

THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL, c.1875–c.1975

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Abstract: The ‘Cambridge School’ is a term associated with some historians of political thought who since the 1960s have claimed to have something to say of contemporary relevance about politics. Here it is argued that the School has to be understood as a long consequence of Seeley’s determination at the foundation of the Historical Tripos in the 1870s to relate history and politics to each other. For a century almost all the major figures in Cambridge agreed that history and politics should be related, but disagreed about how to do it. The writings of Seeley, Sidgwick, Acton, Maitland, Figgis, Barker, Oakeshott, Cowling, Laslett, Runciman, Dunn, Skinner and others are studied here in order to indicate how the historians of the Cambridge School for a century attempted to relate history and politics in not one but four ways — through political science, the history of political thought, political philosophy and political theology.

Keywords: Cambridge, political science, history of political thought, political philosophy, political theology, Seeley, Sidgwick, Acton, Maitland, Figgis, Barker, Oakeshott, Cowling, Laslett, Runciman, Dunn, Skinner.

It may perhaps be said that as Oxford has wedded political theory to philosophy, so Cambridge has wedded it to history.

Ernest Barker²

Introduction

Cambridge is not a school in any simple sense. It is, instead, an ancient university which established a tradition of teaching about politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as it attempted to become a modern university.³ It did so in a highly distinctive way: by harnessing the study of politics to the study of history. There has been so fundamental a relation between politics and history in Cambridge that if we are to talk of a ‘Cambridge School’ at all, it should not be with regard only to works in the history of political thought written by Skinner, Dunn, Pocock and some others since the 1960s — not least because Pocock was only at Cambridge for a short time as a graduate student, and because Dunn more or less abandoned the history of political thought after writing his book on Locke in 1969. Skinner, of course,

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² Ernest Barker, ‘Reflections on English Political Theory’, *Political Studies*, 1 (1953), pp. 6–12, at p. 11.

³ For history at Cambridge, see G. Kitson Clark, ‘A Hundred Years of the Teaching of History at Cambridge 1873–1973’, *Historical Journal*, 16 (1973), pp. 35–53. For broader historical context see Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Revolution of the Dons* (Cambridge, 1981); and Reba Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The Making of an English Elite 1870–1930* (Stanford CA, 1994).

spent most of his academic career at Cambridge, eventually as Regius Professor of Modern History. But Skinner, alone, is not a school. So if we are to talk of a Cambridge School — and I see no reason why not, as long as we recognize that it is not a term with any formal significance — then it should be understood that it is a school of understanding of *history in relation to politics* and *politics in relation to history*. This school is not one which emerged in, say, 1956 (when Laslett suggested political philosophy was dead) or in 1969 (when Skinner wrote his famous essay on the methodology of the history of political thought). It has had a continuous history since the foundation of the Historical Tripos in 1875. Skinner, often taken to be the symbol of the triumph of this tradition, may in fact be the symbol of its decline and fall. Until the very late 1960s, the teaching of politics in Cambridge was almost entirely carried out within the History Faculty and therefore mostly, although not always, by historians. But since then, the emphasis on the history of political thought within the History Faculty and the concomitant exclusion of political science, political philosophy and political theology has, if anything, left the Cambridge school with what I would argue is a highly eroded capacity to say anything about politics at all.

The secondary literature so far written on the Cambridge School has either tended to emphasize the early establishment of political science within the Historical Tripos in the era of Seeley,⁴ or has dealt only with the intensification of history of political thought in the era of Skinner⁵ — or has suggested that the relation between these two episodes is all that is of interest.⁶ This would be valuable, especially if it were to be supplemented, as it has not yet been, by a study of the very large number of reflections that men like Maitland, Barker or Dunn made as they went along. But the distinctive purpose of this essay is to do something which has not yet been done, which is to offer a view of the entire history of political study in relation to history in Cambridge, considering not only the formal or established or recently famous

⁴ For instance, Stefan Collini, ‘A Place in the Syllabus: Political Science at Cambridge’, in *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, ed. S. Collini, D. Winch and J. Burrow (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 341–63; and Robert Wokler, ‘The Professoriate of Political Thought in England since 1914’, in *History of Political Thought in National Context*, ed. Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 134–58.

⁵ See *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge, 1988); Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge, 2003); and *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, ed. Annabel Brett and James Tully (Cambridge, 2006).

⁶ Mark Goldie, ‘J.N. Figgis and the History of Political Thought in Cambridge’, in *Cambridge Minds*, ed. Richard Mason (Cambridge, 1994).

elements of the story, but the entire range of possibilities which were sketched about how politics and history could be related.⁷

History was not simply political history in the usual sense of a sequence of events in politics in the past: instead history was something from the past which could be of relevance to the understanding of politics. The question was, what was this ‘something’? In the case of the political science advocated by Seeley, this something was facts which could be generalized in laws (as if above history); in the case of the history of political thought, it was thoughts which could be considered as actions, accidents or antecedents (as if across history); in the case of political philosophy, it was intimations of eternal truths (as if beyond history); and in the case of political theology, it was a singular event which put all other events in their place (as if through history). History was never history for its own sake: everyone sought a recognition of the significance of past politics for present or future politics. The scientists wanted to study politics objectively, as if the historical study of constitutions would yield demonstrable laws (and therefore would suggest something about how politics should be practised in the future); the historians had a sense that this was a mistake, and thought that politics should be studied in terms of the thoughts which had made it a meaningful human endeavour in the past; the philosophers agreed with the historians that it was a mistake to study politics scientifically, but also thought it was a mistake to be distracted by the endless particularities of our history when politics should be understood in terms of a continuous engagement with an unchanging predicament in such a way that politics could never be understood as the highest form of life; and the theologians agreed with the philosophers that the historians had surrendered the unity of the subject, but also thought that they were mistaken in attempting to trawl through all history to find intimations of eternity when it could only rightly be found in the event which gave all history its significance.

These four traditions taken together are a truer representation of the attempt to understand politics in terms of history in Cambridge since the late nineteenth century than any one tradition taken by itself. The political papers offered within the Historical Tripos from its foundation in 1875 indicate how some of these traditions established hegemony over the subject in the following century. At the outset there was a paper on Principles of Political Philosophy and General Jurisprudence. This was replaced, in 1885, by Political Science, which was, in 1897, divided into Inductive Politics and Deductive Politics. These two papers, although renamed Political Science A and B, existed until 1931 when the former was replaced by the History of Political Thought and the latter renamed Theory of the Modern State (and, in 1951, Theories of the Modern State). In 1975 there was an expansion of the History

⁷ For an early attempt to get beyond the history of political thought see James Alexander, ‘An Essay on Historical, Philosophical and Theological Attitudes to Modern Political Thought’, *History of Political Thought*, 25 (2004), pp. 116–48.

of Political Thought into two papers, chronologically divided into before and after 1700, while the Theories of the Modern State was renamed Political Philosophy. In 1997 the Political Philosophy paper (the descendant of Deductive Politics, Political Science B and Theories of the Modern State) was incorporated into a paper called Political Philosophy and the History of Political Thought from c.1890. Political Science was forgotten after its removal from the Tripos in 1931 until it was restored alongside Psychology and Sociology in a separate Social and Political Sciences Tripos. Political theology, on the other hand, never had a formal status, instead remaining, throughout the century, effectively secular, silent or subversive.

