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## ABSTRACT

This article justifies approaching classic works of political theory as relevant to problems that concern us. Perennial problems are shown to exist in three increasingly controversial senses. First, past authors addressed a problem which we can ponder. Second, past authors addressed a problem which authors who wrote on these authors also addressed and which we can ponder. Third, numerous authors expressed beliefs relevant to a problem which we can ponder. The errors identified by opponents of perennial problems arise from empirical misjudgments concerning the ways that different authors addressed such problems, not from the assumption that such problems exist.

## ARE THERE PERENNIAL PROBLEMS IN POLITICAL THEORY?

Most universities offer courses on the classic works of political theory from Plato to Marx, and perhaps beyond.<sup>1</sup> Scholars usually justify such courses on the grounds that these works address perennial problems; problems such as, why should we obey the government? what is a just state? and what are the grounds of political morality? Recently, however, linguistic contextualists led by Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock have mounted an attack on the very existence of perennial problems. They argue that works written in different places and at different times address incommensurable problems because, say, linguistic meanings, authorial intentions, or the human condition, depend entirely on specific historical contexts.<sup>2</sup> My aim in what follows is not comprehensively to dissect and criticise the arguments of the contextualists. On the contrary, I sympathise with their general conviction that any history worthy of the name must try to remain true to the past as it was, and I also sympathise with their disquiet at the way a preoccupation with contemporary concerns sometimes encourages scholars to write history which is not true to the past as it was. It is just that I think they are wrong both to place such emphasis on the methodological role of linguistic contexts, and, more importantly for us, to deny the existence of perennial problems.<sup>3</sup> Thus, my aim is constructive. I want to show that no matter what theory of meaning, or view of the human condition, we adopt, we must assume that there are, in a number of senses, perennial problems in the history of political theory. I want to demonstrate the legitimacy of courses discussing the classic works from Plato to Marx in terms of problems which concern us.

Because I want to show that we must accept the existence of perennial problems no matter what view we take of things such as meaning and the human condition, I will argue in the linguistic manner of analytical philosophy. I will focus on the logical implications of our

concepts. I will ignore quasi-empirical issues such as whether or not there are permanent features of the human condition which make for timeless human concerns.<sup>4</sup> This means that my arguments will relate only tangentially to some of the main concerns of the contextualists and their critics. Consequently, I will consider the arguments of the contextualists only when they suggest objections to my positions. What is more, I will build my defence of the existence of perennial problems on foundations with which the more moderate of the contextualists might concur.

## I

If we cannot distinguish between more and less right ways of understanding classic works, we can treat classic works anyway we want with equal legitimacy; and, if we can treat classic works anyway we want with equal legitimacy, we can treat them as discussions of perennial problems in whatever sense we care to define a perennial problem. Consequently, nobody can object to our treating classic works as discussions of perennial problems unless they allow that we can understand classic works in more and less right ways. Further, if we can understand classic works in more and less right ways, we must be able to produce better and worse translations of classic works into our vocabulary. We can begin, therefore, with the assumption that we can translate classic works into our vocabulary.

What exactly do we mean when we say that we can translate classic works into our vocabulary? This means that we can describe the meaning of classic works to our contemporaries using words they understand. Contextualists insist that we can understand classic works only by putting them in their historical context. Even if this is so, however, we still can translate classic works into our vocabulary: we might have to make a detour through the relevant context, but we still can reach an adequate translation in the end. Thus, when

contextualists write histories, they try to show us that classic works had particular meanings identified in relation to the relevant historical contexts, and, crucially, they do so by describing these classic works and their historical contexts using our vocabulary. Similarly, when scholars want to show us that other cultures, or ages, had belief systems that are alien to us, they necessarily do so using our language. In general, anyone who engages in the history of political theory must accept that we can understand classic works fairly adequately.

Imagine that the author of a classic work discussed a particular problem and explicitly stated that they were discussing this problem. Because we can translate classic works into our vocabulary, we must be able to translate their statement concerning the problem into our vocabulary, so we must be able to understand the problem. Further, because we can understand the problem, we can puzzle over the problem, so the problem can become a problem for us. Classic works, therefore, necessarily deal with perennial problems in this sense: they consider problems which we too can ponder. I will call this sense of perennial, perennial(A).

A critic might object that although we can come to understand the problems discussed in classic works, we can not experience these problems as problems because we can not puzzle over a problem that we have a definite answer to. For example, the critic might say, even if we could understand a particular eighteenth century work as an attempt to explain the existence of different species, we could not puzzle over this problem because evolutionary theory provides us with a clear answer to this problem.

