History, Political Theory and Truth:

Why We Can Learn From the Past Even When We Get It Wrong

Yascha Mounk

Can the study of the past help us to think about the present? There are good answers to this difficult question. Thinkers as diverse as Adam Smith, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill have responded in the affirmative. So, more recently, have Isaiah Berlin, Leo Strauss, Richard Rorty and even John Rawls. Most of these thinkers, needless to say, disagree with each other about how exactly history might be useful for the present. Consequently, they also disagree about the manner in which we should study history. Yet, for the purposes of this paper, it is what they agree about that interests me. For they are not only united in their contention that those who wish to speak to the politics of the present have good reason to study the past. They are also united in the – largely tacit – assumption that in order for history to be useful to the present, one first has to get the history right. It is this seemingly commonsensical proposition I hope to question.

To examine exhaustively what role historical accuracy – which, for simplicity’s sake, I shall sometimes refer to simply as “truth” – should play in using history for the present, I would have, at a minimum, to discuss every thinker mentioned above.¹

¹ The emphasis on “historical accuracy” throughout this paper may suggest that I have a rather positivist view of history, which reduces the historical craft to the mere amassing of true facts about the past. That is not my intention. On any interesting account of the nature of the historical enterprise, mere accuracy does
Such an undertaking would, however, require a vast book (and a boring one at that). So instead I propose to focus on that tradition of intellectual history and political theory active today that lays the greatest store by historical accuracy: the so-called Cambridge School. I have two reasons for this focus. First, scholars like Quentin Skinner and Raymond Geuss have, on my view, offered particularly persuasive reasons why the study of the past can help us to think about politics in the present. A reconstruction of their work can therefore serve both to make historically-informed political theorists more self-conscious about the nature of their enterprise, and to explain the relevance of their undertaking to their colleagues in other fields of political science. And second, it seems to me that, if my arguments successfully demonstrate that the uses of history for the present proposed by this tradition do not actually require historical accuracy, then they are likely to prevail in the contexts of other traditions as well.

I will proceed as follows. In the first section, I show that the Cambridge School has offered persuasive reasons why the study of the past is an important part of political theory – whether we wish to engage in normative reflection, or to gain a greater conceptual understanding of the present political situation. In particular, three potential “uses of history” point to insights we would be unlikely to arrive at by means of philosophical speculation alone. They explain why we should complement...
the analytical, normative and empirical study of politics with a careful consideration of past texts and institutions.²

In the second section, I argue that the Cambridge School has neglected to distinguish adequately between the scholarly norms appropriate to work about past political texts or institutions, as undertaken by intellectual historians, and the scholarly norms appropriate to work using past political texts or institutions, as undertaken by political theorists. While intellectual historians are primarily concerned with reconstructing the meaning, however defined, of past texts, political theorists – even those who take history very seriously – are primarily concerned with drawing lessons, however defined, from these texts. It follows that a political theorist can do outstanding work by drawing on historical texts even if she turns out to be wrong about their meaning.

I defend my argument against potential objections in the third section. Finally, in the conclusion, I argue that political theory and intellectual history, though mutually supporting, are nevertheless distinct pursuits. The past can, and should, help us to think about the present. But political theorists – even ones who take seriously the lessons that the study of historical texts can hold in store for our understanding of politics in the present – need not be intellectual historians.

² I see no reason to draw a sharp division between the appropriate uses of past texts on the one hand and past institutions on the other hand. Hence, I will draw upon both kinds of example throughout.
I  How to Use History for Thinking About Politics

In this section, I argue for the relevance of history for contemporary reflection about politics by positing the possibility of a “Skinnerian Political Theorist.” The idea of a Skinnerian Political Theorist may seem strange. After all, in “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” his most important methodological essay, Skinner denied that we can ever learn directly from the answers past thinkers have given to political problems. On this view, Leo Strauss (and many others) were wrong to think that the great political thinkers of the past addressed a set of questions that still animate us today, or indeed that they might have discovered the right answers.3 Quite on the contrary, Skinner famously maintained, “we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves.”4 Many readers took this to imply a complete separation of history and political theory. If we could not learn from history, then a student of history should be concerned with reconstructing past meanings, and nothing else.

In fact, this assumption was so widespread that most methodological debates, whether between scholars broadly sympathetic to the “Cambridge School” approach, or between Skinner and his critics, disagreed primarily about what we should take historical meaning to consist in. Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock and Mark Bevir, for example, disagreed about how precisely to define “meaning,” but they all implicitly agreed that past texts should be studied by intellectual historians

aiming to recover meaning. A Skinnerian Political Theorist, it seemed, could not exist. Only misguided imposters would try to appropriate the history of political thought for their own purposes. To take Skinner seriously was to become an intellectual historian.