Politics was taught in the century after the foundation of the Tripos in 1875 by — in order of birth — J.R. Seeley, Lord Acton, Oscar Browning, Henry Sidgwick, William Cunningham, B.E. Hammond, F.W. Maitland, Thomas Thorneley, J.B. Bury, G.L. Dickinson, G.E. Green, J.N. Figgis, Ernest Barker, R.V. Laurence, Harold Temperley, F.A. Simpson, C.K. Webster, F.E. Adcock, C.N.S. Woolf, H.F. Russell Smith, J.R.M. Butler, E.J. Passant, Paul Vellacott, David Knowles, Michael Postan, Herbert Butterfield, Denis Brogan, H.O. Evennett, Michael Oakeshott, Charles Smyth, R.J. White, Christopher Morris, Walter Ullmann, W.B. Gallie, Moses Finley, David Thomson, Peter Laslett, Noel Annan, Arthur Hibbert, Duncan Forbes, J.R. Pole, J.G.A. Pocock, C.W. Parkin, Maurice Cowling, W.D.J. Cargill Thompson, Philip Abrams, W.G. Runciman, John Burrow, David Luscombe, J.H. Goldthorpe, Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, John Barber, Roy Porter and Richard Tuck.⁸ By any standard this is a formidable list of names. Not all made original contributions to the understanding of the subject. Some taught only within colleges and lectured for the university for a year or two, others taught for some time before leaving to take up posts in other universities, and yet others lectured for the university and taught for the colleges for many years without contributing anything major to the understanding of the subject. Before 1975 perhaps only Seeley, Sidgwick, Acton, Maitland, Figgis, Barker, Oakeshott, Butterfield, Cowling, Skinner and Dunn can be said to have contributed something decisive or original to the understanding of the relation between history and politics. Since 1975 there has been mostly repetition or diminution.

In what follows I forsake and foreshorten chronology in order to trace the four different ways in which politics was understood by the historians in Cambridge as a consequence of the harnessing of history to politics. The story may be considered excessively parochial, since it has to ignore developments in Oxford, Harvard, Berlin and elsewhere. Of course a concern with the

⁸ Information from the volumes of the *Cambridge University Reporter*. The list of lectures delivered by these figures in the History Faculty makes interesting reading and could elsewhere be the foundation of a chronological study of shifts in historical understanding.

relations of history, philosophy and politics was common elsewhere in the late nineteenth century: but I hope I can show that due to the continuity of the Tripos all the figures discussed here believed that politics could not be studied apart from history. If there is an argument it is that there was far more to Cambridge than the history of political thought, which should now perhaps be considered nothing more than the fallow field that enabled the other three fields to flourish. If the Cambridge historians achieved anything, then it was because of such intellectual crop rotation — now, sadly, far less likely since the enclosure of academic fields. To use a Skinnerian trope, the history of political thought for several decades has been a *synecdoche*, a part which stands for the whole of the understandings possible when history and politics are brought together.

I

The first tradition, political science, was the particular legacy of Seeley. He was the Regius Professor of Modern History at the time of the foundation of the Historical Tripos, and an influential lecturer on politics until his death in 1895. In his inaugural lecture he argued that history should avoid the ‘modest thoroughness’ which had hitherto characterized scholarship in Cambridge, that it should be understood as an ‘experimental study’ like ‘natural science’, and that it should be considered the foundation of ‘a school of statesmanship’.⁹ In his lectures on political science he declared that history was ‘truncated’ and ‘incomplete’ without political science — nothing but ‘romance, curiosity, poesy’ — and that political science was ‘hollow’ and ‘baseless’ without history.¹⁰ He was contemptuous of the ‘old path of mere erudition, of investigation for investigation’s sake, of collecting facts by endless research and housing them in scholarly books without asking for any principle which might bring the confused heap into order’.¹¹ He thought there should be ‘no distinction between the historian and the political philosopher’.¹² History was a ‘means to an end’, which was the understanding of the actual modern state. This was the novelty: that the subject-matter was the state itself. (This was a view which was eroded in the twentieth century, although Skinner was still to make the state the *telos* of his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* in 1978.) But Seeley was concerned with what he supposed was the actual state. He ‘kept close to history’, built ‘no imaginary state’, used no ‘*à priori* method’, applied no theory in advance to his facts, avoided ‘speculative’ reasoning and only reasoned on ‘obvious facts’ taken from history in order to

⁹ J.R. Seeley, ‘The Teaching of Politics’ (1869), in Gustav Adolf Rein, *Sir John Robert Seeley: A Study of the Historian*, trans. John Herkless (Wolfeboro NH, 1987), pp. 101–18, at pp. 104, 105 and 116.

¹⁰ J.R. Seeley, *Introduction to Political Science* (London, 1896), p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 362.

remove ‘the misunderstanding and illusions which in this subject more than any other are caused by laxity and popular recklessness in the use of words’.¹³ He argued that since political science was ‘frankly inductive’ it was not its purpose to ‘mix up what ought to be with what is’, to ‘show us what is right’, or to ‘find the perfect or ideal state’.¹⁴ It was, despite Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke and Montesquieu, not a matter for speculation but for science — a historical science of comparative method.

This was a robust view of politics. But no one defended it after Seeley’s death. Historians tended to retreat into proper history or, eventually, under Acton’s influence, the history of political thought. But although Seeley’s conception of political science was obviously flawed, it established in Cambridge the principle that the study of politics was not a mere contemporary study, it gave the study of history an edge it would otherwise have lacked, and it encouraged later historians in Cambridge to reflect on how the relation between the two should be properly — historically, philosophically or theologically — understood. Without Seeley’s conception of political science it is unlikely that the history of political thought and political philosophy would have been taught within the Historical Tripos; and it was only long after these other traditions established themselves, and succeeded in forcing political science out of the Tripos in 1931, that there were renewed attempts to defend a different conception of political science. Whereas Seeley in the 1880s had laid emphasis on the *state*, later historians who wanted to restore political science in the 1960s laid emphasis on *society*, and hence sociology or social science.

Sociology had never been taken seriously in Cambridge. Seeley, Sidgwick, Barker, Oakeshott and others were hostile to it. In the 1920s the University even turned down money offered to create a Chair in Sociology. It only agreed to establish a Chair in Political Science at the time because ‘political science’ could be interpreted, as Barker, the first Professor of Political Science, interpreted it, as the broad study of politics.¹⁵ In the 1930s the émigré Postan attempted to encourage the harnessing of history and sociology together so that history could be more relevant to the present. He claimed that historians did not ‘expose themselves to the challenge of contemporary politics or philosophical debate as openly and as fully as they did a century ago’ and thought that they could do so by relating the ‘facts’ of history to the ‘general universal laws’ of sociology.¹⁶ But these arguments were not taken up until around 1960 by Laslett, Runciman and Dunn, who complicated them with an enthusiasm

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 362–3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 37 and 18.

¹⁵ Martin Bulmer, ‘Sociology and Political Science at Cambridge in the 1920s: An Opportunity Missed and an Opportunity Taken’, *Cambridge Review*, 27 April 1981, pp. 456–9.

¹⁶ Michael Postan, *Fact and Relevance: Essays on Historical Method* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 131 and 56.

for the history of political thought, with a distrust of political philosophy, and with a desire to see philosophy and sociology come together into what Laslett and Runciman called a 'prescriptive political theory'.¹⁷

Laslett noted in 1958 that Cambridge had 'no teachers of politics, no sociology, and the smallest number of philosophers, in relation to [its] size, in the whole wide world'.¹⁸ He himself was a historian of political thought, influential as the editor of Filmer's *Patriarcha* and Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, but he did not consider that history alone was enough to counter the apparent reluctance of philosophers to engage with politics. Behind the 'obscurantism' of Oakeshott's philosophical writings Laslett found only the 'discouraging' truth that the 'politics of metaphor and paradox' was 'calculated to leave the situation just as it [was]';¹⁹ and so he declared, as Seeley might have done, that 'Rousseau's General Will, Hegel's Spirit of the Nation, Bosanquet's Real and Apparent Wills [and] Gierke's Real Personality of Groups' were 'metaphorical', 'idealistic', 'sceptical'. No 'workable theory of politics' would be developed until such political philosophy had been 'set aside'.²⁰ By this time, Oakeshott had left Cambridge, and only Cowling maintained something like Oakeshott's position. When Cowling attempted to argue against Laslett in the *Cambridge Review* in 1959 many anthropologists and sociologists, like Fortes, Shils and Goody, came out on Laslett's side.²¹ Two short books emerged out of this debate in 1963, both published by Cambridge University Press. Runciman's *Social Science and Political Theory* put the case for the combination of history, sociology and philosophy, and Cowling's *The Nature and Limits of Political Science*, which shall be discussed later, put the case against.

