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THE IDENTITY OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

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Two types of criticism are frequently levelled at the history of ideas in general[1] and the history of political theory in particular. The first is very much that of historians practising in other fields; that it is written as a saga in which all the great deeds are done by entities which could not, in principle, *do* anything. In it, Science is always wrestling with Theology, Empiricism with Rationalism, monism with dualism, evolution with the Great Chain of Being, artifice with nature, Politik with political moralism. Its protagonists are never humans, but only reified abstractions—or, if humans by inadvertence, humans only as the loci of these abstractions. The other charge, one more frequently levelled by philosophers, is that it is insensitive to the distinctive features of ideas, unconcerned with, or more often ineffectual in its concern with, truth and falsehood, its products more like intellectual seed-catalogues than adequate studies of thought. In short it is characterised by a persistent tension between the threats of falsity in its history and incompetence in its philosophy.[2]

At first sight both these charges seem plausible. One might well suppose that the status of propositions about the history of thought would be at issue both in the accuracy of their location of a particular event in the past and in the adequacy of their understanding of the nature of the event so located. Statements about a type of event in the past, statements that event X took place at time P, may be mistaken in their claims that (the event that took place at time P) was an event of X-type or that (an event of X-type) *did* take place at time P. Concentration on the identification of some types of event (e.g. in the history of ideas, the subtler sorts of analysis of classics of philosophy) may well lead to greater concern for analytical complexity and force than for mere historicity,[3] and concentration on mere historicity may well lead to a shabby sort of level of understanding of what it was that did exist in the past. In this way the

two types of criticism can readily be seen as the advocacy of different forms of enquiry within the common subject-matter. This would make the issue between them not one of truth or falsity but merely of the tactical choice between competing simplifications. The cartographic metaphor is clearly apt here. It is not convenient to attempt to represent all conceivably replicable features of a geographical environment on any single map. But this tells us nothing of the ontological limitations of cartography. Maps are maps, not regrettably ineffectual surrogates for physical environments. And if such a choice between competing evils is necessary, it must be equally legitimate to represent it as a choice between competing goods. This painless resolution is in fact that which most practitioners adopt (in so far, that is, as they see any need for resolution; this is, at worst, for them a matter of discounting risks; not, of course, a matter of making statements which are deliberately false, historically or philosophically). After one has chosen the aspect of a subject-matter which most concerns one, the criticisms of those whose interest in it is very different are discounted. If choice is necessary and some sort of failure certain, then one *should* plainly choose to discount the costs of the type of failure one has chosen. Such axioms about the necessary limitations of human skills are nothing but the most ordinary common sense.

What I wish principally to argue in this paper is that the costs of such self-abnegation are much higher than is normally recognised; that the connection between an adequate philosophical account of the notions held by an individual in the past and an accurate historical account of these notions is an intimate one; that both historical specificity and philosophical delicacy are more likely to be attained if they are pursued together, than if one is deserted for the other at an early stage of the investigation. In other words, I wish to claim that the disagreements over the appropriate subject-matter and form of explanation for the history of ideas, though they are indeed persuasions to choose to examine one form of description of intellectual acts in the past rather than another, are also something more. What is in question is not merely a choice between true (or false) stories but a problem intrinsic to the attempt to tell stories about this type of data. More precisely, I wish to claim: 1, that the completion of both types of investigation is a necessary preliminary to the construction of an indefeasible explanation of either type; 2, that a sensitive exercise of both types of explanation and a realisation of the sort of problems which an audience would have in following the story will tend to produce a convergence of tactic in this pursuit; that a rational explanation of a past philosophical dilemma, a causal explanation of a past philosopher's enterprise and

an account of either of these rendered intelligible to an ignorant layman will display a considerable symmetry of form and that most of the unsatisfactory features of the history of ideas as written comes from its notable lack of resemblance to any such form. I hope to make these somewhat cloudy notions clearer in the final sections of this paper.

There is nothing very obscure about the notion that much of the history of ideas as written displays a certain philosophical crassness, whether or not this is true. But what exactly are we to make of the complaint mentioned above about the 'bloodlessness' of the history of ideas? I shall attempt to dramatise this charge in what follows, in order to make its appeal more obvious.[4] The point, in essence, is simple enough. Apart from odd examples in the history of religious development or scientific discovery, few branches of the history of ideas have been written as the history of an *activity*. Complicated structures of ideas, arranged in a manner approximating as closely as may be (frequently closer than the evidence permits) to deductive systems have been examined at different points in time or their morphology traced over the centuries. Reified reconstructions of a great man's more accessible notions have been compared with those of other great men; hence the weird tendency of much writing, in the history of political thought more especially, to be made up of what propositions in what great books remind the author of what propositions in what other great books. Key principles of the explanatory thought-systems of social groups, of communities, and of whole countries have been pursued through the centuries. As a make-weight to this type of analysis, we have biographies of great thinkers which identify the central arguments of their more important works, sketch in their social background in some detail and expatiate upon their merits or moral relevance to the present day. Finally we have formal philosophical analyses of the works of great philosophers or scientists which tell us what Hobbes's theory of obligation or Plato's theory of justice or Galileo's theory of motion is and how far we should accept it.[5] All of these enterprises are recognised, and properly recognised, as forming part of a pursuit which can be labelled as the 'history of ideas'. Yet none of them is necessarily bound to (and few ever in fact do) provide any sort of historical account of an activity which we would recognise, in common sense terms, as 'thinking'. The history of thought as it is characteristically written is not a history of men battling to achieve a coherent ordering of their experience. It is, rather, a history of fictions—of rationalist constructs out of the thought processes of individuals, not of plausible abridgments of these thought processes. It consists not of representations, but, in the most literal sense, of reconstructions, not of plausible

accounts of how men thought, but of more or less painful attempts to elaborate their ideas to a degree of formal intellectual articulation which there is no evidence that they ever attained.