Yet, Skinner’s position never actually implied so radical a separation between political theory and intellectual history. The makings of the Skinnerian Political Theorist existed from the very beginning. As Skinner argued in the sentences that followed directly on the heel of his celebrated invocation to think 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 ... the key to the indispensable value of studying the history of ideas.⁵

In Skinner’s early works, such suggestions about the possible use of intellectual history for political theory were brief and cryptic. By the time he held his inaugural lectures to the Regius Chair in Modern European History at Cambridge University some three decades later, Skinner put a lot more emphasis on different ways of using history – though he did not always distinguish between them in a clear manner. I will therefore present a brief, systematic reconstruction of three potential uses of history suggested by Skinner. Insofar as they outline the “philosophical value” a Skinnerian Political Theorist can draw from “the classic texts,” these potential uses offer convincing reasons why political theorists should study the past.

⁵ Ibid.
Three Uses of History

On Skinner’s account, history can aid our understanding of politics in three distinct ways. First, history can help us ask critical questions about political arrangements and concepts of the present which we might otherwise uncritically accept. On this view, it is ever “difficult to avoid falling under the spell of our own intellectual heritage.”

We are the heirs of a particular way of talking and thinking about politics. Because our moral and political education is so imbued with the normative preferences and conceptual assumptions of our own time, arrangements in our world that are the result of mere historical contingency falsely acquire a halo of self-evident desirability and even immutability.

A serious study of history promises to deliver us from this shortsightedness by showing us that things have not always been as they are now. It is only by studying ancient political thought, for example, that we will realize the possibility of democratically selecting office-holders by methods other than a vote – or that we will realize that selection by vote, as contrasted to selection by lot, might actually be inherently aristocratic.

“The history of philosophy, and perhaps especially of moral,

---

7 For an ancient source of this view, see for example Book IV.9 of Aristotle’s Politics, where he reports that “the appointment of magistrates by lot is thought to be democratic, and the election of them oligarchic.” The view that elections give an aristocratic element to modern democracies has more recently been defended in Manin, Bernard: The Principles of Representative Government, Cambridge: CUP, 1997.
social and political philosophy, is there to prevent us from becoming too readily bewitched.” To save us from our current state of bewitchment, a Skinnerian Political Theorist can engage in the use of *history as antidote*.

Second, history can allow us to perform “acts of excavation.” On this view, our history is full of political concepts and institutions we have abandoned; in some cases, we have forgotten about the existence of formerly important political traditions altogether. A few of these traditions have presumably died a well-deserved death. But other political concepts may have been abandoned for contingent reasons, or because of mere theoretical confusions.

A main goal of Skinner’s inaugural lectures, therefore, was to “re-enter the intellectual world we have lost [...] and thereby to provide us with the means to think again, if we will, about its possible claims on our intellectual allegiances.”

History, in other words, can be useful to political science not only because an understanding of the past allows us to appreciate what is distinctive about the present (as posited by *history as antidote*); in some cases, the study of political traditions very different from our own may even inspire us to re-appropriate neglected insights from the past for our own, present purposes. Political theorists who draw on the past in this way make good use of *history as archaeology*.

---

See also contemporary re-appropriations of the importance of the lot such as Stone, Peter: *The Luck of the Draw – The Role of Lotteries in Decision Making*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.


9 *Liberty before Liberalism*, p. 10.
The third use of history championed by Skinner similarly emphasizes the contingent nature of the beliefs we currently hold. In the words of Raymond Geuss, *history as genealogy* is “a way of putting into question or problematizing something ... The principal targets of this problematizing approach are the apparently self-evident assumptions of a given form of life and the (supposedly) natural or inevitable and unchangeable character of given identities.” On this view, it is only by understanding, say, the history of democracy that we can understand the nature of our own democracies: “[w]e need to become historians if we are to make sense ... of our present moral and political world.”

This threefold account of why history matters can help us make sense of the importance of studying past political texts. Even professional political theorists are always in danger of becoming bewitched by the conceptual and normative categories they are steeped in. On its own, the speculative imagination is not always an adequate protection against this kind of myopia, precisely because it can become active only after we have recognized the need to call the particular normative and conceptual assumptions we grow up with into question. If we never studied societies very different from our own, our state of smug ignorance might be inescapable. History – along with comparative politics, anthropology, and perhaps

---

11 Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, XX.
even science fiction$^{12}$ – is of indispensable help in freeing our imagination, allowing us to think again.

I thus take the three uses of history presented here to be central to the most promising manner for political theorists to turn to intellectual history. On my view, any scholar engaged in this enterprise, whether or not he follows the particular methodological prescriptions that are commonly used to define a Skinnerian Intellectual Historian, might be called a Skinnerian Political Theorist.

II Against the Need for Historical Accuracy

The hopeful enterprise of the Skinnerian Political Theorist raises two critical questions. What exactly should the relationship between intellectual history and political theory be in the work of the Skinnerian Political Theorist? And under what circumstances can he or she be said to make a valuable contribution?