This criticism does not stand up to scrutiny. For a start, surely we do not have definite answers to all of the problems raised by the classic works of political theory, and those problems which we have not solved still can puzzle us, so they can be perennial(A) problems. Further, surely most problems in political theory differ from scientific problems such as the existence of different species precisely in that they can not be given definite answers, so surely most problems

considered in classic works are perennial(A) problems. Finally, even if we imagine that we have definite answers to all the problems raised by classic works, this criticism still fails. The fact that we have a solution to a problem ready to hand does not mean the problem does not exist for us. For example, we can consider the same problem as the eighteenth century author who pondered the existence of different species, it is just that the problem puzzled him or her more than it does us. Indeed, people can reject evolutionary theory even after we have explained it to them, as is instanced by some Biblical fundamentalists, so evolutionary theory must be just one of several possible ways of accounting for the existence of different species. Evolutionary theory must be just one possible answer to a particular problem.

Another critic might object that although we can come to understand the problems discussed in classic works, we can not experience these problems as problems because to experience a given problem one must hold certain beliefs.<sup>5</sup> For example, the critic might say, even if we could understand a particular sixteenth century work as an attempt to discuss the problem of how God gave kings their divine right to rule, we could not puzzle over this problem because we do not believe that God did give kings a divine right to rule.

This criticism seems somewhat disingenuous. If we do not believe in the divine right of kings, surely we will answer the question of how God gave kings their divine right to rule by saying that God did no such thing. Likewise, if we do not believe in God, surely we will answer the question of how God gave kings their divine right to rule by saying, not only that God did no such thing, but also that there is no God. In these examples, we address the same problem as our sixteenth century predecessor, but instead of giving a positive solution to the problem, we reveal the problem to be an illusion based on false premises. I think that to show a problem is illusory is to answer the problem. Imagine, for example, a sixteenth century political theorist who spent several years puzzling over the problem of how God gave kings their divine right to rule only to

conclude that God did no such thing. Surely we would want to say that this theorist considered the problem of how God gave kings their divine right to rule even though he or she eventually rejected the problem as an illusion. To be scrupulously fair, however, I will distinguish between issues, understood as problems which we can show to be illusory or give a positive solution, and dilemmas, understood as problems which we must give a positive solution.

We already can conclude, therefore, that because we must accept we can translate classic works into our vocabulary, we also must accept there are perennial(A) issues. Classic works of political theory deal with perennial problems in this sense: they discuss issues which we could come to wonder about, either concluding the problem is illusory or giving a positive solution to the problem. For example, if we translate Hobbes into our vocabulary and find that he considered what we would describe as the issue of why people should obey an absolute sovereign, then we can consider both this issue and his solution to the problem expressed by this issue.

So far, my argument is fairly uncontroversial precisely because it does not take us very far. All I have shown is: because we can understand classic works, we can understand the problems with which these works grapple, and, in this sense, we can ponder past problems. Even the contextualists would seem happy to grant us this much. After all, one aim of their historical writings is to bring us to see as issues problems which puzzled the authors of classic works but which no longer puzzle us. For example, both Skinner and Pocock have described various political theorists associated with the Engagement Controversy as considering the problem of whether or not people are obliged to obey a government with no prior title to legitimacy, and clearly we too can consider this issue.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we should make greater allowance for the historical context by saying: various political theorists associated with the Engagement Controversy considered whether or not people are obliged in such and such a sense to obey in



such and such a sense a government in such and such a sense with no prior title to legitimacy in such and such a sense under such and such circumstances. But however precisely we define the problem, we still will be able to understand it, and so see it as an issue. It seems, therefore, that everyone accepts the existence of perennial(A) issues. However, although so far my argument is fairly uncontroversial, it has controversial corollaries. It is to these that I now turn.

## II

Consider perennial dilemmas. Perennial(A) dilemmas will exist if there are some perennial(A) issues that we can not show to be illusory, that is, if we share enough beliefs with people from the past for their problems to strike us as genuine puzzles. When I consider whether we share such beliefs, I will deal with one final objection to the existence of perennial(A) problems. A contextualist might accept the existence of perennial(A) questions, but not perennial(A) answers on the grounds that past answers invariably rely on beliefs we do not share. For example, the contextualist might say, we can not learn from Plato's discussion of the benefits of people restricting themselves to their special function within the state because Plato's discussion relies on an outdated belief in slavery.<sup>7</sup> The existence of both perennial(A) dilemmas and perennial(A) answers depends on our sharing the relevant beliefs with those who pondered these dilemmas and provided these answers.