Because of these features, it is often extremely unclear whether the history of ideas is the history of anything which ever did actually exist in the past, whether it is not habitually conducted in a manner in which the relationship of evidence to conclusion is so tenuous that it provides no grounds at all for assent. For there are certain banal truths which the customary approaches appear to neglect; that thinking is an effortful activity on the part of human beings, not simply a unitary performance; that incompleteness, incoherence, instability and the effort to overcome these are its persistent characteristics; that it is not an activity which takes its meaning from a set of finished performances which have been set up in type and preserved in libraries, but an activity which is conducted more or less incompetently for most of their waking life by a substantial proportion of the human race, which generates conflicts and which is used to resolve these, which is directed towards problem-solving and not towards the construction of closed formal games; that the works in which at a single point in time a set of problems issue in an attempt at a coherent rational ordering of the relevant experience are in some sense unintelligible except in terms of this context; that language is not, as the seventeenth-century savants mocked, a repository of formal truths donated by God to Adam but simply the tool which human beings use in their struggle to make sense of their experiences. Once talking and thinking are considered seriously as social activities, it will be apparent that intellectual discussions will only be fully understood if they are seen as complicated instances of these social activities.

All of this is, of course, to beg the question at issue; but it has its glib plausibility. Whether it has anything else is what I shall try to show. May the charge perhaps amount to nothing more interesting than a pun on the word 'understanding'? The notions of understanding and explaining historical events have recently received a considerable amount of philosophical attention.[6] Complicated issues of epistemology and of the logical forms of explanations have been extensively explored and the practice of historians somewhat clarified. But the extent of the disagreement which remains is still considerable and its precise character frequently elusive.

Consider the following plausible historians' assignments. 1, Explain why Plato wrote the *Republic*. 2, Explain why Plato's ideal state has an authoritarian political structure. 3, Explain why Plato criticises Thrasymachus's account of justice in the *Republic*. 4, Explain why the Roman empire in the west collapsed. 5, Explain

why there was a French Revolution between 1750 and 1820. 6, Explain why there was a French Revolution in 1789. 7, Explain why there was not an English Revolution in 1831.

Some of these seem to be problems about the states of consciousness of agents; others do not. Some seem to demand an account of the set of premises which make a given argument or set of arguments seem cogent. Some seem to be answerable by a detailed narrative of a period of time in the past. Others do not seem to be susceptible of narrative treatment at all. That is to say, a story of the periods in point seems to leave the question raised quite unanswered. What story could possibly explain why there was a French Revolution between 1750 and 1820? It would need a most remarkable story of 1789 to seem an appropriate answer to that question. Why should one wish to assimilate one set of these questions to another, still less reduce them all to one sort? Or, to put the issue differently, why should one suppose that the venerable dispute between idealist and positivist philosophers of history, or its more recent avatar, that between the exponents of causal and those of 'rational' or narrative explanations, between the notions of history as applied general sociology or as stories which happen to be true, is a real dispute at all? Is it not rather an attempt to legislate for the type of historical explanations which should ideally be given, a lengthy exercise in the persuasive definition of the adjective 'historical'? What conceivable set of causal laws could 3 be subsumed beneath? Or what narrative or set of reasons constitute an answer to 4 or 5? Giving reasons for why an argument seemed cogent to an individual in the past, or why an act seemed appropriate is not an instance of subsuming anything under a causal law, though there are certainly causes for the appearance of cogency in the argument or appropriateness in the act. No explanation of the persistence and change of a complex social system over time can be adequately provided by a story. But both of these last two enterprises, whether or not they have ever been carried out in a definitively satisfactory manner, represent intelligible and characteristic *explanatory*[7] enterprises of historians and the attempt to reduce them to the same type of enterprise is absurd. But to insist that there is a correct model for historical explanation implies that one or other of these, causal or rational, must be merely provisional, preliminaries to the construction of an explanation of the approved form. In any case, does either of them provide an appropriate form of explanation for the history of ideas (surely an ideal example for those with a strong distaste for the more scientistic aspirations of historians)?

What *is* the subject-matter of the history of ideas; past thinking, philosophy, ideas, ideologies? And what indeed is its form; a set of

narratives, a set of subsumptions of individual instances under covering laws, a set of reconstructed rationalia for specific philosophical performances? Most urgently, how far does causality intrude into this sensitive intellectualist enquiry and how far are its permitted intrusions a matter of intellectual taste on the part of the historian and how far a matter of professional obligation; how far in short is the meaning of any set of ideas irreducibly infected by the conditions of its birth?