As the very title of “Meaning and Understanding” makes clear, Skinner is primarily concerned with finding out how it is that the “historian of ideas” can “understand”

$^{12}$ As I show in Section III, there are good reasons why, at the heuristic level, the careful study of very different societies that have actually existed in the past (or indeed of very different societies that actually exist now, far away from here) is especially likely to generate important insights. But, in principle, a close reading of a work richly imagining a world very different from our own could certainly serve the purposes of what one might call science fiction as antidote, science fiction as archaeology and even science fiction as genealogy.
the “meaning” of a work of philosophy or literature. This is an important question, and Skinner's methodological prescriptions have proven particularly fruitful in helping us answer it. But if we approach the past from the standpoint of the Skinnerian Political Theorist we will want to ask a very different question. Not: “What is the true meaning of the text in front of me?” But rather: “What criteria determine whether my use of the text in front of me qualifies as a good example of *history as antidote*, or of *history as archaeology*, or of *history as genealogy*?”

This changed way of posing the problem opens up an uncomfortable yet all the more crucial set of follow-up questions. Do we actually need to come to a correct understanding of a text we study if we wish to use it for the purposes of the Skinnerian Political Theorist? Might it not be possible to reassess the political institutions of our time even if we *mistakenly* attribute an opposing view to a past thinker? Should we forego the possibilities afforded by an interesting set of concepts, which is sadly absent from our own political discourse, just because it stems from a present misinterpretation rather than a past meaning?

The answer to all these questions, I would like to suggest, is “no.” The work of the Skinnerian Political Theorist – like the work of all political theorists – should be judged not by its accurate reconstructions of historical meaning, but rather by the contribution it makes to enlarging or refining our present modes of thinking. Such a contribution can be inspired by past political texts even if it is grounded in a reconstruction of these texts that is, historically speaking, wrong. This, at any rate, is

---

what I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of this section by discussing, in turn, each of the three uses of history outlined so far.

History as Antidote

First, let us decide whether the use of *history as antidote* requires a political theorist to come to a correct understanding of the past. To do this, it will be helpful to consider the process of historical interpretation. The interpretation of past texts and institutions is fiendishly difficult – all the more difficult the more alien the subjects we study are from our own political culture. Thus, any intellectual historian who aims to recover the meaning of a past text will, in the process of approaching historical truth, formulate and subsequently reject many working hypotheses concerning the “true” meaning of the text he is studying.

For the purposes of intellectual history, only one working hypothesis seems relevant: the last, undefeated hypothesis which represents an historian’s “all-things-considered” judgment about a text’s true meaning. But the same is not true for the political theorist who studies past texts in the hope of using *history as antidote*. If one of the political theorist’s working hypotheses about the meaning of a past text challenges the concepts and institutions of our present political world, then he becomes interested in drawing out the implications of this challenge. His working hypothesis, erroneous though it might be in terms of past meaning, could in this manner be of considerable use to his work.
If reading Aristotle, say, allows a political theorist to discover that there are good reasons to think of the lot as a quintessentially democratic selection mechanism for office holders, then he begins to ask himself uncomfortable questions. Are our normative justifications for elected office holders adequate? Should we rethink the institutional makeup of our representative democracies? Should we even call our current institutional set-up a democracy? These questions are of course more worth asking if there is indeed good reason to believe that elections are inherently anti-democratic. What is more, in attempting to decide whether elections are anti-democratic one could do much worse than to study Aristotle's view of the matter. But ultimately, whether or not it is worth asking these critical questions about our present institutions does not turn, in any straightforward sense, on whether Aristotle thought that elections were anti-democratic. After all, Aristotle may have been mistaken. To preclude this possibility from the start would be to make a pure argument from authority. Consequently, the political theorist will not see any reason to give up on his present inquiries if he comes to realize that the interpretation of Aristotle which originally allowed him to ask penetrating questions about representative democracy was, as a matter of historical fact, wrong. A careful study of past texts can help the political theorist engage in history as antidote even if he is ultimately mistaken about – or, in the last consequence, indifferent to – their true historical meaning.

As an example of such a use of history as antidote, consider Thomas Hobbes's penetrating discussion of who, the father or the mother, should have dominion over
a child. In Hobbes’s time, parental rights were, in most circumstances, vested exclusively in the father. This seemed to his contemporaries a most natural practice. Alternatives were hard to imagine. But Hobbes points to just such an alternative: “We find in history that the Amazons contracted with the men of the neighbouring countries, to whom they had recourse for issue, that the issue male should be sent back, but the female remain with themselves: so that the dominion of the females was in the mother.”14 This reference to history allows Hobbes to draw a series of radical inferences. In the state of nature the right of dominion over children is regulated by an – implicit or explicit – agreement between mother and father. In commonwealths, the right of dominion is regulated by civil law. For the most part, this law decides “in favour of the father, because for the most part Commonwealths have been erected by the fathers, not by the mothers of families.”15 But, Hobbes strikingly concluded, there is nothing natural about this law. It might just as well be changed, if the sovereign so wished.

