean. This only points, however, to the second mistaken assumption on which this methodology appears to rest, the assumption that "meaning" and "understanding" are in fact strictly correlative terms. It has been classically demonstrated, however, by J. L. Austin, that the understanding of statements pre-

192. It might also be claimed, much more obviously as well as validly, that these remarks go very little way toward arguing a case against the assumption that the understanding of actions is essentially a matter of seeing the results of causes. It is true, of course, that the debate itself is marked by a high degree of assertion rather than argument. But I do hope shortly to complete a more systematic discussion of the subject, with particular reference both to the study of history, and to the use of historical examples.

supposes a grasp not merely of the meaning of the given utterance, but also of what Austin labelled its intended illocutionary force.[193] This claim is crucially relevant to my present argument in two respects. First, this further question about what a given agent may be *doing* in uttering his utterance is not a question about meaning at all, but about a force co-ordinate with the meaning of the utterance itself, *and yet* essential to grasp in order to understand it.[194] And second, even if we could decode what a given statement must mean from a study of its social context, it follows that this would still leave us without any grasp of its intended illocutionary force, and so eventually without any real understanding of the given statement after all. The point is, in short, that an unavoidable lacuna remains: even if the study of the social context of texts could serve to *explain* them, this would not amount to the same as providing the means to *understand* them.

This central claim — that the grasp of force as well as meaning is essential to the understanding of texts, and yet cannot be supplied from the study of their social context — can readily be illustrated in practice. Suppose an historian comes across the following statement in a Renaissance moral tract: "a prince must learn how not to be virtuous." Suppose that the sense and the intended reference of the statement are both perfectly clear. Suppose even that this clarity is the result of a study of the entire social context of the utterance — a study which might have revealed, say, that virtue in princes had in fact led to their ruin at the time. Now suppose two alternative truths about the statement itself: either that such cynical advice was frequently offered in Renaissance moral tracts; or that scarcely anyone had ever publicly offered such cynical advice as a precept before. It is obvious that any commentator wishing to understand the statement must find out which of these alternatives is nearer the truth. If the answer is the first alternative, the intended force of the utterance itself in the mind of the agent who uttered it can only have been to endorse or emphasize an accepted moral attitude. But if the answer is the second, the intended force of the utterance becomes more like that of rejecting or repudiating an established moral commonplace. Now it happens in fact that something like each of these historical claims has been advanced in turn by historians of ideas about the statement to this

193. See the reconstruction of Austin's William James Lectures for 1955 by J. O. Urmson, published as *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962).

194. I am aware, of course, that the claim that illocutionary force is coordinate with, rather than a part of, meaning, has been disputed. See L. J. Cohen, "Do Illocutionary Forces Exist?" *The Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1964), 118-137. I cannot accept this claim: (i) since again I dare to believe that examples — such as those I mention here — of any complexity must tell against it, and (ii) since there seems to me to be more formal reasons for doubting the claim. These I have mentioned in a forthcoming article, "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts," *The Philosophical Quarterly*.

effect to be found in Machiavelli's *Prince*.[195] Now is it obvious not merely that only one of these claims can be correct, but also that the decision on which one *is* correct will very greatly affect any understanding of what Machiavelli can have been intending to achieve. Potentially the question is whether he intended to subvert or to sustain one of the more fundamental moral commonplaces of political life in his time. But while such a decision may be said to be crucial in this way to understanding Machiavelli, it is neither the sort of decision which could ever be arrived at from studying the statement itself and its meaning (which is pellucid enough), nor from any amount of study of its social context, for the context itself is evidently capable of yielding *both* of the alternative illocutionary acts, and so can hardly be invoked to reject either in favor of the other. It must follow that in order to be said to have *understood* any statement made in the past, it cannot be enough to grasp what was said, or even to grasp that the meaning of what was said may have changed. It cannot in consequence be enough to study either what the statement meant, or even what its context may be alleged to show about what it must have meant. The further point which must still be grasped for any given statement is *how* what was said was meant, and thus what *relations* there may have been between various different statements even within the same general context.