Runciman was less hostile to political philosophy than Laslett, but agreed that it could not do without 'political science or political sociology' if 'the most important questions of contemporary politics' were to be solved.²² He understood political philosophy to be not only a matter of theory but of practical ideals and therefore 'in some sense prescriptive'; and he understood sociology to be 'the systematic study of collective human behaviour' in terms of 'general, testable, explanatory propositions'.²³ Runciman admitted that the 'logical relation between a (more or less empirical) proposition in political

¹⁷ *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. Peter Laslett and W.G. Runciman, Second Series (Oxford, 1967), p. ix.

¹⁸ Peter Laslett, 'Cambridge and the Social Sciences', *Cambridge Opinion*, 10 October 1958, pp. 5–8.

¹⁹ Peter Laslett, *Cambridge Journal*, 5 (1951–2), pp. 765–8.

²⁰ *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. Peter Laslett (Oxford, 1956), pp. 159–60.

²¹ See the discussion involving many correspondents (including Laslett and Cowling) in the *Cambridge Review*, 80 (1958–9), pp. 246–519.

²² W.G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 85.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

science and a (more or less prescriptive) proposition in political philosophy' was an 'intractable problem'.²⁴ But he remained convinced that the question of 'how societies do behave' was inseparable from the question of 'how they ought to'.²⁵ 'Since the prescriptions of political philosophers depend for their usefulness or conviction on their analysis of actual political situations', he claimed, 'any advance in our knowledge of actual political situations is likely to have important implications for political philosophy'.²⁶ Seeley would have recognized these arguments, though to Runciman's mind they legislated for the harnessing of sociology to philosophy, leaving history nowhere. Runciman later was to express some doubts about his original arguments about sociology, though he clearly remained committed to the idea of a human science of some sort.²⁷

Dunn was more determined than either Laslett or Runciman were to hold onto the relation between politics and history (rather than sociology). In an early essay he echoed Postan in saying that the 'badly constructed [Historical] Tripos' no longer provided the 'intelligent orientation to the contemporary world' which he thought it had done 'at the end of the nineteenth century'.²⁸ In searching for such an orientation, he did more than any other writer of his time to reflect on all four traditions discussed in this essay. He began as a historian of political thought who argued that Locke's politics were no foundation for modern politics because of 'the intimate dependence of an extremely high proportion of Locke's arguments for their very intelligibility, let alone plausibility, on a series of theological commitments'.²⁹ He then abandoned history to consider the contributions of science and philosophy to political understanding. But he found it 'increasingly hard to believe' that political judgments 'were grounded in anything at all dependable'. It sometimes seemed as if the study of politics was no more than 'spiritual self-cultivation for those with the inclination and opportunity to pursue it'. Dunn combined a historian's dismay about the distance between theory and practice with a political scientist's eagerness to reconcile 'aspiration' and 'expectation'. Like Seeley, he thought that political study ought to be of actual, contemporary benefit to the practice of politics, but he was far warier than Seeley had been about the lessons of history.³⁰

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁷ For Runciman's eventual doubts about sociology, see W.G. Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1997), Vol. III, pp. 302–3.

²⁸ John Dunn and Alastair Young, *Cambridge Opinion*, October 1964, p. 11.

²⁹ John Dunn, *The Political Theory of John Locke* (Cambridge, 1969), p. xi.

³⁰ John Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* (Cambridge, 2nd edn., 1993), pp. vii, 126, 127 and 132.

Dunn thought that if political science had a future, it had to recognize that politics had lost its theological roots, that it was in an unsatisfactory philosophical state (not least because the Western philosophical inheritance was a limited one), and that it was of contemporary relevance only insofar as it recognized that the entirety of political understanding was historically constituted.³¹ There was such a profound sense of the difficulty of achieving anything in political science that the inference must be that Dunn hoped Runciman was right but feared Cowling was right. His judgment — which sounds like a compromise between Seeley, Oakeshott and Skinner — was that the study of politics was relevant, was a matter of philosophical importance and yet had to be understood historically because the ‘attempt to understand politics’ had ‘no clear boundaries’, ‘no uncontroversially given core’ and was part of ‘the struggle to win from often inaccessible and refractory seams, the materials for grasping the possibilities and dangers of the human world as this still confronts us’. If nothing was eternally true, then political science could avoid the shallowness of either positivity or piety only by turning to the history of political thought.³²

II

The second tradition, the history of political thought, emerged out of hostility to Seeley’s conception of political science. But, as we will see, although far less obviously flawed than political science, the history of political thought suffered from a fundamental ambivalence about its relevance to actual politics. Historians sometimes claimed that if the history of political thought were good history, then it would eschew any simple attempt to relate past theories to the present, but at other times they claimed that good history could enable us to restore the relation between past and present theories.

Historians at first were hostile to Seeley’s conception of political science because of its suggestion that history was secondary to something else. Bury’s famous suggestion that history was a ‘science, no less and no more’ was an outright rebuttal of Seeley’s view that history was the ‘handmaid’ of another science.³³ Most historians agreed with Maitland that political science was either ‘history or humbug’,³⁴ and there is no question that it was this sort of thought which led directly to the classic defence of history as history,

³¹ For Dunn’s doubts about political philosophy, see John Dunn, ‘The Future of Political Philosophy in the West’, in J. Dunn, *Rethinking Modern Political Theory: Essays 1979–83* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 171–89.

³² John Dunn, ‘The History of Political Theory’, in J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 26–7 and 30.

³³ J.B. Bury, *The Science of History* (Cambridge, 1903), p. 42.

³⁴ Thomas Thornely, *Cambridge Memories (The Lighter Side of Long Ago)* (London, 1936), pp. 79–80. Skinner put it slightly differently (‘history or ideology’) about fifteen years ago in a public lecture in the School of Pythagoras in St John’s College.

Butterfield's *Whig Interpretation of History* of 1931, and through Butterfield's direct influence on Laslett and Pocock, to Laslett's edition of *Patriarcha* in 1949, Pocock's *Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* in 1957, and everything which followed Skinner's methodological advocacy of the history of political thought as history in 1969. None of this would have been possible if the historians opposed to political science — Prothero, Ward, Creighton, Maitland, Cunningham and others — had succeeded in removing it altogether from the Tripos. One reason it was not removed was because Acton, Seeley's successor as Regius Professor of Modern History, lent his authority to the view that the unity of history was constituted by the history of ideas.

In his inaugural lecture Acton claimed that he 'had not come to Cambridge with any design of reorganising the scheme of the Tripos' but because he thought that 'some knowledge of the essentials of the history of thought, especially of political thinking, was needed by the side of the history of action'.³⁵ Acton thought, and Figgis was to agree with him, that writings from the past were not to be studied just because they were relevant to modern concerns, but because they conveyed a better sense of the ideas which had been held in the past — those ideas which separated the medieval, for instance, from the modern.³⁶ It was in Figgis's work in the history of political thought that the historians found a positive answer to Seeley's conception of political science. History was no longer, as Seeley thought, a repository of facts: it was an archive of continuities and discontinuities in ideas. As far as Figgis was concerned, it demonstrated that there was no 'immutable' system of politics, no set of 'eternal principles' and no 'universal theory of the state'. Old political theories were not to be understood as a 'collection of purely ridiculous propositions', but as theories which had had 'value' in the past, and which had lost value not because they were 'absurd' but because their 'work was done'.³⁷ Yet, like Seeley, Figgis continued to argue that history was relevant. 'It is not to revive the corpse of past erudition', he wrote, 'that I have any desire, but rather to make more vivid the life of to-day, and to help us to enliven its problems with a more accurate perspective'.³⁸ The hope was the same — that history might be relevant — but the claim was a weaker one. Whereas Seeley had hoped that the relevance of history might be asserted categorically, Figgis could only assert it hypothetically. Indeed, its major relevance, ironically, was in undercutting the

³⁵ *Cambridge University Reporter*, 27 (1896–7), pp. 505–8.

³⁶ Compare Lord Acton, *Selected writings of Lord Acton*, ed. J. Rufus Fears (Indianapolis, 1985), Vol. II, pp. 383–4, and J.N. Figgis, *Studies in Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius* (Cambridge, 2nd edn., 1916), pp. 2–3.

³⁷ J.N. Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge, 2nd edn., 1914), pp. 153 and 263.