Scholars have long since relegated stories about Amazonian women to the status of myths based on no, or very little, historical reality. Now, my question is: should we conclude that Hobbes was mistaken? Would he have been better able to challenge the beliefs of his own society about what is supposedly an unchanging social institution – an institution we now know to be amenable to change – had he realized that the Amazonians never existed? Of course not. Hobbes’s historical inaccuracy is striking, but ultimately beside the point. In the first step, an historical myth, about

14 Hobbes, Leviathan, Ch. XX (my emphasis).
15 Ibid.
which Hobbes was mistaken, helped him to realize that a different set of social arrangements from the one his contemporaries thought natural was in fact conceptually possible. In the second step, he assessed this alternative set of institutions with the normative apparatus at his disposal. In discussing Amazonian women, Hobbes made good use of history as antidote – even though he was wrong about the past.16

History as Archaeology

The reasons why political theorists can make fruitful use of history as archaeology even while getting the history wrong are parallel to the reasons why the same is possible for history as antidote. In order to use history as archaeology, we will wish to read the work of a past thinker or to investigate a set of historical institutions sympathetically, with constant attention to ways in which it might be dissimilar to our own political world. In doing so, we will once again formulate many working hypotheses about texts or institutions under study. If some of these hypotheses seem interesting to us as possible candidates for serious consideration in the present, then they are worth investigating – even if they turn out to be mistaken as a matter of intellectual history. As in history as antidote, so too in history as

16 I should emphasize that I am committed neither to the view that Hobbes consciously used something like a method of history as antidote, nor to the view that Hobbes would have been unable to formulate his radical critique of contemporary assumptions about the respective status of men and women without invoking the example of Amazonian women.
archaeology the political theorist can be inspired to rethink the present world even by misinterpretations of the past.

If we were to reject this point, we would be forced to reject as useless many of the most interesting texts in the history of political thought. Let us see, for example, how unequivocally the question of Agrarian Laws is first broached in Livy's *History of Rome*:

[Cassius] contemplated adding to this a quantity of land which, he alleged, though State land, was occupied by private individuals. This alarmed many of the patricians, the actual occupiers, as endangering the security of their property. On public grounds, too, they felt anxious, as they considered that by this largess the consul was building up a power dangerous to liberty. Then for the first time an Agrarian Law was proposed, and never, from that day to the times within our own memory, has one been mooted without the most tremendous commotions.\(^{17}\)

When writing his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli, for his part, certainly seemed aware that Livy was hostile to the Agrarian Laws. In fact, Machiavelli himself at first agreed that “this law could never be spoken of in Rome without the City being thrown into turmoil.” Nevertheless, Machiavelli’s conclusion stood in clear contrast to any reasonable interpretation of Livy:

so great is the ambition of the Nobles, that if it is not beaten down in various ways and means in a City, it will soon bring that City to ruin. So that if the contentions about the Agrarian Law took three hundred years in bringing Rome to servitude, she would perhaps have been brought to servitude much sooner if the Plebs with this law and their other desires had not always restrained the ambitions of the Nobles.\(^{18}\)

---

\(^{17}\) Livy, *The History of Rome*, Book 1, Ch. XLII.

\(^{18}\) Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book 1, Ch. XXXVII.
Machiavelli’s defense of agrarian laws was very consequential in the subsequent history of republicanism. Observations such as the need for “well-ordered Republics to keep the public rich and its Citizens poor,” which Machiavelli made in this context, helped to erode the hitherto widespread view according to which Ancient Rome demonstrated the incommensurability between republican government and redistribution. But Machiavelli’s immense contribution was obviously based on an understanding of Livy which, to say the least, took considerable interpretative liberties. It is plausible to think, in other words, that Machiavelli made good use of history as archaeology precisely because he was mistaken about Livy’s beliefs, cared little about Livy’s beliefs, or both.

History as Genealogy

*History as genealogy*, unlike the other two modes of history I have discussed, is concerned with similarities between past and present. As such, it seems most obviously to require that one get the history right. If a genealogy of the Westphalian

---

20 Note that I remain agnostic on whether Machiavelli actually misunderstood Livy. He may have grossly misread Livy, or simply disagreed with Livy’s view of the effects of Agrarian Laws. On the criteria I propose, the question about which reading of Machiavelli is more accurate is, in any case, of secondary importance in the eyes of a political theorist. (It certainly would have seemed to be of secondary importance to Machiavelli himself.) Hence, my claim about Machiavelli is modest. All I need to suggest is that in the process of reflecting on Livy’s writing, Machiavelli developed a mode of thinking to which Livy was in fact opposed – and that this may have helped to introduce a different view of property as a serious candidate for the consideration of his contemporaries.
conception of state sovereignty, for example, is meant to call in question the innocuousness of the ideal by pointing out that it originally served colonial purposes, then to show that the Westphalian conception of state sovereignty actually subverted colonial purposes would seem to be a fatal objection.