I have illustrated this claim about the insufficiency and even the potentially wholly misleading character of contextual as well as purely textual study only from the simplest possible type of case. But it is also arguable (as I have elsewhere sought to demonstrate)[196] that Austin's own discussion of illocutionary force needs to be extended, in certain more oblique ways, to deal with the identification of less overt and perhaps even non-avowable illocutionary acts. We need, for example, to be able to deal with the obvious but very elusive fact that a *failure* to use a particular argument may always be a polemical matter, and thus a required guide to the understanding of the relevant utterance. Consider, for example, the failure of Locke to use any historical arguments in the *Second Treatise*. Since the discussion of political principles in seventeenth-century England virtually hinged on the study of rival versions of the English past,[197] a strong case could be made for saying that Locke's failure to mention these issues constituted perhaps the most radical and original feature of his whole argument. As a clue to the under-

195. See, in favor of the first alternative, Allan H. Gilbert, *Machiavelli's 'Prince' and its Forerunners* (Durham, 1938), and, in favor of the second, Felix Gilbert, "The Humanist Concept of the Prince and *The Prince* of Machiavelli," *The Journal of Modern History* 11 (1939), 449-483. The statement itself occurs in *The Prince*, Ch. 15.
196. In my forthcoming article, cited in fn. 194, above.
197. Here I merely assert this claim. Elsewhere I have attempted to substantiate it in detail. See my article, "History and Ideology in the English Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 8 (1965), 151-178.

standing of Locke's text, this is obviously important: but it is a clue which
the study of the social context (still less the text itself) could never be made
to yield. Similarly, we need to be able to cope with the intractable possibility
that certain of the classic philosophical texts may contain quite a large
number of what contemporaries would instantly have seen to be jokes. Plato
and Hobbes perhaps spring to mind: again, this would obviously be an
important clue to the understanding of their texts, but, again, it is hard to
see how either of the approved methodologies can help. And similarly, ques-
tions of allusion and oblique reference generally clearly raise important prob-
lems of recognition and correspondingly obvious dangers of misunderstand-
ing any text in which they figure prominently. These and other such problems
are obviously too intrinsically complex to illustrate briefly here, but they may
already serve to underline the central point, which the simpler examples
have, I think, sufficiently made clear: that to concentrate either on studying
a text in itself, or on studying its social context as a means of determining
the meaning of the text, is to make it impossible to recognize — let alone
to solve — some of the most difficult issues about the conditions for under-
standing texts.

<p style="text-align:center">V</p>

If my argument so far has been correct, two positive and general conclu-
sions can now be shown to follow from it. The first concerns the appropriate
method by which to study the history of ideas. On the one hand, it must
be a mistake even to try either to write intellectual biographies concentrating
on the works of a given writer, or to write histories of ideas tracing the
morphology of a given concept over time. Both these types of study (not to
mention the pedagogic histories of thought which combine their demerits)
are necessarily misconceived. On the other hand, it does not follow, as is
sometimes claimed,[198] that no particular way of studying the history of
ideas is any more satisfactory than any other. My first positive conclusion
is rather that the whole trend of my argument points to an alternative
methodology which need not be open to any of the criticisms I have so far
advanced. The understanding of texts, I have sought to insist, presupposes
the grasp both of what they were intended to mean, and how this meaning
was intended to be taken. It follows from this that 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

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198. See for example the Introduction to Brinton, *English Political Thought in the
Nineteenth Century,* on the "fortunate" absence of any agreed methodology, 1.

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. It follows that the essential aim, in any attempt to understand the utterances themselves, must be to recover this complex intention on the part of the author. And it follows from this that the appropriate methodology for the history of ideas must be concerned, first of all, to delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance, and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer. Once the appropriate focus of the study is seen in this way to be essentially linguistic and the appropriate methodology is seen in consequence to be concerned in this way with the recovery of intentions, the study of all the facts about the social context of the given text can then take its place as a part of this linguistic enterprise. The problem about the way in which these facts are handled in the methodology of contextual study is that they get fitted into an inappropriate framework. The "context" mistakenly gets treated as the determinant of what is said. It needs rather to be treated as an ultimate framework for helping to decide what conventionally recognizable meanings, in a society of *that* kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate. (In this way, as I have sought to prove in the case of Hobbes and Bayle, the context itself can be used as a sort of court of appeal for assessing the relative plausibility of incompatible ascriptions of intentionality.) I do not suggest, of course, that this conclusion is in itself particularly novel.[199] What I do claim is that the critical survey I have conducted may be said to establish and prove the case for this methodology — to establish it not as a suggestion, an aesthetic preference, or a piece of academic imperialism, but as a matter of conceptual propriety, a matter of seeing what the necessary conditions are for the understanding of utterances.