Contextualists deny that we can share the relevant beliefs with people from the past on the grounds that meanings depend on particular historical contexts, understood either as Skinnerian arguments or Pocockian languages.<sup>8</sup> This argument, however, does not follow. Even if the meaning of utterances depended on particular contexts, when we translated these meanings into our vocabulary, the beliefs expressed in such utterances still might coincide with our beliefs at a number of points. Because the meanings of utterances might depend on contexts in a way

that the beliefs expressed in utterances might not, no argument for the historical specificity of meanings can establish the historical specificity of beliefs. Besides, contextualists do not even establish the historical specificity of meanings: even if meanings depended on contexts, different contexts might overlap in a way which would prevent meanings being historically specific to one context.

Actually, we must accept that we share some beliefs with the authors of classic works, so there can not be an a priori argument against the existence of either perennial(A) dilemmas or perennial(A) answers. We must share some beliefs with the authors of classic works of political theory otherwise we could not translate these works into our vocabulary. In general, if we could not translate a work as an expression of a web of beliefs many of which we considered to be true and rational, we could not conceive of the work as expressive of intelligible beliefs, so we could not translate the work at all. More specifically, we can understand or translate a work only if we know a fair amount about what the author of the work believed, and this is so irrespective of a theory of meaning since intentions, desires, conventions and the like all incorporate some component of belief. Yet, when we first approach a work, we can not know anything about what the author of the work believed, so, as a point of entry, we must presume the author held beliefs many of which we share. Later we might find innumerable points of disagreement, but we can do so only against a background of numerous shared beliefs.<sup>9</sup> In short, because we must accept we can translate past works into our vocabulary, we also must accept we share some beliefs with the authors of past works. Further, because we must accept we share some beliefs with the authors of past works, we also must accept no valid argument could show that beliefs necessarily are historically specific, so, finally, we must accept there might be both perennial(A) dilemmas and perennial(A) answers.

We can conclude, therefore, that whether or not we possess the relevant beliefs to turn a

given perennial(A) issue into a perennial(A) dilemma, or to turn a given answer into a perennial(A) answer, must remain an empirical question.<sup>10</sup> I think that most historians of political theory would say their empirical investigations reveal a number of places where such an overlap of beliefs does occur.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the burden of proof surely rests with the opponents of perennial problems who must show us that all problems discussed in classic works are illusory. My main concern, however, lies with theoretical arguments about the perennial nature of such problems, so I will leave this empirical matter here. From now on, I will take the concept of a problem to cover both issues and dilemmas.

### III

Most definitions of a perennial problem would include the idea of recurrence on various different occasions, not just once in the past and again in the present. So far, I have shown only that classic works consider problems we too can ponder. Next, I want to argue that classic works consider problems other works also consider and we too can ponder.

Contextualists typically deny this possibility on the grounds that historical contexts define concepts. Works written in different contexts use different concepts, so they necessarily consider different problems. Here the contextualists argue that concepts do not possess the stability necessary for us to identify the problems considered in various classic works as the same problem.<sup>12</sup> Actually, however, because we must accept we can translate classic works into our vocabulary, we also must accept concepts can possess the required stability. Because we can translate classic works into our language, we can translate a given work and various other works into our language, and when we do so, we might find that these works consider similar problems as defined using our language. In this way, our language constitutes a meeting point capable of imparting the necessary conceptual stability to numerous different classic works. A modified

version of this argument applies especially to the contextualists. If linguistic contexts determined meaning, our linguistic context would have to overlap with other linguistic contexts otherwise we would not be able to understand works written in these other contexts; and, if linguistic contexts thus overlap, the linguistic contexts of different classic works could overlap; and, finally, if the linguistic contexts of different classic works could overlap, the concepts defined by these linguistic contexts also could overlap precisely because they are defined by these contexts. In this way, our ability to translate classic works into our language shows that linguistic contexts can overlap, so concepts can possess the required stability even if they depend on linguistic contexts.

We must accept different classic works could use comparable concepts, so we also must accept different classic works could consider similar problems. Of course, the fact that classic works could consider such perennial problems does not establish that they do so.

Nonetheless, our argument does establish that whether or not they do so is an empirical question.