But, lest the whole enterprise be allowed to fall prey to the “genetic fallacy” – that is, to the erroneous assumption that a concept’s origins license far-reaching conclusions about its normative status in the present – this cannot be an adequate account of history as genealogy. A rose, after all, smells sweetly even if it originated in a dung heap. Similarly, if we believe that the institution of state sovereignty serves good ends today, then the fact that it originated as a tool of colonial oppression is – though interesting – ultimately irrelevant.

Political theorists can give a satisfactory response to those who worry that any use of history as genealogy will fall foul of the genetic fallacy. But, on my view, this response necessarily entails the admission that the value of their genealogical account derives not from its historical accuracy, but rather from the set of reflections it makes possible about the present. Hence, the questions a provocative genealogical account allows us to pose about the present are not rendered irrelevant by the sheer fact that the account itself is inaccurate.

The key to such an account of history as genealogy, one that does not fall foul of the genetic fallacy, lies in Raymond Geuss’s observation that genealogy “is a summons to develop an empirically informed kind of theoretical imagination under the
conditions of perceived danger.”21 This formulation, in turn, alludes to Michel Foucault’s observation that the point of genealogy is not to prove that “X is false” or “X is bad,” but rather to demonstrate that “X is dangerous.”22 Concretely, I take this to mean that the point of demonstrating that, say, the concept of state sovereignty once served colonial purposes is to demonstrate that it is potentially dangerous: given certain historical conditions, it could once again be made to serve sinister goals. Geuss’s account of genealogy escapes the genetic fallacy. It does not assume that state sovereignty has bad consequences today because it had bad consequences yesterday. On the contrary, it merely points out that, if state sovereignty had bad consequences under yesterday’s conditions, then we must worry that analogous conditions might again arise in the future.

Once we’ve formulated the nature of genealogy in this manner, it becomes readily apparent why we need not get the history right even in history as genealogy. Imagine that an historian has argued that conditions Y held in the past, and has convincingly shown that under such conditions bad consequences Z would have followed from the existence of state sovereignty. On my view, this observation furnishes us with the material for a better understanding of state sovereignty even if conditions Y never actually held. After all, conditions Y might come about in the future, and we should then expect bad consequences Z to follow. In short, a genealogical critique of a concept is reason enough for us to worry about the future

---

consequences of the concept even if the situation described is merely possible, rather than having been real in the past.

Note that, yet again, to dismiss my argument would be to dismiss some of the most interesting texts in the history of political thought. Foucault’s many historical mistakes, for example, have been well documented. But it is not clear that his analyses of madness or of sexuality or of different modes of governance lose their relevance as a result. The point is just as clear regarding Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche’s preference for an evaluative scheme in which the term “bad” indicates weak over an evaluative scheme in which the term “bad” indicates wicked is deeply troubling. It will surely remain troubling even if we reject his historical account, according to which the origin of the term “bad” as indicating wickedness lies in a “slave revolt” or an “inversion of all values.” If Nietzsche’s historical account proved accurate, we should still attempt to resist his arguments; conversely, if his historical account proved vastly inaccurate, we should hardly think that his formidable challenge can easily be dismissed.

In sum, *history as genealogy*, just like *history as antidote* and *history as archaeology*, can be a powerful mode of political theory. All three modes of history can contribute to our understanding of the present political world even when they entail historical inaccuracies.

III Objections
There are many potential objections to my argument. Perhaps the most damaging is the suspicion that I am mounting a defense of philistinism. If we are sanctioned to get the past wrong, doesn’t this imply that the careful reconstruction of past meanings has no value? Luckily, the answer to this question is simple enough. In no way do I mean to imply that the study of history for the purpose of reconstructing past meanings is devoid of value. On the contrary, history has immense intrinsic value, and this more than justifies the existence of professional historians. The pursuit of this particular kind of value should be the primary concern of intellectual historians. But, though it may, it need not be the primary concern of political theorists. To deny the value of history is to be a philistine; to point out that the pursuit of historical accuracy need not be the concern of political theorists is merely to allow them to produce better scholarship.

The charge of philistinism is answered easily enough. But there is a related question that is rather more troubling. It is this: if we are such careless students of history that we get it utterly wrong, how are we supposed to learn anything at all from that misunderstood past? There does seem to be a real tension between my stance that to study the history of political thought should be important to political theorists, and my seemingly opposite stance that to get interpretations of the history of political thought right should not be important. Surely, the study of history cannot be important if no negative consequences follow from getting the history wrong? There is, I admit, an air of paradox here. But it can be cleared up if we carefully
distinguish between the different levels at which the question of historical accuracy could be posed.

On this view, we should distinguish questions about the conceptual *necessity* of historical accuracy from both questions about its potential *relevance* in particular argumentative contexts and questions about how we can make history a useful *heuristic*. So far, we have been concerned with the conceptual *necessity* of historical accuracy. This is the level at which defenders of the need for historical accuracy have traditionally staked their case. But it is also the level at which my argument points to the clearest dividing line between political theory and intellectual history.