One might want to say that any statement made by any individual at any time could only be said to be *fully* understood if one knew the conditioning-history and the set of present stimulus conditions which elicited it. And yet human beings do to some extent understand each other and by the time they reach the age of speech the very notion of such a history of their conditioning seems to elude our pictures of them. (Not just, no one has ever been able to provide such a specification, but who would seriously claim to be able to imagine what it would be like to know such a story and then confront the individual whose story it was, what the logical relations between such a story and our own descriptions of actions would be like?)[8] Clearly, if this were a necessary condition for understanding a statement we could not have acquired the very notion of understanding statements. Indeed, one might say that to suppose anything so implausible is simply to confuse psychology with epistemology, to mistake the genetics of a statement for its logical status, a tired error. But the initial proposition was not that one could not understand statements *at all* but that one could not *fully* understand them; that any understanding was in principle liable to be exposed as including a specific misunderstanding of some feature of what it is claimed to understand. But what sort of feature? For, any explanation of a given linguistic act in terms of its history can only give at best the necessary and sufficient conditions of its occurrence. It cannot give any full account of its *truth* status.[9] This does not mean that such an explanation cannot include an account of why X thought it to be true (in so far as he did do so)—plainly this must be included—nor even an account of why X thought it was true though many with the same values as X and greater specific skills would have been able to show conclusively why it was false. What the explanation cannot give in purely historical terms is an account of why it *is* true or false. To put the point most simply, in the history of science, the full set of statements about the sufficient conditions of Aristarchus of Samos's heliocentrism does not serve to tell us the senses in which his theory was true or false.[10]

If this assertion is correct, important conclusions follow. In the history of philosophy, for example, the only account of a past

philosophical performance which could be said to be complete at any one time must comprise the complete Skinnerian story of its genesis[11] *and* the best available assessment of its truth status. Furthermore it implies that every complete account in the history of philosophy is implicitly dated. (Not, of course, every statement in the history of philosophy; as, for example, Plato wrote the *Republic*; the following words occur in the *Republic* in the following order: even, Locke's *Essay* contains criticisms of a doctrine that there are innately known truths.) For its truth is contingent on the adequacy of this philosophical assessment; and the criteria for the adequacy of the assessment change over time. Perhaps, though, the point is trivial. So, after all, do the criteria for truth claims in psychology; say, from Aquinas to Descartes, to Bain, to Skinner. In the nineteenth century the idea of a complete physics did not seem fatuous and hence a complete psychology at least in principle conceivable. Today, where the idea of indefeasible physical truth is so puzzling, the idea of an indefeasible psychology seems grotesque. Perhaps it is grotesque. In which case the claim collapses into the banality that all explanations are implicitly dated. One could also perhaps argue for a necessary time-specificity in the philosophical account on lines parallel to those which Danto uses[12] to distinguish between contemporary- and future-specific descriptions of events, as in the Yeats poem on Leda and the Swan: 'A shudder in the loins engenders there/The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead.' But it seems equally plausible today to argue for a time-specificity in the causal story. It's not simply what true statements there are to make about the past (the contemporary- or future-specific descriptions of the past) which alters; but what one knows the past to have been like. In the same way changes in physical or chemical knowledge may have effects in geology which alter the geological story, while the history of the human race as such at most alters the labels attached to different areas of the geological subject-matter.

Even at this level of abstraction the argument clearly implies that there are two necessary components to the *identification* of every past performance of philosophical importance, two descriptions of the act which require very different verificatory procedures. A major argument of this paper is that much of the incoherence and implausibility in the history of ideas stems from the failure to separate these adequately and that most abstract methodological arguments in the subject depend upon an effort to make one of the two descriptions of the act all-important and the other trivial. They err in proffering one description as the overriding, the *correct*, description of the performance in place of the other. It seems clear that both

descriptions are in principle correct, that they constitute answers to different questions about the nature of the act. What is much less clear (perhaps, even, not always true in practice) is the claim that they cannot be brought off perfectly well separately. The causal story is clearly a very intricate piece of historical explanation but the philosophical analysis may well seem simpler. May we not follow a suggestion of Alan Ryan's[13] in leaving to the historian the question of 'what Locke intended' and confining our attention to 'what Locke said'? The question then is simply how we may know 'what Locke said'. Perhaps, if we examine the history of political theory we shall contrive to discover such a temporally inviolate entity.

What is it that the history of political thought is the history of? Two things, at least; the set of argued propositions in the past which discuss how the political world is and ought to be and what should constitute the criteria for proper action within it; the set of activities in which men were engaged when they enunciated these propositions. The precise degree of abstraction which places a given proposition inside or outside the category is obviously pretty arbitrary. But the identification of the continuum on which this break occurs is simple enough—roughly from the *Republic* or *Social Choice and Individual Values* to the single expletive 'Fascist'. To the two types of history there correspond two sorts of integral explanation, 'rational' and causal.[14] Between the two, and punningly encompassing both, there lies a third, narrative, which is 'rational' without the humility and causal without the criteria of achievement. The first looks like a history of political arguments; the second a history of political arguing. One develops the coherence which a set of political propositions seems to have held for its proponents and comments on the status of this coherence (places it within criteria of rationality and irrationality to which we accede today); it maps the logic of arguments and sets these out against its own prescriptive logic, so that their structure can be grasped clearly. All the statements contained in it are statements about the relationships of propositions to propositions. Men, breathing, excreting, hating, mocking, never step inside it. Their role is merely to label a particular set of propositions with the name which they bear themselves. Their names appear in this story but never their selves. It is a tale to be told by clever and subtle men, and it signifies much but in it there is neither sound nor fury. But history, surely, is about the world and not about propositions. Where, in the world, do these propositions have their place? In what does their historicity consist? The answer plainly is that they are not merely propositions, logical structures; they are also statements. Men have said (or at least written) them. So the men appear again in the story, appear as speakers. It is in the role

of the speaker that this disembodiment of the proposition begins to be threatened.