What is more, a simple consideration indicates, almost conclusively, that in some cases the empirical evidence will tell in favour of perennial problems. Political theorists often discuss classic works, and when they do so, they thereby create chains in which their concerns link up with those of the authors of these works. Suppose, for instance, that a work discusses a given problem. If this work is a classic, later theorists will have commented on this work, and in doing so, they often will have discussed this problem. True, each and every such commentator could have misunderstood the past works which they looked at, so all such chains could consist solely of works discussing unique problems, but the chance of historians of political theory having produced such a catalogue of errors surely must be negligible, particularly as we must accept historians can translate past works into their vocabularies reasonably adequately.<sup>13</sup>

We can conclude, therefore, that classic works deal with perennial problems in this sense:

they consider problems which other authors who have commented on their work also have considered and which we too can ponder. I will call this sense of perennial, perennial(B). For example, if we translate Marx's doctoral thesis into our language and find that he commented on some questions in the philosophy of nature that puzzled Democritus and Epicurus, then we can consider problems raised by Democritus and Epicurus and later addressed by Marx. This, of course, would not be so if Marx had been entirely mistaken in his understanding of these Greek philosophers, but since we have seen that people can translate past works into their own vocabulary, we must allow that Marx might not have been mistaken, and even if he was, someone at sometime almost certainly was not, so they could provide us with an alternative example that would count as a perennial(B) problem.

#### IV

What about cases where authors do not comment on other works? Here we return to an empirical question. Do authors sometimes discuss similar problems even when they do not consider each others works, or do they always then discuss unique problems? Contextualists such as Skinner argue for the latter view on the grounds that authors direct their works towards problems that are alive at the time they write, and on the grounds that these problems change with time.<sup>14</sup>

I suspect that some problems persist through time in a way that would cast doubt on the contextualist case. In any case, this is an empirical question, and numerous historians of political theory believe their empirical studies show that such persistent issues do exist, so the contextualists must provide convincing alternative readings of classic works. These, however, are empirical questions which I do not want to dwell on.

Let us suppose, therefore, that the immediate problems authors address possess the

uniqueness contextualists ascribe to them. It still remains possible that we could reconstruct the views of authors on problems that they did not address directly, and that some of these problems could persist through time. Here there are two ways in which authors might address a problem indirectly. First, authors explicitly can express beliefs relevant to one problem whilst dealing directly with some other problem. For example, if someone says that "people should obey the government because humans ennoble themselves by submitting to authority," they directly consider the problem of political obligation, but in doing so, they explicitly express beliefs relevant to a view of the good life for humans. Second, authors implicitly can reveal beliefs relevant to a problem by dealing with another problem in a particular way. For example, if someone says that "people should obey the government because the alternative is anarchy," they imply that anarchy is a bad thing, so some sort of authority is either morally desirable or pragmatically necessary.

Surely we will allow that we legitimately can discuss explicit statements relevant to problems of indirect concern to the author. Thus, we might find that even if authors always directly address unique problems, they occasionally express beliefs that concern perennial problems. For instance, even if Plato and Marx focused on culturally specific problems such as the limitations of Athenian democracy and the nature of nineteenth century capitalism, they still might have made explicit statements which are relevant to perennial problems such as why we should obey the government or what constitutes a just state.

Once again, whether an author did or did not make such statements concerning a given problem is an empirical question. Crucially, however, the existence of this empirical question means that contextualists can not simply show that the authors of classic works addressed unique problems, they also must show that these authors did not make any explicit statements relevant to more perennial problems whilst they were addressing these unique problems. It is not enough,

therefore, for contextualists to say that authors direct their writings towards problems that are peculiarly salient at the time they write, and the nature of these problems constantly changes. Even if this were so, authors indirectly might consider less specific problems, and these less specific problems might be perennial. The chances of an empirical survey finding that classic works do not thus consider perennial problems indirectly strikes me as negligible, but rather than get bogged down in empirical questions, I shall leave the matter here.

Let us return to the general implications of our ability to reconstruct the views of past authors on problems which they did not address directly. Because authors do not express such beliefs in answer to specified problems, it must be we who identify such beliefs as relevant to a given problem. The nature of the beliefs depends on facts about the author: a given author either did or did not believe such and such. But the problem in terms of which we frame such and such a belief is a matter for us. True, the nature of the beliefs in question will limit the range of problems that we can select. If, for instance, we found that someone believed "the franchise is more important than the free market," we could not present their belief in terms of either the problem of the basis of objective knowledge, or the problem of the comparable value of a contemplative against an active life. Nonetheless, there will remain a number of problems in terms of which we can present the belief. For example, we could discuss the belief that "the franchise is more important than the free market" in terms of either the problem of the relative merits of political and economic liberty, or the problem of the nature of a good or just society or state.