Specifically, I have argued that, on the Skinnerian account of the usefulness of the past for the present, there are no inherent reasons why we might not be able to learn from historical interpretations that are false. Now, even people who accept that there is no conceptual link between historical accuracy and contemporary relevance may argue that, as a matter of scholarly practice, these two different goals are one and the same. But if my claim that we can sometimes get the history wrong is counterintuitive, then this converse stance entails commitments that, on due reflection, turn out to be even more counterintuitive. After all, this stance would not just claim that getting the history right is often useful; rather, it would have to claim that a more accurate understanding of a text or historical set of institutions is *always, without exception* more fruitful for thinking about the present. But why should that be the case?
The stance that the goals of historical accuracy and contemporary relevance just so happen to coincide at all times has the same structural features as an act-utilitarian stance that denies that, on act-utilitarian principles, we should under certain circumstances feed a person to the lions for the delectation of the masses. Such act-utilitarians would argue that the pain of an innocent victim who is being fed to the lions will always outweigh the pleasure of the onlookers – even if millions and millions of sadists are giddily watching the spectacle on their TV screens. Utilitarians would, in other words, have to argue that it just so happens to be true about the world that the conceptually distinct goals of utility maximization and respect for bodily inviolability never come to clash, empirically speaking. Similarly, skeptics about my argument would have to claim that it just so happens to be true about the world that the conceptually distinct goals of historical accuracy and contemporary usefulness will never come to clash, empirically speaking. A single example in which these two distinct goals come apart is enough to prove my point. In Section II, I have offered numerous such examples.²³

Historical accuracy, then, is not always required for a political theorist to derive real contemporary insights from her study of the past. This is an important realization; for example, it implies that the work of a political theorist should not be judged by the same standards that apply to the work of intellectual historians. But even if this radical separation between history and political theory is true at the conceptual

²³ The only somewhat plausible account on which the two goals of historical accuracy and contemporary usefulness would reliably dovetail is the one which Skinner rejects most decisively: the view according to which the only reason to study the history of political thought is the hope of rediscovering some authorial wisdom which has forever been preserved in the texts of past geniuses.
level, we might wish to ask, at a more practical level, whether political theorists
drawing upon history might not be most likely to learn from the past if they get it
right. This does intuitively seem to be the case. Surely, the careful, rather than
superficial, study of past texts and institutions will, generally speaking, be a more
useful heuristic for generating insights about the present (though only in most cases,
and only up to a point).

Far from being a concession undermining the main thrust of my thesis, this stance
follows directly from my arguments in Section I. For the Skinnerian Political
Theorist, the study of past texts and institutions is important because, in painting a
vivid picture of a world dissimilar to ours, it allows us to challenge our own
assumptions. To study a text that was written in the context of a very different
political world, which contains many alien value judgments, and perhaps even
different standards for what makes an argument convincing, enables us to see our
own world afresh. But it is not easy to reap these benefits. Careless readers of past
texts are always in danger of projecting their own ideas and assumptions into
anything they study. Such careless readers cannot profit from studying the past in
the ways suggested here: for wherever they cast their eyes, they behold but a sub-
par version of the present. Hence, the Skinnerian Political Theorist will share the
intellectual historian’s criticisms of this kind of sloppy appeal to history. To garner
real insights from history requires both historical imagination and hard work.

Nevertheless, intellectual historians would be wrong to claim that history cannot be
of use to political theorists if their interpretations are historically inaccurate. The
stricture that one will learn from the past only if one studies it sympathetically does not entail the stricture that one must be correct, or even aim to be correct, about the historical meaning of a text. It is true, for example, that history is a promising heuristic because the rich records of past societies allow us to immerse ourselves into another world better than we could merely by carrying out thought experiments. Yet, heuristically speaking, we may get the best perspective on our own society at the point at which we have understood how different those past ways of thinking about politics were – but are not yet bogged down in the minutiae of particular debates with little bearing on our own political situation. Similarly, one of the reasons why we are interested in the great political texts of the past is that the arguments of actual people actually attempting to solve pressing political or conceptual problems are likely to be subtler than, say, the political arguments of characters in a science fiction novel. Yet it is perfectly possible that, if we carefully study the texts of a past thinker, aware of both the political situation in which he found himself and the concepts he had at his disposal, we may falsely attribute to him a theory that is of greater contemporary interest than his true position. Political theorists who wish to exploit history’s heuristic value will need to have a keen awareness of the difficulties involved in understanding what is interesting about the past, then. This does not mean, however, that they will necessarily have to be historically accurate.

24 The same reason explains why the study of history is likely to be more fruitful than the study of science fiction.
This brings us to a third level at which we might wish to pose the question of historical accuracy. The conceptual necessity of historical accuracy and history's heuristic value aside, might there not be particular argumentative contexts in which the question of truth does become highly relevant? This too seems to me to be true without detracting from the paper's main thesis.