My second general conclusion concerns the value of studying the history of ideas. The most exciting possibility here, which I cannot now explore, but which I have touched on in discussing both the causes of action and the conditions for understanding statements, is the possibility of a dialogue between philosophical discussion and historical evidence. It is clear that the distinctions which have been established in the debates over the causes and meanings of actions are not merely of use to historians, but essential

199. A similar commitment is suggested (rather than fully *argued,* it seems to me) in John C. Greene, "Objectives and Methods in Intellectual History," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44 (1957-58), 59.

for historians to grasp, although — with damaging consequences — they have not so far shown much consciousness of this fact. The point here, however, is that the converse of this may also be true. The understanding of statements uttered in the past clearly raises special issues, and might yield special insights, especially about the conditions under which languages change. The philosophers have perhaps been rather slow to take advantage of the possibly very large signficance of this fact, both for the analysis of meaning and understanding,[200] as well as for the discussion of the relations between belief and action, and in general over the whole question of the sociology of knowledge.

My main conclusion, however, is that the critique I have mounted already serves to suggest a much more obvious and less remote point about the philosophical value of studying the history of ideas. On the one hand, it has I think become clear that any attempt to justify the study of the subject in terms of the "perennial problems" and "universal truths" to be learned from the classic texts must amount to the purchase of justification at the expense of making the subject itself foolishly and needlessly naive. Any statement, as I have sought to show, is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend. The vital implication here is not merely that the classic texts cannot be concerned with our questions and answers, but only with their own. There is also the further implication that — to revive Collingwood's way of putting it — there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, with as many different answers as there are questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners. There is in consequence simply no hope of seeking the point of studying the history of ideas in the attempt to learn directly from the classic authors by focusing on their attempted answers to supposedly timeless questions.

This overwhelming element of contingency in the alleged answers provided by the classic texts has freqently been emphasized, but I believe it can be shown, in the light of the critique I have tried to mount, that the precise nature of the point to be made about this issue has been misunderstood by Collingwood as well as by his critics. Collingwood's own misunderstanding derived, I think, from the fact that he chose to link his attack on "perennial questions" with an excessively strong thesis to the effect that we cannot even ask if a given philosopher "solved the problem he set himself," since we can

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200. That a development of such a rapport might be extremely fruitful has already been both suggested and demonstrated in L. Jonathan Cohen, *The Diversity of Meaning* (London, 1962), esp. Ch. I.

only see what the problem was for him if he did solve it. Thus "the fact that we can identify his problem is proof that he has solved it; for we can only know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution."[201] But this merely seems to be a version of the confusion I have already sought to point out between an intention *to do* something and an intention *in doing* something. It is true that unless I do perform the action or solve the problem which I intended *to* do, then it can never be known what my problem was — for there will simply be no evidence. It does not follow, however, that you cannot ever know what I intended *to* do unless I did it — for I may have stated, even if not executed, my intention. Nor does it follow that you cannot know what my intention *in* trying to do something was unless I succeeded in doing it — for it is often quite easy to characterize (to decode the intention *in*) an attempted but wholly unsuccessful action. (It may be quite clear, for example, that Defoe intended a parody in writing his *Experiment,* even though the intention was so disastrously misunderstood that we might well say of the intended action that it was unsuccessfully performed.) A further misunderstanding, however, seems to be revealed by those who have criticized this attack of Collingwood's on the idea of perennial problems. It has even been insisted, for example, in an important recent discussion, that when "Lenin says that every cook ought to be a politician and Plato that men ought to restrict themselves to the exercise of their special function in the state," then this *is* for Plato and Lenin to be concerned with the "same problem," so that it is a merely a priori judgment to deny that any perennial issue is involved.[202] But the claim on which historians of ideas have insisted has not merely been that there may be some semantic sameness of this kind, but that the problem is the same in the sense that we may hope directly to learn from a study of the solution Plato offers of it. It is this sameness, indeed, which is said to constitute the whole reason for studying Plato's *Republic*.[203] But it is in this sense that the problem simply cannot be the same in both cases at all. For if we are to learn from Plato, it is not enough that the discussion should seem, at a very abstract level, to pose a question relevant to us. It is also essential that the answer Plato gave should seem relevant and indeed applicable (if he is "right") to our own culture and period. As soon as we begin to study Plato's actual arguments, however, the sense in which the issue of participation is the same for himself and ourselves dissolves into absurdity. What we are most likely to learn from Plato is that the cook should not participate