Because we decide upon the problem in terms of which we want to present a belief, we usually can make various beliefs contributions to a single problem provided only that we define the problem in sufficiently abstract terms. Imagine, for instance, we find that someone believed "the franchise is more important than the free market," and someone else believed "people should

be free to do as they please with the products of their labour." We could not describe the latter belief in terms of the problem of the relative merits of political and economic liberty, but, if we were prepared to discuss a more abstract problem, we could describe both beliefs in terms of the problem of the nature of a good or just society or state.

Finally, therefore, we can say that provided we are willing to frame problems in a suitably abstract fashion, we can find perennial(C) problems, that is, problems numerous authors have expressed beliefs about at least indirectly and we too can ponder. For example, Plato, Hobbes, and Marx all undoubtedly said something about the nature of the good or just society or state if we accept a broad enough definition of the terms good, just, society, and state. How broadly we must define our terms, and so how worthwhile we will find such an enterprise, remains an empirical question. Crucially, however, we must accept the existence of perennial(C) problems at some level of abstraction.

We can reach this conclusion by a different route. Once we grant that the history of political theory is an identifiable enterprise, we need some way of distinguishing this enterprise as a component of the history of ideas, and when we specify what we mean by political theory, we necessarily point to a cluster of abstract questions that represent perennial(C) problems. Thus, our ability to identify a history as the history of political theory presupposes that we can identify a set of abstract problems constitutive of the domain of political theory.

Critics no doubt could raise a number of objections to my account of perennial(C) problems. Here are some I anticipate. For a start, a critic might object that although we undeniably can use classic works as fodder on which to draw in discussing contemporary problems, we should not confuse this philosophical exercise with the historical exercise of recovering the meanings of these classic works.<sup>15</sup> This criticism misses the force of our argument. The critic implies that our argument establishes only that we can gain inspiration from



classic works, but any inspiration we gain bears no relation to the historical meaning of these works. Actually, however, our argument establishes that we can recover the historical meaning of classic works, and then present parts of their meaning as relevant to philosophical problems defined in suitably abstract terms. Indeed, it is precisely because classic works as a matter of historical fact do express beliefs relevant to such problems that we can describe such problems as perennial. Throughout history people really have had beliefs relevant to such problems. We do not invent the beliefs we consider without care for historical accuracy.

Again, a critic might object that although we can engage in a process of abstraction resulting in accounts of perennial problems, this process will entail our understanding classic works at a false level of abstraction.<sup>16</sup> This criticism misses the nature of our proposal. We do not have to begin with an abstractly stated problem and then see various classic works as expressions of equally abstract solutions to this problem. Rather, we can begin with various classic works expressing solutions to problems understood at various levels of abstraction and then construct a more abstract problem to encompass these other problems. We can choose to concern ourselves only with political thought at a certain level of abstraction without thereby committing ourselves to the assumption that political thought in actual fact took place only at that level. In short, to define a problem using a given level of abstraction is not necessarily to describe those classic works which suggest answers to this problem using a similar level of abstraction.

Alternatively, a critic might object that although different authors indirectly express beliefs of relevance to a range of problems, the concepts they use, and so the beliefs they express, lack the necessary similarity for us to present the beliefs as relevant to any common problem, no matter how abstract. But we already have dealt with this objection. We have shown that because we must accept we can provide more or less adequate translations of past works into our

vocabulary, our vocabulary can impart the necessary similarity or stability to the concepts used by different authors. Because we can translate past works into our vocabulary, we can discuss the similarities and differences of these works in terms of a single set of concepts.

Finally, a critic might object that although different authors express beliefs of relevance to the same abstract issues, their comments on these issues always depend on beliefs we do not share; thus, their comments on these issues can never be of relevance to us, so these issues can not really be perennial problems. Once again, we already have dealt with this objection. We have shown that we necessarily share a number of beliefs with past authors, so whether we share the beliefs necessary to turn a given issue into a dilemma, and to make a given answer to such a dilemma interesting to us, must be empirical questions, so no a priori argument can establish that the comments past authors make on problems are of no relevance to us. We might find that the reasons the author of a classic work had for expressing certain beliefs of relevance to some problem are reasons we find compelling for adopting a similar stance towards the problem.