³⁸ Figgis, *Political Thought From Gerson to Grotius*, pp. 2–3.

claims for relevance of too simple a political science, or, what was often the same thing, too Whig a political history. Maitland, in his introduction to Gierke's *Das deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, attempted to show how 'subtlety of historical perception' could improve 'political theory'.³⁹ His argument was that historians should not thrust a modern 'state-concept' upon 'reluctant material': though this argument was 'not only for the sake of the Middle Ages'. His discussion of medieval conceptions such as *societas* (partnership), *universitas* (corporation) and *genossenschaft* (fellowship) was to some extent a protest against Seeley's habit of seeing all political institutions in terms of the state.⁴⁰ It was to have some influence in political philosophy. Later on, in *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott, who admired Maitland, theorized the state in terms of two irreconcilable theories of *societas* and *universitas*.⁴¹ It is not clear what Maitland and Figgis would have made of this: nonetheless they certainly wanted history to be as relevant as Seeley wanted it to be, though they wholly rejected his reasons for believing that it was relevant in any simple sense.

The history of political thought was soon established as an important branch of history. Following the example of Figgis, many historians — Barker, Adcock, Woolf, Russell Smith, Evennett, Morris, Ullmann, Finley, Laslett, Forbes, Pocock, Parkin, Cargill Thompson, Abrams, Burrow, Luscombe, Skinner, Dunn and Tuck — contributed to it through their teaching and writing. Most of their works were miniatures, and modest about any possible contemporary relevance. Perhaps only Figgis, Ullmann, Pocock and Skinner wrote over extended eras or across important transitions in thought. But Figgis, Ullmann and Skinner did not stray far from their centuries, and even Pocock's highly unusual *The Machiavellian Moment* was less emphatic about the centuries before the sixteenth and after the eighteenth than about the centuries between them. Oakeshott, writing in a different manner, imposed his categories on a definite history which went from the twentieth century as far back as the twelfth, but only Barker could be said to have had something like a genuine philosophy of history: a sense of the shifts of political understanding from the era of the ancient *polis* through the

³⁹ For Maitland's acknowledgement that the sort of history written by Figgis interested him more than any other, see his letter to A.W. Ward, 15 August 1904, in *The Letters of Frederic William Maitland*, ed. P.N.R. Zutshi (London, 1995), Vol. II, p. 293.

⁴⁰ Frederick Maitland, 'Introduction' to Otto Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age* (Cambridge, 1900), p. viii.

⁴¹ Compare *ibid.*, pp. vii–xlv and Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 185–326.

medieval *cosmopolis* to the modern state.⁴² The philosophers displayed the longest sense of history. No one wrote a book as complete as Sidgwick's *Development of European Polity*, although Barker ranged as far, as did Oakeshott in his lectures.⁴³ The only historian to attempt anything as broad was Pocock in his late, rather magnificent, *Barbarism and Religion*.⁴⁴ But this itself was parahistorical, a hiding behind Gibbon's skirts, and had no consequences for politics or political understanding.

The famous methodological writings of Dunn⁴⁵ and Skinner⁴⁶ — less obviously Pocock⁴⁷ — were in a sense no more than attempts to restate the conceptions of Maitland and Figgis about the need for a historical understanding of political thought which would make some decisive contribution to modern political understanding without compromising itself as good history.⁴⁸ At the time, they were not very conscious of the length of the tradition: they tended just to follow the example of Laslett.⁴⁹ Part of the reason that methodological restatement may have been necessary was because the philosophers — Sidgwick, Barker and especially Oakeshott — had tended to undermine confidence in the idea that the history of political thought was anything other than a compromise between history and philosophy. Certainly, there is evidence in the early writings of not only Laslett, Forbes and Pocock but also Cowling of the diffi-

⁴² See, for instance, the comments in the introduction of *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford, 1946), pp. lix–lx.

⁴³ Oakeshott's lectures later given at the LSE indicate some of his range. See Michael Oakeshott, *Lectures in the History of Political Thought*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter, 2006).

⁴⁴ See the five volumes to date of J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge, 1999–2011).

⁴⁵ John Dunn, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', *Philosophy*, 43 (1968), pp. 85–104.

⁴⁶ Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (1969), in *Meaning and Context*, ed. Tully, pp. 29–67.

⁴⁷ J.G.A. Pocock, 'The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry', in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. Laslett and Runciman, pp. 183–202.

⁴⁸ Pocock, Dunn and Skinner tended to ignore the earlier part of their own tradition, attributing influence to nothing further back than Forbes, Laslett and, at a slight remove, since he had died in 1943 and worked in Oxford, Collingwood. See J.G.A. Pocock, 'Quentin Skinner: The History of Politics and the Politics of History', *Common Knowledge*, 10 (2004), pp. 535 and 538; Dunn, 'The History of Political Theory', p. 20; and Quentin Skinner, 'A Reply to My Critics', in *Meaning and Context*, ed. Tully, p. 233.

⁴⁹ Pocock claimed Laslett's edition of *Patriarcha* 'pioneered the enterprise of finding out exactly when, and for what, a work of political theory was written, published, answered'. See Pocock, 'Foundations and Moments', in *Rethinking the Foundations*, pp. 37–49, at p. 37. Skinner also mentioned Laslett, but says 'Laslett never supplied a theoretical account of his practice', whereas Dunn and Pocock did. See Skinner, 'Surveying the Foundations', in *ibid.*, pp. 236–61, at p. 240.

culty of getting out of Oakeshott's shadow.⁵⁰ Eventually two ways were established of answering Oakeshott: the first was the one taken by Cowling in his later writings, which was to trump philosophy with theology, and the other was the one taken by Pocock, Dunn and, most determinedly, Skinner, which was to trump it with history.

Skinner was in his earlier writings the Butterfield of the history of political thought. His famous methodological articles were as resolute as *The Whig Interpretation of History* in insisting that no shortcuts could be taken with history: though he tended to use Collingwood's argument to justify this point, the argument that there were no 'timeless questions and answers', but 'only individual answers to individual questions'.⁵¹ He argued that authors had 'intentions' and their arguments had 'uses' which required historical study. What this meant was that nothing had been written *sub specie aeternitatis*, nothing had an essence, and nothing remained the same. Skinner's was a severe doctrine of minimization: he wanted historians to avoid writing 'a history of thought which no one ever actually succeeded in thinking, at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained'.⁵² But to consider the history of political thought to be a sequence of 'individual answers to individual questions' was to infinitely particularize that history in such a way that it could only with great difficulty be the history of a unified subject. It was Acton's emphasis on ideas without Acton's emphasis on the unity of history.

But Skinner at the same time was the Seeley of the history of political thought. He wanted to hold on to the philosopher's emphasis on ideas and the

⁵⁰ For Laslett's attempt to escape Oakeshott's categories, see Peter Laslett, *Cambridge Journal*, 5 (1951–2), pp. 765–8. For Oakeshott on Laslett, see Michael Oakeshott, *Historical Journal*, 5 (1962), pp. 97–100. For Oakeshott on Forbes, see *Cambridge Journal*, 6 (1952–3), pp. 248–51. For Oakeshott's influence on Forbes compare Duncan Forbes, *Cambridge Review*, 2 March 1973 and Michael Oakeshott, *European Studies Review* (1975), pp. 217–20. Forbes was never a Skinnerian exactly because he held onto Oakeshottian distinctions (between what was and what was not history) until the end: 'I do not see why it is wrong to do one's philosophy or political theory unhistorically if it helps to puzzle out problems as such, sharpen the wits generally and so on, provided one does not claim to be doing history.' Duncan Forbes, 'Aesthetic Thoughts on Doing the History of Ideas', *History of European Ideas*, 27 (2001), pp. 101–13, at pp. 104–5. For Pocock's not entirely successful early attempt to escape Oakeshott's categories, see Pocock, 'The History of Political Thought'. For Oakeshott's comment on Pocock, see Michael Oakeshott, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 15 (1965), p. 282. For Cowling's use of Oakeshott's categories, see Maurice Cowling, *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* (Cambridge, 1963), and for his attempt to escape them, see Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (Cambridge, 1980–2001), Vol. I, pp. 251–82. It is highly significant that, apart from Cowling, no one in Cambridge mounted a direct criticism of Oakeshott's philosophical procedure — certainly no one ever did from a historical point of view.