For there are three ways in commonsense terms that one may misunderstand what it is that a man has said. The meaning one attributes to his words may not be a meaning that can properly be attributed to them in his public language (in which case the only way the interpretation could be correct would be if he characteristically misused his language in this particular way). The meaning which one attributes to them may not have been that which he intended them to bear.[15] The meaning which one attributes to his act in saying them may be mistaken. One's identification of the speech act may fail in its grasp of the lexical possibilities, of the historical actuality of the proposition which he intended to enunciate (usually one of the lexical possibilities),[16] or of what he was doing in saying it. The failure to grasp a set of propositions correctly may be due to what is necessarily a mistranslation (an error about language), in fact a misinterpretation of what someone has said (an error about a propositional enterprise of a human being) or a misinterpretation of his behaviour in saying it (an error about the nature of a complex action).

If the historicity of the history of philosophy or political theory consists in the fact that the statements *were* made at a particular date by a particular person, then it seems that the enterprise of identification can be confined to the avoidance of the first two types of misunderstanding. Surely, one might say, it matters what Socrates *said*, not just what words he used but what he was saying in using them —what he meant. But it does not matter, as far as the history of philosophy is concerned, what he was *doing* in saying them. Philosophy as the manipulation of faeces, as the denunciation of a sibling, as the placation of a God or a Party, as a cry of pain, as a mode of self-gratification, may be an apt enough description of the historical activities of philosophers, but it has nothing to do with the history of philosophy. No description of the psychological state of the philosopher can infect the truth or falsity of what he maintains. Philosophy is about truth not about action. It may be a profound sociological truth (well, it *might*, anyway) that socialism is a cry of pain.[17] But this tells us nothing of the truth status of such propositions and arguments as constitute Socialism. In logical terms, one can yelp truth as readily as speak it.[18]

The problem, however, is more pressing than this. There are occasions on which one cannot know what a man means unless one knows what he is doing. Suppose a person were to give a parody of the sort of argument normally produced in favour of a position which he particularly detests—say, in an argument about the

justification for punishing homosexual acts as such, to describe an alleged causal relationship between changes in the sexual mores of the Roman aristocracy and the military collapse of the Roman empire in the West. If, at the end of the impassioned and sneering recital, a listener were to be asked what the speaker in question had said, it might be possible for him to provide a full record of the words used and in the correct order and with perfect understanding of the rules for the use for each particular word and yet still not have *understood* what was said. Of course, such a misapprehension could readily be described as a failure to grasp what the speaker was doing in saying those words; and this is clearly an apt description. But it does seem at least equally natural to describe it as not understanding 'what he was saying'. 'Doing things with words' *is* saying things, just as saying things is doing things with words.[19] Parody or even irony are not just acts which hold the world at a respectful distance. They are ways of saying things about the world. It would surely be impossible to write a coherent account of Plato's ideas in the *Gorgias* or Hume's in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* without taking note of the fact that some of the propositions which they contain are highly ironical in character. On the other hand clearly a coherent account of the arguments in these works does not necessarily itself contain lots of ironical propositions. The point that needs emphasis is only that the identification of what Plato or Hume's arguments are is contingent on understanding what they were doing in enunciating certain propositions at particular points in their works. But the sort of specific and primitive failure of identification here in question is hardly the most frequent danger. Must it not in any case be possible to elicit the correct identification of the meaning from the text itself? For, it would be most embarrassing if it *is* the case that we need some accurate emotional and cognitive chart of Plato's experiences while writing the work, or some sort of abridged story of his intellectual career beforehand, in order to grasp it fully, since we manifestly know almost nothing about these except from the pages of the dialogues.[20] But, to take a vulgar example from the causal story as we have had it told, just what sort of light does it shed on the arguments of the *Republic*, supposing that it were in some sense true, to say that it is an instance of the ideology of the declining Athenian political élite?

Clearly it does not tell us whether any particular argument in the work is true or false. But if the claim about the causal story can be sustained, it must to some degree improve our identification of the arguments as arguments. At first sight this seems implausible. For, what sort of acts can we adequately identify in terms of their social causation? Crudely, one can provide an account of the social

causation of acts which can be specified as the performance of socially defined roles (this is circular). These can be widely differentiated and may not look as though they have any social component at all; attacking the government, defending (or affirming the rationality of) the social structure, loving one's wife, praising God, philosophising. The sole necessary condition is that the act must appear only as an instance of the role (cf. 'loving one's wife' with 'how one loves one's wife'), and the role must be specified in the description of the general social order. The only particulars which appear in the account must appear as instances of universals. No description of a social structure, taken by itself and without the addition of a huge number of dated statements about the individual, could enable one to deduce the complete life story of the individual. This is quite irrelevant to the issue of whether one can in principle predict all human behaviour; merely a logical feature of any explanation of individual acts in terms of a social structure. This manifestly does not mean that one cannot improve one's understanding of an individual act by improving the social description of it (cf. Why is he kneeling in discomfort in the gloom consuming that tasteless food and ill-flavoured wine? Answer, he is partaking of the Body and the Blood of Christ. But compare the complexity today of the demand: 'Describe just what he is doing in "worshipping God" in that way'). But what would it mean if it were true, ignoring the vulgarity of the chosen phrasing, that the *Republic* was ideology for the declining Athenian political élite, as it were, an acceptable substitute for being Critias? It clearly would not mean that any description of the social role of the declining Athenian political élite would have written the *Republic* for you. It is a very abstract description of the book and what we are interested in, if we are interested in the history of philosophy or political theory, is a very concrete description. What could be said to be socially caused about the *Republic* is at most certain features of it.[21] The authoritarian political structure of Plato's Utopia is not the *Republic*, is not why it appears in the history of political thought, let alone philosophy.[22]