We can conclude, therefore, that because we must accept we can translate classic works into our vocabulary, we also must accept there are perennial(C) problems. Classic works of political theory deal with perennial problems in this sense: they indirectly address questions which other such works also address indirectly and which we can discuss directly. For example, when Plato talks about philosopher kings, when Hobbes discusses the sovereign, and when Marx makes scattered references to the nature of a communist society, all of them, at least indirectly, express certain beliefs about the nature of a good society or a just state. This might not be so if we define our concept of a good society or a just state in narrow terms, but provided we accept broad enough definitions of these concepts, these authors will have expressed, at least indirectly, views on these questions.

Now that we have identified various senses in which perennial problems undoubtedly do exist, we should consider the implications of our analysis for discussions of legitimate and illegitimate ways of approaching the history of political theory.

The main point to make is that we legitimately can approach classic works in the history of political theory as works that express beliefs relating to problems we too can ponder. We can identify perennial problems that numerous past authors considered at least indirectly and we find interesting. For example, we may, if we wish, write a study comparing the views of Plato, Hobbes, and Marx on the just state, and we may, if we wish, discuss the relevance of their views of the just state for us today.<sup>17</sup> The study of classic works can represent a confrontation with arguments, beliefs, and theories which remain relevant to us.

Another important point to make concerns the status of classic works as classics. When contextualists deny the existence of perennial problems, they thereby deconstruct the idea of a tradition of classic works. If the classic works of political theory are not especially illuminating on questions of great interest, what makes them classics? The contextualists own suggestion is that the classic works provide useful focuses around which to orientate our historical research.<sup>18</sup> This undoubtedly is so. But my rehabilitation of perennial problems points to additional grounds for regarding classic works as classics. Here a classic work is one which we find contains a range of insightful comments of relevance to problems perplexing us. Certainly, we must decide for ourselves both what problems we want to discuss and what answers we will give to these problems. Certainly also, the problems we select partly will determine which works we consider to be classics, so the tradition of classic works could change over time as new problems come to pre-occupy us. Nonetheless, we often can find works that at least indirectly consider the problems we decide to discuss; and, even if we do not agree with the answers these works

suggest to these problems, we still can use these works as a stimulus to our own thinking. Thus, we can regard as classics those works that most stimulate our thinking. Classic works are classics because of their philosophical stature.

A final point to make is that how far a given problem represents a perennial problem will be an empirical matter, depending amongst other things on how broadly we initially have defined the terms we use to state the problem. Some problems might be shared by people who wrote in very different cultures at very different times; other problems might be shared by people who wrote at different times but within a single tradition. Some problems might date back to the Greeks and beyond; other problems might have arisen later but recurred constantly since then. We can not draw a neat line between problems that are perennial and problems that are not perennial.

## VI

Although I have defended the idea of perennial problems, I sympathise with the contextualists' critique of the lack of historical accuracy apparent in some discussions of classic works in terms of perennial problems. What, then, remains useful in the contextualists' challenge to a focus on perennial problems? I think that errors occur not, as the more virulent of the contextualists suggest, because scholars consider classic works in terms of perennial problems, but, as the more moderate of the contextualists might accept, because scholars sometimes misunderstand the way in which classic works address perennial problems. We have seen how theoretical considerations show that there simply must be perennial problems of various kinds. However, we also have seen that whether a given classic work expresses beliefs on a problem, whether a given classic work considers a problem directly or indirectly, and how abstractly we must frame perennial problems, are all empirical questions. Errors arise when scholars give the

wrong answers to these empirical questions.

First, errors arise when scholars wrongly attribute certain beliefs to authors of classic works. If scholars have a strong interest in a problem, they might get carried away and attribute a belief concerning the problem to a given author even though the evidence is not sufficient to enable them so to do. Imagine, for example, that a scholar interested in the virtues and vices of a constitution based on a separation of powers scours Aristotle's works looking for comments relating to this problem, and thereby builds a doctrine they call Aristotle's view of the separation of powers. A critic might argue that the evidence did not support the claim that Aristotle held these views. Here we would have a debate about what Aristotle believed.

Second, errors arise when scholars treat indirect references to beliefs that suggest an answer to a problem as though they were direct statements of beliefs specifically addressed to the problem. If scholars find that an author occasionally expressed beliefs on a particular subject, they might get carried away and present these scattered remarks as though the author set out to address this subject in a particular way, when obviously the author did no such thing. Imagine, for example, that a scholar says Aristotle wrote about the separation of powers. A critic might argue that Aristotle did not write about the separation of powers, but rather indirectly expressed various beliefs of relevance to a consideration of the separation of powers. Here we would have a debate, not about what Aristotle believed, but about what problems Aristotle meant to address.