⁵¹ Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', p. 65.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

historian's emphasis on situation, without sacrificing either to the other. He argued that a sense of the 'variety' of political theories in the past could enable historians to arrive at a better sense of what was 'necessary' and what was 'contingent' in their own time.⁵³ The word 'necessary' was a rare concession to the sort of view defended, as we shall see, by Sidgwick, Acton and others. Skinner continued to object to a 'vulgar demand for relevance' — presumably the sort of claim for relevance which Seeley might have made — while nonetheless suggesting at the same time that the history of political thought was 'relevant' because it could make us 'less parochial in our attachment to inherited beliefs'.⁵⁴ So the history of political thought associated with the Cambridge School marked an attempt to remain within the bounds of a severely limited historical attention to a variegated past and yet to find elaborate or subtle ways in which history could remain relevant to present politics without compromising itself as history. In their later writings, Skinner, Dunn and Tuck, while refusing to abandon historical standards, attempted to suggest ways in which the past was relevant to the present — by demonstrating repetitions of old ideas, analogies between old and new ideas, continuities between older and newer ideas, or even, more actively (this is Skinner), the possibility of a restoration of lost ideas.⁵⁵ But, although this has generated a vast literature, the verdict must be that it has done so because of the contradictions involved in scholarship that is both antiquarian and engaged. The historians tended to ignore difficulty — or admit it occasionally ('it would be fair to say neither Dunn nor Skinner has given a wholly convincing or comprehensive account of *how* historical enquiry solves conceptual puzzles', admitted Tuck)⁵⁶ — and now most historians of political thought in Cambridge either repeat the old doctrines, or ignore them in order to write mere history. It was the philosophers, and not the historians, who did most to show that the attempt to bridge the past and the present made contradiction inevitable.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁵⁴ Skinner, 'A Reply to My Critics', pp. 287–8. For Skinner's most ambitious attempt to use past conceptions against present ones, see Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁵⁵ Dunn showed that he was conscious of the tension in 'What is Living and What is Dead in the Political Theory of John Locke?', in J. Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 9–25. Tuck showed that he was in 'The Contribution of History', in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Goodin and P. Pettit (Oxford, 1993), pp. 72–89, at p. 86. See Iain Hampsher-Monk on Tuck's, Dunn's and Skinner's various suggestions about the relevance of history in I. Hampsher-Monk, 'The History of Political Thought and the Political History of Thought', in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, ed. Castiglione and Hampsher-Monk, pp. 168–71.

⁵⁶ Tuck, 'The Contribution of History', p. 84.

III

The third tradition, political philosophy, was associated with doubts about both Seeley's political science and what eventually became Skinner's history of political thought. This was the tradition of higher reflection on politics, and was manifest for almost a century in the writings of Sidgwick, Barker and Oakeshott — although it was largely forgotten in Cambridge when Oakeshott left in 1949, despite its vestigial remains in Forbes, Pocock and Cowling.

Sidgwick helped Seeley found the Historical Tripos, edited Seeley's lectures after his death, and wrote lectures on politics which became the major textbooks on the subject for forty years. But he disagreed with Seeley in one fundamental respect: he did not treat political science as if it rendered philosophy unnecessary. If it was Seeley who established political science within the Tripos, it was Sidgwick who made sure political philosophy was not forgotten. In a highly ambivalent essay about history, he argued that the 'antithesis' between the 'historical' and the 'philosophical' was 'not only ancient but antiquated'. He associated 'the historical study of human beliefs' with 'a general scepticism as to the validity of the doctrines studied', although he added that 'the historical study of beliefs in such departments as ethics, politics or theology [was] sometimes the effect as much as the cause of this kind of scepticism'. But it followed for him that 'the history of beliefs [could not] by itself furnish [the historian] with a criterion of their truth'.

It must be admitted that some advocates of the Historical Method — especially in the department of politics — avoid the difficulties that I have been discussing, by a very simple expedient. They assume the ultimate end of political institutions to be known . . . The business of the political thinker, in their view, is then merely to determine the best means to this end.

But, as far as Sidgwick was concerned, it was necessary to look 'elsewhere' than history for a consideration of the ends of politics. This could not be history in any simple sense: for the reason that 'each age has its own problems, in the solution of which it can only obtain a doubtful and indirect assistance from a study of preceding ages'.⁵⁷ It was political philosophy which was required to establish a complete sense of politics.

Sidgwick distinguished the study of how politics *was* and *is* from the study of how politics *ought to be*, and dealt with the history of political thought as an aspect of the former and political philosophy as the completion of the latter. His lectures on inductive politics — later published as *The Development of European Polity* — were written according to Seeley's conception of the subject and only ventured into discussion of the theories of Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau because the history of political thought was 'a necessary part of the subject of political science so far as it

⁵⁷ Henry Sidgwick, 'The Historical Method', *Mind*, 11 (1886), pp. 203–19, esp. pp. 213–16 and 218–19. The indented quotation is from p. 218.

deals with the phenomena of civilised societies'.⁵⁸ However, in his lectures on deductive politics — later published as *The Elements of Politics* — Sidgwick declared that the study of politics was 'not primarily historical' because history could not 'determine for us the ultimate ends and standard of good and bad, right and wrong, in political institutions'.⁵⁹ He disclaimed originality: his purpose was not to generate any 'entirely new method' but 'by careful reflection, to introduce greater clearness and consistency into the kind of thought with which we are all more or less familiar'. This, which he thought of 'considerable practical value', was also Seeley's purpose, but while Seeley thought of it as a scientific activity, Sidgwick preferred to think of it as a philosophical one.⁶⁰ Unlike Barker a generation later, however, he never openly objected to Seeley's conception of political science.

Barker in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Political Science expressed admiration for Sidgwick, Acton, Figgis and Maitland (he could 'cite no greater name' than Maitland), claimed there was 'an obvious affinity between history and political theory',⁶¹ and declared that he was 'not altogether happy' about the term 'political science'. The idea that politics was an 'exact and experimental study of natural phenomena' would 'convey suggestions, and excite anticipations, which [could] not be justified'.⁶² Barker preferred to take what Aristotle called *politike episteme* and call it 'political theory' on the grounds that the nature of the study was *theoria* or 'speculation' about 'the purpose, or purposes, which man proposes to himself as a moral being, living in association with other moral beings'.⁶³ As such, it was 'a study of ends'. It was speculative, axiomatic and systematic, and it dealt with 'the continuous eternities both of society and of thought'.⁶⁴ The problem of political theory was a 'constant', which was the determination of 'the end, or ultimate value, which governs the life of political society'.⁶⁵

Barker did not ignore the history of political thought (he was the author of several histories of political thought himself) but dealt with it separately. He commented that it was necessary to 'know a good deal of the history of political ideas to be a tolerable political theorist' but added that political theory would only benefit from the study of the history of political thought if it were 'studied as a means and not as an end'.

⁵⁸ Henry Sidgwick, *The Development of European Polity* (London, 1903), p. 344.

⁵⁹ Henry Sidgwick, *The Elements of Politics* (London, 2nd edn., 1896), p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶¹ Ernest Barker, 'The Study of Political Science', in *Church, State and Study: Essays* (London, 1930), pp. 193–216, at p. 198.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

To study and to understand previous theories about a subject does not absolve a teacher from the duty of himself understanding the subject itself. It is possible, but not perhaps very useful, to know all political theories without attaining a theory; and there may be more wisdom in less knowledge, if it is brought to a point and used as a tool of original thought. The danger of some subjects of speculation is that they may be choked, as it were, by the history of their own past.⁶⁶

This was the strongest statement yet made of the secondary status of the history of political thought, and this was all the more significant because Barker did more than anyone else to contribute to both political philosophy and the history of political thought. He translated Aristotle's *Politics*, translated and edited a vast number of ancient texts in two volumes covering everything from Alexander to Plethon, edited Augustine's *City of God*, translated, as Maitland had done, part of Gierke's great work on Natural Law, and wrote his own *Reflections on Government* (1942) and *Principles of Social and Political Theory* (1951).