It is most trivially true in the context of “negative” arguments that are directed against claims from historical authority. Let us imagine that an originalist constitutional scholar claims that the Second Amendment to the US Constitution outlaws all forms of gun control because the Founding Fathers intended to safeguard each citizen's right to carry guns under any circumstances. Let us further imagine that a political theorist responds by emphasizing that the Second Amendment predicates gun rights on the need for “a free State” to dispose of “a well regulated militia.” On his view, the Founders were actually motivated by a traditional republican skepticism of standing armies, so that their wishes are, for one, not really concerned with gun ownership for private purposes and, for another, in any case violated due to the existence of the professional armed forces. Obviously, in this particular context, the question of whether or not the political theorist's claim is historically accurate is highly relevant – but that is because he is responding to an historical argument from authority.

A subtle account of the relationship between history and political theory, then, has to distinguish different levels of analysis. Might the real facts of history, under certain circumstances, be relevant to the lessons we can draw from it? Yes. Is the
scrupulous study of history likely to be a better heuristic for formulating interesting thoughts than a mistaken, superficial reading? Sure. But, in any of the three uses of history for political theory defended here, is it intrinsically necessary that one get the history right? No.

Before concluding my argument, I want to consider one last, and rather different, objection. It might be said that the argument defended here, though broadly correct, is less novel than I claim. Richard Rorty, for example, has argued that there are at least two different ways to approach the history of philosophy. We can engage in “rational reconstruction,” and treat the philosophers we study as colleagues with whom we might be able to exchange views. Such rational reconstructions will be driven by our own concerns, so there might be a number of rational reconstructions of each individual thinker, each of them useful in their own right. Alternatively, we can engage in what we might term “historical reconstruction.” This method is more contextualist; for example, it recognizes that Aristotle and Kant did not mean

---

25 The “historical reconstruction” position, in turn, splits into two sub-conceptions. On the first, we are trying to render as accurately as possible what John Locke or Jean-Jacques Rousseau actually thought, even if they appear to have been, on their own terms, confused about a particular issue. On the second, we are trying to render as accurately as possible what Locke or Rousseau might have viewed as their best considered position. If a throw-away remark about a point of detail straightforwardly contradicted a structural element of their theory, for example, we should disregard it in our historical reconstruction under the assumption that they would themselves have changed their mind in this way if pressed. This position is nonetheless far from “rational reconstruction.” For example, it would attempt to explain that – given his different conception of what constituted satisfactory evidence, and background assumptions concerning the truth of the bible – Jean Bodin had good reason to believe in the existence of witchcraft. (Cf. Skinner, Quentin: “Interpretation, Rationality and Truth,” in Visions of Politics, Vol. 1, p. 30.
to contribute to modern-day debates in the philosophy of language or meta-ethics. These two choices seem, Rorty argues, to present us with an unenviable dilemma:

[E]ither we anachronistically impose enough of our problems and vocabulary on the dead to make them conversational partners, or we confine our interpretative activity to making their falsehoods look less silly by placing them in the context of the benighted times in which they were written. Those alternatives, however, do not constitute a dilemma. We should do both of these things but do them separately.26

Rorty’s view bears a superficial similarity to mine. I too suggest a conceptual separation between two enterprises, that of the intellectual historian and that of the political theorist. I too think that, for certain purposes, it is irrelevant whether a reconstruction of “Aristotle” can really be said to restate what Aristotle meant. Yet, on closer examination, Rorty’s argument turns out to be very different from mine. Rational reconstruction, after all, is not at all the same as my suggested uses of history as antidote, history as archaeology and history as genealogy.27 Unlike the uses of history defended here, rational reconstruction attempts to describe the golden nugget of truth hidden away in the work of Aristotle or Kant. It is, in fact, more akin to the earlier uses of the history of philosophy criticized by Skinner than to Skinner’s own concerns.28

---

27 I do not mean to deny the value of rational reconstruction; it is simply not my primary concern in the present context.
28 See for example Skinner’s criticism of J. L. Mackie’s position in: Skinner, Quentin: “The idea of negative liberty: philosophical and historical perspectives,” Philosophy in History, Rorty, Schneewind & Skinner (Eds.), Cambridge: CUP, 1998, pp. 200-1. Interestingly, the position of philosophers like Mackie is in this respect similar to the position of the Straussians.
These differences between the two lines of argument become amply evident as soon as Rorty talks about uses of history that are similar to what is suggested here. Quoting Skinner, Rorty maintains that historical reconstruction can teach us to distinguish “what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements.” And historical reconstruction, Rorty assumes, is most emphatically concerned with past meanings; unlike me, then, he believes that this way of engaging with the past requires that one get the history right. The debate between advocates of historical reconstruction and advocates of rational reconstruction is thus orthogonal to our present concerns. One way to express the novelty of my claim is to say that, from the perspective of political theory, historical inaccuracies need not be a fatal objection even to work that takes itself to engage in “historical”, rather than “rational,” reconstruction.