Finally, errors arise when scholars do not frame problems in a sufficiently abstract manner. If scholars find that an author expressed beliefs relevant to a contemporary problem, they might describe the problem using concepts that are too culturally specific to embrace the beliefs the author actually had. If a scholar wrote about Aristotle's view of the separation of powers, for example, a critic might object that Aristotle could not have held any beliefs about the separation of powers because the concept of the separation of powers only makes sense against a

background of beliefs Aristotle did not hold. Here our scholar could reply that they mean something less specific than does their critic by the separation of powers; perhaps, they mean something more like constitutional theory. Thus, we might have a debate, not about what Aristotle believed, or about what problems Aristotle meant to address, but about the way in which we should define the separation of powers.

### Addendum

I have tried to establish the existence of certain types of perennial problems in the history of political theory. My arguments rest on our ability to distinguish more and less adequate views of the meanings of past works. If we could not do so, we could approach works in whatever way we wished with equal legitimacy, so we could approach works in terms of perennial problems. Suppose, however, that someone denied we could distinguish more and less adequate understandings of past works. They might argue that we can approach works in terms of perennial problems, but we can not assume these works really do relate to such problems. In this addendum, I want to block this stance to perennial problems.

People can reject the possibility of distinguishing between rival views of past works on the grounds either that we can not distinguish between rival views of any works or that there is something peculiar about past works. Let us start with the argument that we can not distinguish between right and wrong views of past works, though we can do so with respect to current works. This argument undermines itself. Even if this were so, we could not take account of our inability to understand past works unless we knew where to draw the line between current works and past works. But we could not know where to draw the line. If we could not understand past works, we could not identify a correct understanding against which to judge any given understanding as false, so we could not come to know that any given understanding was false, so

we could not know at what point our understandings become necessarily false, so we legitimately could assume our understanding of any given work might be correct.

Let us turn now to the argument that we can not distinguish between right and wrong views of any work.<sup>19</sup> This argument also undermines itself. If we could not distinguish such views, we could not know whether or not we had even begun to understand someone correctly, so we could not communicate with one another in many of the ways we now do. Whenever we wrote an academic article or book, we would have to presume that readers would be as likely to misunderstand as to understand our meaning, so there would be no point in our writing articles or books. Thus, anyone who argues we can not distinguish between rival views of any works can have no reason to express their belief. Finally, we can turn this point around to conclude: anyone who has a reason to express their beliefs must accept the existence of the types of perennial problems I have identified.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay first appeared in Political Studies 42 (1994), 662-75.

2. The best known statement of the contextualist rejection of perennial problems occurs in the seminal paper Q. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in J. Tully, ed., Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988), p. 65. He writes: "There simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners. There is in consequence simply no hope of seeking the point of studying the history of ideas in the attempt to learn directly from the classic authors by focusing on their attempted answers to supposedly timeless questions." Skinner's main theoretical papers are collected together in this volume.

Pocock's main theoretical pieces are J. Pocock, ""The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry," in P. Laslett & W. Runciman, eds., Philosophy, Politics and Society, Second Series (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1962), pp. 183-202; J. Pocock, "Languages and Their Implications," in Politics, Language and Time (London, Methuen, 1972), pp. 3-41; and J. Pocock, "State of the Art," in Virtue, Commerce and History (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1-34.

3. For a critique of linguistic contextualism as a method see M. Bevir, "The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism", History and Theory 31 (1992), 276-298.

4. On the muddle of empirical and metaphysical claims underlying assertions of a fixed cosmic agenda see C. Condren, The Status and Appraisal of Classic Texts (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 46-50.

5. Some contextualists even seem to imply that we can demonstrate the illusory nature of some of the problems which puzzle us by revealing them to be products of residues of historical languages.



Some problems in political theory can be "solved historically, by an investigation of how the relevant language had developed." See R. Tuck, Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 1.

6. I deliberately put the matter thus because they do not claim this context has any explanatory power with respect to Hobbes' work. See Q. Skinner, "The Ideological Context of Hobbes's Political Thought," Historical Journal 9 (1966), 286-317; Q. Skinner, "Conquest and Consent: Thomas Hobbes and The Engagement Controversy," in G. Alymer, ed., The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement (London, Macmillan, 1974), pp. 79-98; and J. Pocock, "The Machiavellian Moment Revisited," Journal of Modern History 53 (1981), 56-57.