Barker was the first Professor of Political Science, and, if he had had his way, Oakeshott would have been his successor. Oakeshott's appointment would have meant that the philosophical tradition would have capitulated less easily to the historical tradition in the second half of the twentieth century. Oakeshott, like Sidgwick and Barker, distinguished history and philosophy, and in an early paper derided Seeley's conception of an 'inductive science' of politics. 'Political science and political philosophy', he declared, 'either mean the same thing or the term science has, in this connection, no valuable meaning at all.'⁶⁷ His political philosophy was not historical. The danger of history was that it abandoned the student to a secondary realm of different historical understandings without enabling him to come to his own understanding. Oakeshott thought only philosophy dealt directly with understanding. He thought it necessary to distinguish the 'origin' of something from its 'validity': the study of an object's origins was historical, whereas the study of its validity was philosophical. One could not do what the political scientists had said must be done, or even what some historians were to do later, 'elucidate grounds by a study of causes'.⁶⁸

In *Experience and its Modes* (1933) Oakeshott formally distinguished history from philosophy and both from practice. This meant history was just one way of experiencing the world, and certainly not a complete one. The 'historical past' had to be distinguished from the 'practical past'. If a historian ever thought that the past had taught him something, he was

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁶⁷ Michael Oakeshott, 'The Cambridge School of Political Science' (1924), in Michael Oakeshott, *What is History? and other Essays* (Exeter, 2004), pp. 45–66, at pp. 50–1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

mistaken, for it was not the historical past which had done so but some past put to practical use.⁶⁹ Oakeshott was therefore highly critical of attempts made by historians of political thought to blur history and philosophy together, as Gierke had done,⁷⁰ and Skinner was to do, or to blur history and practice together.⁷¹ Now it may seem as if this tradition of political philosophy simply involved an attempt to bracket out the history of political thought so that philosophy could continue the traditional activity of reflecting on questions of eternal significance. But this would be far too simple. The political philosophy of Oakeshott, Barker and even Sidgwick was not an unhistorical one, like that of, say, Rawls. It was one in which philosophy was grounded in a historical sense. This created difficulties, which even Oakeshott could not resolve in *On Human Conduct*. In that book Oakeshott attempted to sketch a philosophy which would incorporate historical recognitions and express a historical sensibility. Clearly, this could no longer be done in the Hegelian manner taken for granted by Bosanquet a century earlier. But in *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott was writing a sort of historically aware political philosophy of the sort Collingwood had written in *The New Leviathan* (1942), Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1962) and D'Entrèves in *The Notion of the State* (1967). Not a lot has been written in this tradition in the last forty years, probably because it requires both scholarly and argumentative ability, which is rarely found in combination nowadays: but I do not yet think it is dead.

Political philosophy as practised in Cambridge depended on a secular conception of eternity, a sense of the priority of philosophical understanding to any other form of understanding, and the idealist belief that philosophy should not be analytical, critical or dissolvent but exploratory of what was already held to exist. Some sort of idealism lay behind the conviction of those who, like Barker and Oakeshott, wanted to defend political philosophy without lapsing into the scepticism of history or the dogmatism of theology. Barker's writings never forced the issue, because he remained the greatest of commentators on philosophy rather than a philosopher himself. Oakeshott, on

⁶⁹ Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 103–5.

⁷⁰ See Oakeshott's comment on Gierke's theory of *genossenschaft* which was 'in the nature of a compromise' between history and philosophy. Oakeshott doubted 'whether any theory can be satisfactory which is a compromise'. Michael Oakeshott, *Cambridge Review*, 12 October 1934, p. 41.

⁷¹ Michael Oakeshott, review of Skinner's *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought*, in *Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), pp. 449–53. Oakeshott observed that Skinner confused the 'analytical components of a concept and the devious and often logically irrelevant historical circumstances which mediated its emergence'. Compare Dunn's similar criticism that Skinner had not considered the question of whether an account of the 'historical circumstances' in which the modern conception of the state arose had any effect on the 'theoretical security and stability' of those conceptions. See *The Listener*, 15 March 1979, pp. 389–90.

the other hand, retreated from this exposed idealist position: and so, by the time he came to write *On Human Conduct* — by which time his influence in Cambridge was negligible — his idealism was withdrawn, subtle and nominalist about concepts. The question about such political philosophy was whether the emphasis on ends and eternities could still be justified or whether everything was now wholly involved in history. This is still a difficult question.

Following Oakeshott's departure, the only historian in Cambridge who attempted to criticize the rejuvenated political science of Postan, Runciman and others in terms of a distinction between history and philosophy was Cowling. Like Oakeshott — and Barker and Sidgwick — Cowling distinguished history and philosophy absolutely and declared that the study of politics was either the one or the other. But he, too, retreated from absolute idealism: though not, like Oakeshott, in the direction of a sceptical and historicized philosophy which continued to deny its own arbitrariness, but in the direction of an explicit acknowledgement of arbitrariness. In his case, the arbitrary commitment was Christian.

IV

The fourth tradition, political theology, is to some extent the tradition which has never had a name in Cambridge. Many historians across the century attempted to make sense of history and politics in terms of religion. Figgis, Ullmann, Knowles, Evennett and Cargill Thompson wrote about the history of political thought without concealing a commitment to Christianity of one sort or another; Cunningham, Simpson and Smyth offered an uncompromisingly Christian view of history and politics; and Seeley, Barker and Oakeshott expressed respectively an attenuated, a gentle and a lapsed Christianity. Everyone from Seeley to Skinner recognized that modern politics had emerged from the antique conflation and medieval conflict of *imperium* and *sacerdotium*, but only Acton, Butterfield and Cowling attempted to assert the significance of Christianity for a Tripos concerned with politics and history. If a tradition of thought never clearly emerged from this, that was partly a consequence of difficulty and partly a consequence of reticence, but the achievements of these writers were as significant as those in the other traditions.

In general, the history of political thought, even in the hands of Knowles and Ullmann, tended to render religion silent, or thrust it back into the medieval. It was in political philosophy that theology had some influence, even if only in secular equivalents of theological conceptions. Sidgwick, Barker and Oakeshott, in distinguishing philosophy from history, implied that there was a kingdom not of this earth. This view found its highest expression in Oakeshott.

Political philosophy [he wrote], is the consideration of the relation between politics and eternity. The end in politics is conceived to be the deliverance

of a man observed to stand in need of deliverance . . . Politics, as we know, is a second-rate form of human activity, neither an art nor a science, at once corrupting to the soul and fatiguing to the mind, the activity either of those who cannot live without the illusion of affairs or those so fearful of being ruled by others that they will pay away their lives to prevent it. And a political philosophy which represented the gift of politics to mankind as the gift of salvation itself would be at once suspect if not already convicted of exaggeration and error. When we turn to make this enquiry of the great political philosophies, we find that, each in its own convention, they maintain the view that politics is contributory to the fulfilment of an end which it cannot itself bring about; that the achievement in politics is a tangible good and not, therefore, to be separated from the deliverance that constitutes the whole good, but something less than the deliverance itself.⁷²

Oakeshott of course interpreted this in a secular, minimal, manner, as if the salvation were simply to be left alone. He would have agreed with almost all other political scientists, historians of political thought and political philosophers in supposing, as Runciman put it, that ‘the source of a belief is logically irrelevant to its validity’.⁷³ Only the political theologians argued that the source of a belief is highly relevant to its validity. In some, like Acton and Butterfield, there was theological conviction shackled by historical rectitude; in others, like Cunningham and Smyth, there was commitment without complication.⁷⁴ It was only in Cowling that there was the conviction and complication which carried the distinct theological tradition into the later twentieth century.