But here again we have clearly rejected too much. For, those features of the *Republic* for which we might attempt to sketch causal explanations in terms of the social history of Athens can certainly tell us something about the arguments of the book as such. It is when we come to look for the unstated premises of Plato's arguments or attempt to understand why the stated premises seemed to him to need no further extrinsic justification, that we see their relevance. All arguments have to start somewhere. Different sorts of explanations of the plausibility of a premise to an individual provide different

sorts of blocking-off points to the account which can be given of his argument. The constant threat of anachronism, the wholly spurious transparency which sometimes characterises what men have said in the past, makes the correct identification of the premises of arguments and the explanation of these the basic precondition for an adequate account, whether historical or philosophical. If we are to understand the criteria of truth or falsehood implicit in a complex intellectual architectonic, we have to understand the structures of biographical or social experience which made these criteria seem self-evident. To abstract an argument from the context of truth-criteria which it was devised to meet is to convert it into a different argument. If, in our insistent urge to learn from the arguments of the past, we assume that its consequently enhanced intelligibility will teach us more, we merely guarantee that what it teaches us must be something different from what it says and furthermore that what it teaches us must be much closer to what we already know. If the effort to learn from philosophers of the past is a plausible philosophical heuristic, it would be most odd if it can be best carried out *in general* by failing to grasp their actual arguments. As John Passmore put it recently: 'Too often, indeed, such polemical writings consist in telling men of straw that they have no brains'.[23]

If we wish to exploit the causal story, the history of philosophising, for such a purpose, and if we are never granted access to the very special causal stories previously suggested as paradigms for explanation, from what sort of stories can we benefit? Motive-explanations and ideological explanations can both be made causal in form (the former with some difficulty) and both could under some circumstances lend greater intelligibility to a complex structure of ideas; but they certainly raise problems. Even a sociological theory like functionalism is wildly evasive when given consistent causal interpretation[24] and there have been psychological experiments about emotions designed to establish empirically what are necessary logical truths.[25] Even if they are to function as blocks to further rational explanation they must be rationally-connected motives or ideologies or no explanation can be provided of the specific intellectual explicandum, just a description of it which suppresses its intellectual specificity. Clearly the sort of jejune retrospective sociology of knowledge or random biographical information which we have at our disposal before, say, the nineteenth century are not going to help very much. But even if this is very much a counsel of perfection, or despair, it is not one which we can honourably avoid. There must be a point in any argument at which a man stops being able to give reasons—and at that point the organism has to give them for the man. Some, very general, seem almost biological data; like the demand to give

general reasons for the practice of self-preservation. Such a request, while it is intelligible enough to some (could even be said to have a whole modern philosophy devised as an attempted answer), must simply seem a category mistake to most people. A few such teleological laws are widely credited as axioms. In describing a philosophical project coherently some of the premises must be authenticated in this way, extra-intellectually. Any deductive system must have some axioms and there are some claims for anyone which are simply axioms, where a request for a reason for the statement will only be met by a causal explanation of its axiomatic status, that it is one of the stipulations of this man's history. '*I* just do think eating people is wrong.' Such causal explanations may be hard indeed to find in the past. Even if our explanatory accounts come to include explicit fictions as explanatory terms (and after all most historical accounts contain more or less discreet fictions), at least this will enable others to attempt to test their truth or falsity. Only if we learn to make our fictions explicit are we ever likely to escape from our present conceptual morass, from the persisting problem of never knowing just what we are talking about.[26]

Having in this disheartened way evaded the question of what sort of stories to look for in the history of philosophising, there remains the question of what to look for the stories of. The history of philosophy, that Platonic activity which has been extricated belatedly from causality, deodorised, anaesthetised, pure, *that* history must necessarily be written in terms of current philosophical interests. This does not mean that it has to be falsified in terms of our current philosophical tastes, because the causal story, in so far as we can still discover it, has always to be elaborated first. Its historicity is its sufficient and its sole legitimate immunity from our philosophical prejudices. To call these arbitrary is vacuous. A man for whom the philosophical articulations of a society, thinned out in the tortuous distillations of rationality from 'the fury and the mire of human veins', appear arbitrary is a man whose inadvertence takes in both the philosophical and the causal stories, a man for whom everything must be arbitrary. And in the insight that every human interest is arbitrary (as with the story that all human experience is a dream) we do not gain a truth, we merely lose a word. If we did not write it in terms of these current philosophical interests there would be no interests in terms of which to define it. A philosophical analysis of the *Republic* seems apt, where one of the *Iliad* or the *Gortyn Code* does not, and this scarcely raises a problem. Epics and law codes in primitive societies simply are not philosphical—even though one might be a little embarrassed by being pressed on the status of—say—Blake, or Milton, or Dante; and even though Peter Winch writes as though

any sociological analysis of the *Gortyn Code* was necessarily 'philosophical'.[27]

No doubt there are true claims to be made in these areas by somewhat stretching the meaning of the word 'philosophical'. But the central point remains that epics and law codes are conceptually set in well-defined areas of activity, whatever one can learn *from* them about the history of philosophy,[28] and appeal explicitly or implicitly for their standing to many criteria altogether discrete from the nature of truth.[29] The history of philosophy, like the history of science, must needs be Whig as to subject-matter, just as, like all history, it must be Tory as to truth. This does not mean that one should *necessarily* study Kant rather than Christian Wolff; only that one should select philosophically interesting philosophy, after one has identified what philosophy there is to study.[30] The criteria for selecting this, as indeed in a broader sense the criteria of what in the indentified past is philosophy at all, are provided by philosophy today. But the criteria provided by philosophy today need never be merely those of philosophy yesterday. The criterion of future philosophical interest is the achievement of the investigator, not the tradition of the Schools. What we can learn from the past is always what we can succeed in learning; and the educative past can change —as if some disused Mendip lead-working were one day to disclose a new and precious sort of uranium.