7. The example comes from Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 66. He concludes: "All I wish to insist is that whenever it is claimed that the point of the historical study of such questions is that we may learn directly from the answers, it will be found that what counts as an answer will usually look, in a different culture or period, so different in itself that it can hardly be in the least useful even to go on thinking of the relevant question as being 'the same' in the required sense at all. More crudely: we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves."

8. Skinner and Pocock see meanings as tied to particular historical contexts. Skinner sees meanings as given by intentions expressed in accord with the conventional context. See Q. Skinner, "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech-acts," Philosophical Quarterly 20 (1970), 118-138. Pocock sees meanings as given by languages which "functioned paradigmatically to prescribe what he [the author] might say." See Pocock, "Languages and their Implications," p. 23.

9. I am indebted for the general direction of this argument to the accounts of radical translation in W.V.O. Quine, Word and Object (Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1960); and D. Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984). Condren suggests that

Quine's holism implies translation fractures meaning in a way pointing towards the sort of incommensurability I am criticising. See Condren, Status and Appraisal, pp. 49-50. But this is not so. The fact that we and those we seek to understand have beliefs that can be understood only holistically as webs does not imply these webs do not overlap with one another. On the contrary, it is only by assuming such an overlap that Quine's radical translator comes to understand others.

10. The concept of empirical knowledge has been used in a confusing variety of ways. I use the concept consistently, but with deliberate vagueness, to refer to actual historical enquiries into the content of the meaning of past works, no matter what method is adopted, as opposed to more philosophical enquiries into the nature of the meaning of past works.

11. Skinner now acknowledges that many of our theoretical concerns have an ancient lineage. He says: "my objection is not of course to those who stress the long-standing character of many of our philosophical disputes." See Q. Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics," in Tully, ed., Meaning and Context, p. 283.

12. Skinner's most recent, and most accommodating, statement emphasises this objection to perennial problems. See Skinner, "Reply to Critics", p. 283: "I still remain the sworn foe of those who wish to write the type of history in which - to take an example which has recently been discussed - the views of Plato, Augustine, Hobbes and Marx on 'the nature of the just state' are compared. The reason for my nominalism, as I have tried to stress all along, is not so much that each of these thinkers appears to answer the question in his own way. It is rather that the terms employed in phrasing the question - 'nature', 'just' and 'state' - feature in their different theories, if at all, only in such divergent ways that it seems an obvious confusion to suppose that any stable concepts are being picked out."

13. Some contextualists do not regard the history of political theory as a catalogue of errors. For

example, Pocock says: "the above strictures [his criticisms of various approaches to the history of political theory] should not be read as meaning that much excellent history of political thought was not written by scholars operating under these limitations." See Pocock, "Languages and their Implications," pp. 10-11. Nonetheless, contextualists might argue the chance of historians of political theory having produced a catalogue of errors is far from negligible as historians of political theory so rarely have used the contextualist method. This argument fails because their insistence on a particular method does not stand up to scrutiny. See Bevir, "Errors of Linguistic Contextualism".

14. cf. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 65: "Any statement, as I have sought to show, is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend."

15. There is, of course, a genuine distinction between historical and ahistorical ways of approaching classic works. My objection is to the place where the contextualists draw the line. They contrast "historians" with those "who are in the business of constructing decorative or more immediately usable pasts," with those who study classic works in terms of our problems clearly belonging with the latter camp. See D. Winch, Adam Smith's Politics (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 5. Thus, they allow others to treat classic works in terms of perennial problems only if these others "say simply that the text can be made sense of in such and such a way, and that it does not matter to them whether the author or any previous reader has made sense of it in such a way." See Pocock, "State of the Art," p. 24. They allow us to talk of perennial problems only if we give up all claims to being historians.

16. cf. Pocock, "History of Political Thought," p. 186: "We can choose to concern ourselves only with political thought at a certain level of abstraction; we cannot assume in advance that political

thought in actual fact took place only at that level. The strictly historical task before us plainly is that of determining by investigation on what levels of abstraction thought did take place."

17. It is exactly this example that Skinner objects to in his most recent comments on perennial problems. See Skinner, "Reply to Critics," p. 283.

18. See Q. Skinner, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action," in Tully, ed., Meaning and Context, p. 101. A related view sees classic works as fulfilling a need for landmarks to prevent us suffering from historical dislocation. See Condren, Status and Appraisal.

19. For this position see S. Fish, Is There a Text in this Class? (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1980).