Acton agreed with Seeley’s judgment that history and politics were closely related, but thought that the ‘unity’ of history was found not in its supplying political science with facts but in its being ‘one consistent epic’ which traced the ‘movement of ideas’.⁷⁵ The relation between history and philosophy was more ambivalent than Oakeshott thought: ‘History is the source of philosophy, if not quite a substitute for it.’⁷⁶ Since history was a matter of ideas and not institutions, the historian had to be a ‘critic’ and not a ‘compiler’.⁷⁷ If the critical historian subjected his authorities to questioning and conducted research in all the available archives he would achieve the ‘certainty’ and ‘detachment’ which would enable him to ‘fasten on abiding issues’ and not on

⁷² Michael Oakeshott, ‘Introduction’ to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan of the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (Oxford, 1957), pp. lxiv–lxv.

⁷³ Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory*, p. 166.

⁷⁴ William Cunningham, *The Common Weal: Six Lectures of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1917). For Smyth see footnote 88 below.

⁷⁵ Lord Acton, ‘The Study of History’ (1895), in *Lectures on Modern History* (London, 1960), pp. 17–18.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

'the temporary or transient'.⁷⁸ For Acton history was neither the handmaiden of a science nor a science itself but an 'emancipation' in which the historian could 'rise above' history to observe the 'wisdom of divine rule' which lay not in the 'perfection but in the improvement of the world'.⁷⁹ This for Acton made judgment necessary. If history were 'one continuous epic' then it was unavoidable that the historian should have an attitude towards it, and that this attitude would be more than a merely historical attitude. As he put it at the end of his inaugural lecture:

Modern History touches us so nearly, it is so deep a question of life and death, that we are bound to find our own way through it, and owe our insight to ourselves. The historians of former ages, unapproachable for us in knowledge and in talent, cannot be our limit. We have the power to be more rigidly impersonal, disinterested and just than they; and to learn from undisguised and genuine records to look with remorse upon the past, and to the future with assured hope of better things; bearing this in mind, that if we lower our standard in History, we cannot uphold it in Church or State.⁸⁰

Acton struggled with his conceptions. They were very similar to those of the political philosophers, except that his eternity was not an abstract one but one itself related to one historical event, in the light of which all other historical events had to be judged. The same struggle was evident in Butterfield, who also meditated on the relation between divine and human history.

In *The Whig Interpretation of History* Butterfield condemned all history written with the present rather than the past in mind. Its famous argument was that the present did not come out of the past 'in spite of so many vicissitudes' but as the 'result of those very vicissitudes'.⁸¹ Since the 'only absolute' for the historian was 'change', it was therefore hard for the historian to find meaning in history.⁸² Butterfield recognized that philosophers would be impatient of 'the waste and repetitiveness and triviality' of history, but insisted that the historian was an 'observer' who dealt with 'the tangible, the concrete, the particular', who was not 'greatly concerned with philosophy or abstract reasoning', and who was committed to seeing 'principles caught amongst chance and accident'.⁸³ This doctrine was one which influenced Cowling, Laslett, Forbes, Pocock, Skinner and indeed everyone who wrote history in Cambridge after the 1940s. But ironically it was a doctrine which resembled Acton's in gesturing at something which cut across history, although with a difference. Where Acton saw the historian standing with regard to his own past much as God might stand with regard to it, in an attitude of judgment, so

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸¹ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931), p. 41.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

that judgment was a historian's *duty*, Butterfield saw it as his *temptation*, since the historian could never express anything other than 'partial judgments'.⁸⁴ So, against Acton, he suggested that the historian should exercise charity towards the events of history. But he agreed that the historian had to find 'the unities that underlie the differences and to see all lives as part of one web of life'.⁸⁵ Anything else, was 'abridged' history and could add nothing to historical understanding. The 'only safe piece of causation' that a historian could put his hand upon was that it was 'the whole of the past' which led to the 'complex present'.⁸⁶ But since the historian could not explain the whole of the past, the eventual conclusion was, as he put it in *Christianity and History*, that one should 'hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted'.⁸⁷

Acton and Butterfield indicate that a theological conception of history could justify both continual judgment and continual lack of judgment. But neither allowed their views to affect their high valuation of Rankean history. Cowling saw this as a limitation, and saw that a political theology — a phrase he did not use — would require the abandonment of belief in historical objectivity. He took from Smyth the view that historical events could only be understood in terms of an 'ultimate significance' found in one historical event. Unlike the philosophers, who contrasted history with an abstract eternity, Smyth said that history required God's intervention. History was dependent not on 'progress' and 'evolution' but on 'revelation' and 'eschatology'. The historian should be 'diffident' in writing history, for history was God's, not man's; and if it were asked how the death of Christ on the cross could be seen as something more than the 'fine failure of man enlightened beyond his time' the answer was only by faith. It was the function of history to 'confirm and implement this faith: not to compel it'.⁸⁸ In everything else, there was arbitrariness; and even faith was an arbitrariness which could not justify itself directly. History was therefore mostly a *via negationis*.

Cowling's early book *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* attempted to speak about the relevance of God to politics as Smyth had done. But it was actually a narrow assault on Seeley's, Runciman's and Laslett's conception of political science which depended on Oakeshott's distinction between history and philosophy. It argued that sociology had 'no distinct subject-matter',⁸⁹ that political science did have a subject-matter but was mistaken about the relation between the subject-matter (the structure of government) and what it was supposed to reveal (the nature of political activity), and that only history

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸⁷ Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London, 1949), p. 146.

⁸⁸ Charles Smyth, 'The Divine Purpose in History', *Cambridge Review*, 21 February 1941, pp. 285–7.

⁸⁹ Cowling, *The Nature and Limits of Political Science*, p. 173.

understood the relation between its ‘subject-matter’ and the nature of the world it sought to explain — a world of ‘mind unsatisfied with its surrounding, thought cheated and men wrestling with the difficulties of the world’.⁹⁰ Cowling thought that the ‘history of political thought’ was no ‘more likely than other sorts of historical writing to throw light on the nature of political activity in general’, and objected to the suggestion that Europe’s difficulties since the Renaissance had stemmed from ‘philosophical misconceptions’.⁹¹ Society was ‘the outcome of a series, extending over all generations, of acts of apparently arbitrary will which may be not less rational because they are the product of unargued and undefendable prejudice’.⁹² Political science, as a science, was an ‘impossibility’ for political explanation existed as ‘philosophy and history, and nothing else’.⁹³ Moreover, nothing could be ‘deduced from philosophical explanation except understanding of the arbitrary, relative character of the causes and slogans to which men commit themselves in time in face of the absolutely exact, but in a philosophical context absolutely unknowable, judgement of God’.⁹⁴ Cowling was aware that this view was ‘sceptical, reactionary and ontological’; and although the argument was in general Oakeshott’s, Cowling attempted to depend on theology for his ontology, as Smyth had done, rather than on philosophy itself, as Oakeshott had done.⁹⁵

In *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* ‘God’ meant what Oakeshott had meant by it: something eternal and abstract which was over against man. But in *Religion and Public Doctrine* (1980) it meant the God of Christ. So here all of political science, the history of political thought and political philosophy were understood, along with everything else, to be disclosures of definite doctrines about what should be thought about politics and religion in relation to Christianity. It was in these terms that Cowling made judgments of, amongst many others, Seeley, Sidgwick, Acton, Maitland, Figgis, Smyth, Butterfield, Oakeshott and Skinner.⁹⁶ The point was that all forms of political understanding are equally arbitrary, and some more arbitrary than others. There was no positive conclusion: only the negative one that even political philosophy, as the apparently highest form of political reflection, might not yet be high enough.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44 and 52.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁹⁶ For judgments of these historians, see Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, Vol. I, pp. 154–5, 240, 272 and 412; and Vol. III, pp. 93, 97, 188, 246, 304, 476 and 621.

The theological tradition involved, in Cambridge, the recognition that history is a unity, that the historian's ability to make sense of it is limited, and that the relevance of history to contemporary politics or religion is in whatever judgment the historian makes about that history in relation to Christ's crucifixion. It may seem odd to judge all historical events in terms of their relation to one historical event, but one can see in retrospect why a critique of political philosophy from a more exalted perspective was just as necessary as the critique of the history of political thought made in terms of political philosophy, and the critique of political science made in terms of the history of political thought. This fourth tradition restated the doubts which Sidgwick, Barker, Oakeshott and Dunn expressed about political science, the history of political thought and political philosophy, but in terms of a position rather than a negation, in terms of an absolute presupposition. The fact that Christianity began where the subtlest historians and philosophers seemed to end suggested there was *something* to be said, even secularly, for it.