201. Collingwood, *Autobiography,* 70.
202. John Passmore, "The Idea of a History of Philosophy" in *The Historiography of the History of Philosophy, History and Theory, Beiheft* 5 (1965), 12.
203. See for example the claims in Robert S. Brumbaugh, *Plato for the Modern Age* (New York, 1962) to the effect that Plato "offers a relevant contribution" to our problems (216, etc.).

because he is a slave. It is hard to see what problems of participation in modern representative democracies are likely to be advanced by the application of this particular piece of perennial wisdom, decisive through the argument would undoubtedly have seemed to Plato himself.

This reformulation and insistence on the claim that there are no perennial problems in philosophy, from which we can hope to learn directly through studying the classic texts, is not of course intended as a denial of the possibility that there may be propositions (perhaps in mathematics) the truth of which is wholly tenseless. (This does not yet amount to showing that their truth is any the less contingent for that.) It is not even a denial of the possibility that there may be apparently perennial *questions,* if these are sufficiently abstractly framed. All I wish to insist is that whenever it is claimed that the point of the historical study of such questions is that we may learn directly from the *answers,* it will be found 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 after all. More crudely: we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves.

It is by no means my conclusion, however, that because the philosophical value at present claimed for the history of ideas rests on a misconception, it must follow that the subject has no philosophical value in itself at all. For it is the very fact that the classic texts are concerned with their own quite alien problems, and not the presumption that they are somehow concerned with our own problems as well, which seems to me to give not the lie but the key to the indispensable value of studying the history of ideas. The classic texts, especially in social, ethical, and political thought, help to reveal — if we let them — not the essential sameness, but rather the essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political commitments. It is in this, moreover, that their essential philosophical, even moral, value can be seen to lie. There is a tendency (sometimes explicitly urged, as by Hegel, as a mode of proceeding) to suppose that the best, not merely the inescapable, point of vantage from which to survey the ideas of the past must be that of our present situation, because it is by definition the most highly evolved. Such a claim cannot survive a recognition of the fact that historical differences over fundamental issues may reflect differences of intention and convention rather than anything like a competition over a community of values, let alone anything like an evolving perception of the Absolute. To recognize, moreover, that our own society is no different from any other in having its own local beliefs and arrangements of social and political life is already to have reached a quite different and, I should wish to argue, a very much more salutary point of vantage. A knowledge of the history of such ideas can then serve to show the extent to which those features of our own arrangements which

we may be disposed to accept as traditional or even "timeless" truths[204] may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history and social structure. To discover from the history of thought that there are in fact no such timeless concepts, but only the various different concepts which have gone with various different societies, is to discover a general truth not merely about the past but about ourselves as well. Furthermore, it is a commonplace — we are all Marxists to this extent — that our own society places unrecognized constraints upon our imaginations. It deserves, then, to become a commonplace that the historical study of the ideas of other societies should be undertaken as the indispensable and the irreplacable means of placing limits on those constraints. The allegation that the history of ideas consists of nothing more than "outworn metaphysical notions," which is frequently advanced at the moment, with terrifying parochialism, as a reason for ignoring such a history, would then come to be seen as the very reason for regarding such histories as indispensably "relevant," not because crude "lessons" can be picked out of them, but because the history itself provides a lesson in self-knowledge. To demand from the history of thought a solution to our own immediate problems is thus to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error. But to learn from the past — and we cannot otherwise learn it at all — the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements, is to learn the key to self-awareness itself.[205]

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204. For the explicit insistence that "the central problems of politics are timeless," see for example Hacker, *Political Theory,* 20.

205. I am very grateful to the following for sending me their critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and for pointing out a number of mistakes: F. H. Hahn, M. Mandelbaum, J. G. A. Pocock, J. W. Burrow, M. H. Black, and J. A. Thompson. I owe a particular debt to John Dunn, and it will readily be seen that my own discussion owes a great deal to his article, "The Identity of the History of Ideas," *Philosophy* 43 (1968).