IV Conclusion

My argument that we can learn from the past even when we get it wrong challenges the pieties of many historically-inspired political theorists. They – or rather, for I count myself among this group, we – have two possible responses. The first legitimate response to my paper would be to point out that I have limited myself to disputing a necessary link between historical accuracy and political theory for uses

30 The same also holds true for Geistesgeschichte, the third genre endorsed by Rorty. (ibid., esp. pp. 56-61).
of history drawn from one particular tradition. So perhaps it is possible to formulate a rather different account of the potential uses of history for the present – an account that would manage to posit a necessary connection between historical accuracy and political theory. While I remain skeptical that any such account can be found, its discovery would certainly be of great importance. If any explorers wish to take up this challenge, I hope that my paper, in showing what structure such an argument would need to take, will serve as a helpful companion to them on the first part of their journey.

The second response we could – and, in my view, should – adopt is to accept that there is no necessary link between historical accuracy and contemporary relevance. Because of the potential use of careful intellectual history as a *heuristic* as well as the *relevance* of historical accuracy in particular contexts, we will still value political theorists who have the ability to study past texts and institutions with care. But we will also become very aware that, insofar as these scholars are political theorists rather than intellectual historians, historical accuracy will not straightforwardly factor into our assessment of their work. On this view, a work of political theory can be exceptional even though it is historically inaccurate, just as an historically accurate account can be lacking as political theory because its contemporary implications are inexistent or conceptually confused.

This somewhat abstract thought has a very practical upshot: we historically-inclined political theorists should attach many more disclaimers to our work. Far too rarely do we make explicit the precise nature of a paper by saying, for example: “In what
follows, I present a view that illuminates problem A. While it is inspired by a close reading of famous historical thinker B, recent research by intellectual historian C demonstrates that we cannot attribute this view to B.” Or even: “In what follows, I present a view which illuminates problem A. This view is inspired by a close reading of famous historical thinker B. I do not know whether it also represents an accurate historical reconstruction of B’s thought.”

This methodological prescription may sound as though I were advocating a callous, or at any rate lazy, disregard for the truth. Shouldn’t academics always be beholden to the truth? Indeed they should. But, properly understood, my paper shows how historically inspired political theorists can become more scrupulous in this regard. For by stating openly that I’m unsure whether the position inspired by Hobbes can be attributed to Hobbes, I show myself anything but indifferent to truth. The indifferent theorist-cum-historian simply attributes to Hobbes whatever position is of interest for present purposes, sans disclaimer. On the contrary, to admit that the position inspired by Hobbes might not – and need not – have been Hobbes’s own view is a mark of self-awareness and due humility. For that very reason, the methodological prescriptions suggested here signal respect, not contempt, for historical accuracy and the historian’s craft.

Let me conclude by pointing out that my argument, if indeed it is correct, has another important implication for the practice of political theory. At the moment, many historically-inspired political theorists are plagued by a deep confusion regarding the purpose of their enterprise. On the one hand, they attempt to follow
the current methodological prescription in reconstructing the meaning of past texts as accurately as possible. On the other hand, not content with recovering historical meaning as a goal in itself, they wish to reconstruct the thought of past thinkers in such a way that it seems as coherent, compelling, original and relevant as possible. But if my argument is sound, then sometimes the goal of being right about the past and the goal of using such texts as a springboard to say something interesting about the present will tug in opposite directions. Ultimately, we are thus in danger of producing theory that is only somewhat coherent and history that is only somewhat accurate.

This point holds true both for many practitioners of rational reconstruction and for many practitioners of historical reconstruction. For example, in “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Isaiah Berlin, who might be considered a practitioner of rational reconstruction, is at pains to establish the historical pedigree of the proposed analytical distinction between positive and negative liberty. Meanwhile, many practitioners of historical reconstruction appear to assume that to reconstruct, say, Aristotle’s position on *akrasia* as accurately as possible would also afford philosophical insights. Historically inspired political theorists will attempt in vain to square this circle unless we acknowledge that the two goals of historical meaning and contemporary theoretical interest sometimes clash. But to acknowledge that historical meaning and contemporary theoretical interest can clash is to accept that political theorists can fruitfully draw on the past even while getting it wrong.
In sum, even though, as Skinner emphasized, we have to do our own thinking for ourselves, we can turn to the past for inspiration. Political theorists can make valuable contributions to our understanding, normative as well as descriptive, of the present political world by using *history as antidote, history as archaeology* and *history as genealogy*. To succeed in this important undertaking, we need to study intellectual history in a rather peculiar way. On the one hand, we must study past texts or institutions carefully and sympathetically, lest we merely see ourselves reflected back into a boring, sanitized past. On the other hand, this vindication of the importance of history need not entail the belief that political theorists, qua political theorists, actually have to get the history right. We must accept that some of the most important advances in our present-day understanding of politics might be based on interpretations of past texts or institutions that are plain wrong.