Conclusion

So there were four traditions by which politics and history were related in Cambridge:

1. Political science
2. History of political thought
3. Political philosophy
4. Political theology

Political science claimed that history supplied material for an adjacent science of politics, which could establish laws. The history of political thought insisted that history was too complex to generate laws, that politics should be studied historically, and that political theories themselves should be studied historically. Political philosophy distrusted the reduction of everything to history, and sought to suggest that the history of political thought was subordinate to the attempt to establish the eternal ends of politics in philosophy. Political theology, in turn, concerned itself with the excessively abstract distinction between eternity and time, and suggested that no abstract eternity could be as important as a concern with ends which itself derived from a historical event. All the way through, there was a concern with events. Political science involved the hope that all events were also facts which could be instances of laws; the history of political thought suggested that all events were equally important and equally different; political philosophy suggested that events were secondary to something else less transient; and political theology supposed that all events were relative to one absolute event in history.

The Cambridge School was not a school of the history of political thought alone. The history of political thought, taken by itself, was nothing other than

one aspect of the historical study of politics; and, taken by itself, it simply could not explain why it matters. The irony is that the history of political thought only matters if a political scientist, a political philosopher or a political theologian comes along to explain why; and the tragedy of the current state of the now much diminished School may be that only historians of political thought remain.⁹⁷

(It is only fair to add that the Cambridge School has a legacy, though it is not one Seeley would have predicted. In 1980, while discussing other Cambridge historians of politics like Geoffrey Elton and J.H. Plumb, Cowling commented on the 'political realism or faintly cynical Machiavellianism that has been a staple of Cambridge political thinking in the last three decades'.⁹⁸ He was referring to historians who were not particularly interested in ideas. About historians who *were* interested in ideas, we could say that it is Hobbesianism which has become the staple of Cambridge political thinking. Cowling himself was Neo-Machiavellian about politics, and Neo-Augustinian about ideas. But most of the others in Cambridge have been Neo-Hobbesian. Oakeshott, Skinner and Tuck all wrote major works about Hobbes.⁹⁹ Dunn, Geuss and recently David Runciman have all emphasized how necessary it is to begin with Hobbes to understand politics.¹⁰⁰ To be 'Neo-Hobbesian' is of course not to be Hobbesian as such. Cambridge historians have always been ambivalent about Hobbes, not least because, as Sidgwick said, he rejected historical method.¹⁰¹ But perhaps Hobbes is the common denominator of the four traditions. He had a science of politics; he could be taken as a subject by historians of political thought;

⁹⁷ Raymond Geuss, the most active recent member of the school, although coming from an originally different background, taught in the Philosophy Department not the Historical Faculty. See his comments in Quentin Skinner *et al.*, 'Political Philosophy: The View from Cambridge', *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10 (2002), pp. 1–19. It is perhaps also significant that John Dunn taught in the Social and Political Sciences Faculty. I would also like to mention the late Istvan Hont who was perhaps the only member of the 'School' — a term he rejected — who was interested in long Cambridge traditions of the sort discussed here.

⁹⁸ Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, Vol. I, p. 395.

⁹⁹ Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Oxford, 1975); Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996); Richard Tuck, *Hobbes* (Oxford, 1989).

¹⁰⁰ See John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason* (London, 2001), pp. 84 ff.; Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, 2008); John Dunn, 'The Significance of Hobbes's Conception of Power', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 13 (2010), pp. 417–33; and David Runciman, *Politics* (London, 2014). Bernard Williams may also have developed a Neo-Hobbesian strain in his thought while at Cambridge. See Bernard Williams, 'Realism and Moralism in Political Theory', in Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, 2005), pp. 1–17.

¹⁰¹ Sidgwick, *The Development of European Polity*, p. 261.

political philosophers could compare their theories to his; political theologians could at least say that he recognized religion as a problem for modern politics. Be that as it may, in recent years it has been from Cambridge that has come the Neo-Hobbesian objection to the Neo-Kantian and Neo-Marxist assumptions which have dominated political thought for too long. They have insisted that the study of politics should still have something to do with its history, instead of follies about ‘normativity’ or ‘praxis’. It is an odd result. It is not positive, but negative, and is in the nature of a compromise between the four traditions (or, as Hobbes would perhaps say, proof of their respective failures), since none of them alone could have advocated Hobbes as such. The legacy of the School, in short, is that Hobbes states the *problem* of modern politics better than anyone else; and this is a significant suggestion: though, again, it is not obvious whether anything follows from it.)

The Cambridge School, taken as a whole, as it was for at least a century, may seem difficult to characterize. But it was constituted at root by agreement with Seeley that history and politics must be understood together. Its variations depended on the view taken of the relation between them. Everyone in Cambridge — I cannot think of an exception — thought that the understanding of history and politics together was for some reason or other not only a justification of the study of history but also of some use in the understanding of politics. Some, like Runciman, thought the two together could be allied to sociology; others, like Cowling, much more conscious of the fragility of the tradition, did not.

I would like to hope [said Cowling in 1969] that, in the event of the University not accepting the proposals [to establish Sociology], the History Faculty will think seriously about incorporating into its structure the body of a Part II Politics paper so as to provide something resembling a Faculty of History and Politics.¹⁰²

In saying this Cowling was echoing an argument almost a century old. In 1885 Browning, the ally of Seeley, had declared that the Historical Tripos should properly be ‘an Historico-Political Tripos’.¹⁰³ It was this that the Cambridge School was always fundamentally about — the bringing of history and politics together, no matter how, and no matter the consequence.

In 1876, Sidgwick commented that ‘since the time of the Platonists the history of Cambridge shows no philosophical school or sect and scarcely any philosophical coterie’.¹⁰⁴ I have argued that although neither a sect nor even a coterie, there was, in Cambridge, for over a century, a school of disparate traditions, four traditions, all of which perpetuated the claim that politics understood without relation to history was not politics worth understanding, and

¹⁰² Maurice Cowling, *Cambridge University Reporter*, 99 (1968–9), p. 1619.

¹⁰³ Oscar Browning, *Cambridge Review*, 4 February 1885, pp. 178–80.

¹⁰⁴ Henry Sidgwick, ‘Philosophy at Cambridge’, *Mind*, 1 (1876), pp. 235–46, at p. 245.

that, alongside the history of political events and institutions themselves, there needed to be some sort of higher reflection, which at various times took the form of political science, the history of political thought, political philosophy and political theology.¹⁰⁵

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¹⁰⁵ It is relevant to say that between 1991 and 1994, while an undergraduate reading the Historical Tripos at Cambridge, I attended lectures by John Dunn, Quentin Skinner and Richard Tuck. I was supervised by Maurice Cowling in the History of Political Thought from 1750, and by David Runciman in Political Philosophy. Through Cowling I had been put onto Collingwood and Oakeshott, which complicated my version of the sense which many historians had at the time in Cambridge that it was necessary to understand what Dunn, Skinner and Tuck were up to. In 1994–5 I took part in seminars for the MPhil in Political Thought and Intellectual History, and for it wrote an essay on Skinner, which had the distinction of being marked by Skinner himself. Around this time, while at Trinity, I spoke informally to Peter Laslett, Garry Runciman, Alan Cromartie, Ian Harris, and later, while at King's, to Istvan Hont, Michael Sonenscher and others. After completing a PhD thesis on a subject distant enough to be uncomplicated by the School (nineteenth century rather than seventeenth), I began seriously to look into the history of the relation of politics to history in Cambridge, conducting interviews with Dunn (in the Gibb's Building), Skinner (in his Regius Professor's office in the Stirling History Faculty) and Cowling (over the telephone), consulting the pages of the *Cambridge Reporter* and the *Cambridge Review*, and reading everyone from Seeley onwards. I spoke on this subject at a conference in Japan in 2005 at which John Pocock, Raymond Geuss, Hont and Dunn were present. Indebtedness is great. It was Cowling who originally intimated that Cambridge was more than what it had become since the 1960s. But this article should nonetheless be considered written out of a debt to the *entire tradition*.