But this hardly provides any very helpful direction. To bring together the threads of Utopian persuasion, we must return to the contexts of the utterances which men produce. If a statement is considered in a fully open context, its meaning may be any lexically possible set of colligations of the uttered propositions. A man might mean by it anything that a man might mean by it. The problem of interpretation is always the problem of closing the context. What closes the context in actuality is the intention (and, much more broadly, the experiences) of the speaker. Locke, in talking, talks about what he talks about. The problem of the historian is always that *his* experience also drastically closes the context of utterance; indeed all too readily turns a fact about the past into a fact about the intellectual biography of the historian. If in the seventeenth century Locke and Hobbes are the two English political theorists whom we all read and if, had we been writing Locke's major work, we should surely have wished to address ourselves mainly to the works of Hobbes, it is a very simple ellipse to suppose that Locke must surely have been addressing himself to Hobbes. Indeed it is so simple that men will go to the most extraordinarily intricate theoretical lengths to rescue this somewhat subjective 'appearance'.[31] The solution to the historian's problem is formally simple, to substitute the closure of

context provided by the biography of the speaker for that provided by the biography of the historian. But such a project is not merely, in a trivial sense and *pace* Collingwood, logically impossible. It is also in a more pragmatic sense overwhelmingly difficult. But the difficulty is not one which we can consciously agree to evade. Communicating what Locke said and understanding what Locke said both involve making comprehensible the utterance of *Locke*. It is here that the symmetry between understanding, explaining and giving an account of a philosphical claim becomes strongest. For any of these activities must necessarily include what are in effect abridgments of the other two activities and any of them which fails to do so may be in principle corrigible by either of the other two. The problem of communicating, for instance, the meaning of Plato's *Republic* to an audience, the sort of problem which the dim privacy of our writing in the history of ideas so notably fails to solve, is the prototypical problem for the historian of ideas. For it demands not the sort of flashing of professional credit cards, the Great Chain of Being, associationism, Vico, which serve well enough inside the profession when we all feel tired, that rigid and dead reaction to recognised points which as Professor Wisdom complained of aesthetics is 'sometimes found in dog fanciers and characteristic of the pharisees',[32] but grasping the point of the original intellectual enterprise. In the reconstitution of this enterprise, the identification of the problem, the identification, again *pace* Collingwood, of why it was a problem for its proponent (and why many things which would be for us were not for him—firmly a part of the causal story), and in the critical judgment of the solution, we turn a theorem about an intellectual enterprise in the past into an intellectual enterprise in the present. All the premises in our own understanding and representation are inserted firmly into the past as hypotheses for historical adjudication. When the audience can think of no more questions to ask and when we can think of no new questions to ask and can get no more answers to our old questions from the evidence, such an investigation is completed; until the next investigation follows in due course. What I wish to emphasise is that such an investigation, if at any time it were carried to a conclusion, would be the only sort of explanation which would necessarily meet both those types of criticism of the history of ideas in general or the history of philosophy or political theory in particular which I began by noting. All this indeed is whistling to keep our courage up and in no immediate danger of instantiation. But unless we have a picture of the possible shape of success, it will be hard to see why we do it all so badly.[33]

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[1]I mean this term to be used as widely as its use in common speech would suggest, its subject-matter as, in principle, all past thoughts, not just the rather individual meaning given to it by Professor Lovejoy and his pupils. The argument of the piece is that the histories of particular intellectual practices, of science, history, political theory, economics, theology, etc., are special instances of this single unitary category and that whatever autonomy they enjoy within it is simply a matter of literary convenience. In other words it is denied that a coherent account can be given of any of them which lends to them any sort of epistemological discreteness.

[2]This claim is clearly more plausible when made about the history of political theory than it is, for instance, about the history of philosophy. But it seems to me to be quite unmet by even such a helpful series of treatments as those edited by Professor Passmore in Beiheft No. 5, 'The Historiography of the History of Philosophy', of the journal *History and Theory*. For examples of the two different perspectives in the history of political theory in work of some distinction see on the one hand Alan Ryan, 'Locke and the Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie', *Political Studies*, vol. VIII, No. 2 (June, 1965), p. 219 and on the other, Quentin Skinner, 'Hobbes's *Leviathan*' (review article on F. C. Hood, *The Divine Politics of Thomas Hobbes*) *The Historical Journal*, vol. VII, No. 2 (1964), p. 333. For an example of the sort of difference which is likely to appear in full-length treatments from these different perspectives cf. Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oxford: 1957) with the treatment of Hobbes in C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: 1962).

[3]It seems to be the case that the interpretation of the famous passage in David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* on deducing 'ought' statements from 'is' statements has been distorted in just this way. Cf. *Treatise*, Bk. III, 1, i, with, e.g. R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: 1952), p. 29. But this is controversial. Cf. A. C. Macintyre, 'Hume on "Is" and "Ought" ', *Philosophical Review*, vol. LXVIII (October, 1959) with R. F. Atkinson, 'Hume on "Is" and "Ought". A Reply to Mr Macintyre', *Philosophical Review*, vol. LXX (April, 1961); M. J. Scott-Taggart, 'Macintyre's Hume', *Philosophical Review*, vol. LXX (April, 1961). Later, Geoffrey Hunter, 'Hume on "Is" and "Ought" ', *Philosophy*, vol. XXXVII (April, 1962). Antony Flew, 'On the Interpretation of Hume', *Philosophy*, vol. XXXVIII (April, 1963) and Geoffrey Hunter, 'A Reply to Professor Flew', *Philosophy*, vol. XXXVIII (April, 1963).

[4]In practice, it does not always seem relevant in particular instances. The sense in which it *is* true is I hope made clear by the end of the paper.

[5]This list is, of course, a caricature and intended as such. It is not even adequate as a preliminary typology of the sort of books there are. Notably it does not begin to give an account of the best or the worst of the books that are written. In the latter case this is hardly a vice. But it is important to emphasise, in order to avoid misunderstanding, the very remarkable quality of much of the work which has been done in these subjects by Cassirer, Koyré, Kemp Smith, Lovejoy and many others.

[6]I have learnt most from the following, without fully agreeing with any of them: R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford pb. ed.: 1961); Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (Oxford: 1952); William Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Oxford: 1957); W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: 1964); A. Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford: 1962); A. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: 1965); various of the articles edited by Patrick Gardiner in *Theories of History* (Glencoe, Ill.: 1959) and the journal, *History and Theory* (ed. George Nadel); also from two

striking works by practising historians, T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: 1962) and E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: 1959).

[7]Most historical writing for better or worse does not consist largely of explanations. This lends an adventitious force to the position of the critics of 'causal' explanation. But if the stories are still to be true, some sort of concern for causality seems to be inexpugnable. The most elegant literary constructs in history do come to grief on aesthetically trivial facts. Pragmatically the dispute is really over what to do with the data, once gathered. The solution must surely be that a historian may organise them in any way which he can show to be conceptually coherent. In the particular instance which I am discussing in this paper the difficulty has been that the conceptual organisation chosen has often deformed the data. Different historians do (and there can be no reason why they should not) design their work as attempts at applied general sociology or at 'stories which happen to be true'. Professional disputes may, causally, arise over this difference of taste but they are conducted, by professional etiquette, as disputes over the *truth* of propositions about the data. In this, at least, professional etiquette seems unassailable.

[8]This does not, of course, means that such a novel form of comprehension could never come our way, just that it would *be* novel, i.e. we cannot know what it would be like until we know what it is like. See very helpfully Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: 1964), pp. 45-48 esp.

[9]This claim is ambiguous. It does not hold for those propositions the truth or falsity of which depends solely upon the speaker's sincerity in asserting them; reports of intentions, more dubiously promises. For a superb account of the problems raised by these see J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words* (Oxford: 1962). Issues of sincerity do affect the truth status of propositions in works of the highest intellectual complexity (indeed, this insight has been made the key to an entire method of interpretation by Professor Leo Strauss and his distinguished group of pupils from the University of Chicago), but it is clear that the truth status of any proposition of any descriptive complexity cannot rest purely on the sincerity of its proponent.

[10]There is an important conventional sense in which one can understand what anyone says without knowing whether it is true or false. But consider, for example, the project of writing a history of science without beliefs as to the truth or falsity of any scientific proposition. Conversely, if Aristarchus thought that the earth moved around the sun, we can understand the notion, as expressed in these terms, without much difficulty. But we do not thereby know, or at least may not know (i.e. do not *know*) what Aristarchus meant unless we know the ontological and physical contexts at the very least which gave definition to his claim. Rudely, what we know is that Aristarchus anticipated one of our more firmly established beliefs. But this is self-celebratory gibberish, not history. It is a poor attempt at understanding Aristarchus.

[11]Here, as elsewhere, this phrase is used for exemplary purposes. I have no wish to foreclose on any form of attained causal explanations of behaviour, but I do not wish, particularly in the face of Charles Taylor's *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: 1964), to assert that the explanations must be ultimately reducible to statements in a 'physical-object' data language—whether a peripheralist analysis of behaviour or a centralist analysis in terms of neuro-physiology or bio-chemistry.

[12]Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: 1965). The whole book is devoted to expounding the importance of the difference between contemporary-specific and future-specific descriptions of events, say, for example, ours and theirs, to the understanding of historical analysis. The Yeats poem is very deftly quoted at page 151. To rephrase Danto's point, the data-language of history

changes throughout history. The future constantly changes the set of true descriptive statements which could in principle be made about the past. No contemporary description of an event can take this particular sort of account of the future which it 'engenders'.

[13]*Op. cit.* (note (1) above), p. 219. Such an account (sc. an analysis of Locke's concept of property, taken from the *Second Treatise* alone) 'may perhaps be in danger of refutation by the historian as an account of *what Locke intended.* It is in less, even no, danger of contradiction from such a quarter as an account of *what Locke said.* And in case this is thought too small a claim, let me point out that we usually hold people to what they say, rather than to what they suppose to follow from what they meant to say.' I should like to emphasise that the very able article in question does not in practice suffer at all from ill consequences deriving from this, to me, misconceived methodological doctrine.

[14]This again is a wild over-simplification. I have deliberately begged the most intractable question about psychological explanation (what the form of an adequate causal explanation of a piece of human behaviour would be) by talking of the more behavioural 'activity' rather than the more intellectualist 'act'. I quite accept that understanding an act is never just a matter of subsuming a piece of behaviour under a set of causal laws, but I should certainly want to claim that part of doing so is frequently just such an operation. But cf. Alasdair Macintyre, 'A Mistake about Causality in Social Science' in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman, *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (2nd Series) (Oxford: 1962) and convergent arguments in Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: 1963); Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: 1964). Also Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: 1958).

[15]I.e. it may not have been what he *meant*, cf. notes ([13]) and ([9]) above. What a man meant to say may differ from what he succeeded in saying in numerous ways. He may, for instance, as in many of the cases considered by Sigmund Freud in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, speak a word different from the word which he intended to speak; or he may speak a word in a foreign language thinking that it has a meaning which is other than the meaning which it does have, a common occurrence; or he may use a word in his own language persistently while misunderstanding its meaning (whether by mistaking it for another with a similar sound, a malapropism; or by simple mis-identification). All of these seem peripheral. It is hard to imagine a man who never said what he meant to say (not, of course, one who never said what he meant (where meant = felt like saying). There is nothing conceptually difficult in the notion of a consistent hypocrite. Indeed, if by chance one were confronted by someone who never said what they meant to say, one could only interpret their behaviour as the result of severe and peculiar brain damage. There are, of course, numerous instances where men say things which are not consistent with other things which they say or feel and one could, under some circumstances, describe these states of affairs as instances of men not meaning what they say. But this is a very derivative usage and surely cannot be construed as meaning that they did not intend to convey what they did convey but rather that they did not realise the implications of what they, intentionally, said and would not have said it if they had realised these. The suggestion in note ([13]) above depends upon there being a general distinction between what men succeed in saying and what they intend to say. The distinction which *does* exist between these two scarcely seems of the right type. If one is interested in trying to understand an argument, the least one would normally attempt to do is to establish what the protagonist meant.

[16]It is more common for someone from an alien culture to misunderstand what a

person has said than it is for people in any culture not to say what they mean.

[17]Cf. Emile Durkheim, *Socialism and Saint-Simon* (New York, pb. ed.: 1958), p. 41.

[18]I.e. say it yelpingly; not yelps *are* propositions. Just that the truth-status (whatever that may be) of the proposition 'God is Love' is no different where it is gasped out by the dying martyr in the blood-stained arena from when it is enunciated with the plummy self-assurance of a well-fed agnostic in a role which is religious only as an inconvenient historical hangover.

[19]See J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words* (Oxford: 1962), *passim.*

[20]For an example of the acute interpretative difficulties which this fact raises, see the remarkable reconstruction by Professor Ryle, *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge: 1966).

[21]This does not mean that the ideas of stupid people can be explained causally while the ideas of those who share our own incomparable advantages elude such crude determination—though there is a faint and horrible grain of truth in an extreme version of such a view. Cf. Karl Popper's famous argument (set out in brief in the preface to *The Poverty of Historicism*, pp. ix-xi and refs. there (London: 1960, 2nd ed.). But the Popper argument does not apply to making causal statements about past ideas—it is the logical oddity of predicting *new* ideas on which it insists. It is a purely contingent (though highly intractable) fact that in the case of the *Republic* the sort of data which survive go no distance whatever towards providing an account of the sufficient conditions for the writing of the book.

[22]Cf. Eugene Kamenka, 'Marxism and the History of Philosophy', in Beiheft 5, *History and Theory*, pp. 83-104.

[23]John Passmore, 'The Idea of a History of Philosophy', in Beiheft 5, *History and Theory*, p. 13.

[24]See, briefly, W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory* (Cambridge: 1963) cap. 6. For a penetrating account of the sources and deficiencies of the notion as employed by Malinowski see E. R. Leach, 'The Epistemological Background to Malinowski's Empiricism', in *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski* (ed. Raymond Firth, London: 1957).

[25]Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: 1963), pp. 28-51.

[26]There are, of course, dangers in learning to talk precisely about fictions instead of trying to talk about the confusions of the world. Cf. in another area C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: 1959). But it is still important in all innocence to advocate the attempt to combine both.

[27]Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: 1958), *passim.*

[28]As a part of the causal story, this can be very considerable indeed. Cf. on Plato, Arthur W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford: 1960).

[29]Not that one would not employ philosophical notions at any point in the attempt to explain and assess them; only, that most of the operation of understanding them (even after the story of how they come to be there is told completely) has nothing to do with philosophy.

[30]*Mutatis mutandis*, this would apply to the history of any specialised form of reflection. Each such special extrapolation is derived from an unitary matrix, the causal story of past human thought, the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the set of past human thoughts.

[31]See Peter Laslett (ed.), John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: 1960), pp. 67-76. I am currently attempting to set out the character which the book did bear as it was written, in a full-length study, 'The Political Philosophy of John Locke'.

[32]Proc. Arist. Soc. supplementary vol. XXII, 'Things and Persons' (quoted by John Passmore, 'The Dreariness of Aesthetics', in William Elton (ed.), *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: 1959), p. 40.

[33]This paper arises out of several years of discussion of the subject with Mr Peter Laslett and, especially, Mr Quentin Skinner (see his article 'The Limits of Historical Explanations', *Philosophy*, vol. XLI (July, 1966), for a partly analogous, partly contrasting view). I am very grateful to them both. Dr M. I. Finley, Dr R. M. Young and Mrs Joanna Ryan very kindly read it through and helped me to clarify a number of points. Where it remains opaque, it does so through no fault of theirs, but merely as a result of my own obstinacy.