



BRILL

Journal of the Philosophy of History 6 (2012) 84–110



On the Difference Between a Pupil and a Historian of Ideas

Jeffrey Edward Green

University of Pennsylvania

jeqr@sas.upenn.edu

Abstract

This essay takes up the fundamental question of the proper place of history in the study of political thought through critical engagement with Mark Bevir's seminal work, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*. While I accept the claim of Bevir, as well as of other exponents of the so-called "Cambridge School," that there is a conceptual difference between historical and non-historical modes of reading past works of political philosophy, I resist the suggestion that this conceptual differentiation itself justifies the specialization, among practicing intellectuals, between historians of ideas and others who read political-philosophical texts non-historically. Over and against the figure of the historian of ideas, who interprets political thought only in the manner of a historian, I defend the ideal of the pupil, who in studying past traditions of political thought also seeks to extend and modify them in light of contemporary problems and concerns. Against Bevir, I argue that the mixture of historical and non-historical modes of learning, in the manner of the pupil, need not do damage to the historian of ideas' commitment to scholarship that is non-anachronistic, objective, and non-indeterminate.

Keywords

Mark Bevir, *Logic of the History of Ideas*, Historicism, Historian of Ideas, Methodology of Political Theory/Philosophy, Pupil

My intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it.

– Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Introduction

Mark Bevir's *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (1999) may be the most rigorous analysis and defense of the historical approach to political thought ever written, and it surely entitles Bevir to be considered as the contemporary standard-bearer of an esteemed tradition of thinkers – among them, Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock – whose work has defined the terms of philosophical debate about the meaning of the history of ideas within the study of politics.¹ In the decade since its publication, *The Logic* already has been the topic of numerous symposia and critical debates.² However, whereas Skinner's work has generated broad controversies about the relative merit of historical approaches to political theory vis-à-vis nonhistorical methodologies, Bevir's thus far has tended to produce more limited kinds of discussions internal to the history of ideas, such as the difference between Skinner and Bevir's specific approaches³ as well as methodological questions for practitioners of the history of ideas.⁴ Such limitations seem out of keeping with *The Logic's* prodigiousness. Accordingly, I aim to take up the fundamental question of the proper place of history in the study of political thought through critical engagement with *The Logic's* central concepts and

¹ On its importance, see F. Ankersmit, "Comments on Bevir's *The Logic of the History of Ideas*," *Rethinking History* 4:3 (2000), 321–331, 321; K. Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003), 175.

² These include a journal issue on *The Logic* in *History of European Ideas* 28 (2002): 1–117; a roundtable in *Rethinking History* 4 (2000): 301–350; a symposium in *Philosophical Books* 32 (2001) 64–86; and a symposium in *History of the Human Sciences* 15:2 (2002): 102–125.

³ V. Brown, "Historical Interpretation, Intentionalism and Philosophy of Mind," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 1 (2007), 26–62, 30–38, 54–61; K. Palonen, "Logic or Rhetoric in the History of Political Thought? Comments on Mark Bevir," *Rethinking History* 4:3 (2000), 301–310; R. Stern, "History, meaning, and interpretation: a critical response to Bevir," *History of European Ideas* 28 (2002), 1–12; M. Lane, "Why the History of Ideas at all?" *History of European Ideas* 28 (2002), 33–41.

⁴ S. Stuurman, "On Intellectual Innovation and the Methodology of the History of Ideas," *Rethinking History* 4:3 (2000), 311–319; A. Megill, "Imagining the History of Ideas," *Rethinking History* 4:3 (2000), 333–340; B. Young, "The tyranny of the definite article: Some thoughts on the art of intellectual history," *History of European Ideas* 28 (2002), 101–117; V. Brown, "On Some Problems with Weak Intentionalism for Intellectual History," *History and Theory* 41 (2002), 198–208.

arguments.⁵ To be clear, this means that my focus is not the broad question of how to interpret all forms of ideas (e.g., love letters, shopping lists, tax documents), but only the more targeted question, given prominence by at least a half century of debates, about the proper methodology for engaging with authors and texts widely considered to be part of a tradition (or *traditions*) of political thought and philosophy.

Bevir concludes *The Logic* with the reflection that the ultimate measure of the work's success will depend on how well it informs the practices of actual historians of ideas: "The main purpose of my logic . . . is to promote a particular way of doing the history of ideas. My principal aim has been to describe how historians of ideas should explain the historical objects they postulate and justify the narratives they tell. The main question to ask of my logic, therefore, is: does it help historians of ideas to make better sense of the relics from the past available to them? Only time can tell whether or not it does."⁶

What this conclusion indicates, in fact, is two different sets of claims. On the one hand, Bevir alludes to a summation of *The Logic's* principal arguments: that the proper subject matter of the history of ideas is belief (or the intended viewpoint of individual authors of works) and that the proper mode of explanation for why authors hold the beliefs that they do is to situate such beliefs within prior intellectual traditions and the dilemmas that arise within them. On the other hand, however, Bevir's conclusion reiterates an assumption that recurs throughout his work: that there is an academic discipline called "The History of Ideas" whose practitioners – historians of ideas – ought to be specialists in accordance with the discipline's broad methodological principles as defended by Bevir.⁷

This second assertion constitutes Bevir's implicit "ethic of specialization" – an ethic which by no means is limited to Bevir, but is a guiding premise of the so-called Cambridge School. By "ethic of specialization" I

⁵ The conclusion of Lane's essay ("Why the History of Ideas at All?" 39–40) does attend to this matter and my arguments are in the spirit of her contribution.

⁶ M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). (Hereafter citations to *The Logic* are placed within the main text).

⁷ I say "broad" methodological principles because Bevir rejects a narrow methodology – a so-called "logic of discovery" – which would dictate how right answers in the history of ideas are to be found. The methodological principles Bevir defends – that the object of study for the historian of ideas is belief and the mode of explanation centers on tradition and dilemmas – are meant to accommodate a wide diversity of practices.

mean the following assumption: that the conceptual difference between approaching intellectual relics from the past in the manner of a historian of ideas as opposed to other non-historical perspectives suggests that one might want to specialize as a historian of ideas to the exclusion of other types of thinking. The “ethic of specialization” is reflected not so much in the argument sometimes made by historians of ideas that ideas from great authors of the past have no more than a superficial relevance to present day problems,⁸ but rather in the notion that historians of ideas can and should separate themselves from non-historical forms of scholarship.

Now, that there is such a conceptual distinction between historical and non-historical manners of thinking is something that Bevir establishes. Although the question of precisely how Bevir draws the boundary between these two manners of thinking is a matter of some complexity – and something I try to clarify below (section 1) – at the outset one can assert as a basic, if admittedly preliminary and reductive, contrast: the historian will want to understand what an intellectual relic meant to its author, whereas one engages in a non-historical mode of thinking when, for example, one asks what the same relic means to us today. Or, as Bevir describes it, a historian of ideas studies an intellectual relic as a *work* (the work of an *author* whose intended viewpoint is the ultimate source of meaning for the relic), whereas a non-historical mode of interpretation approaches a relic as a *text* whose meaning might depend, for instance, on the interpreter’s own interpretation of the relic in light of issues, concerns, and problems that were of no interest to the author. Bevir does not deny the existence of such non-historical, textual modes of interpretation, nor does he reject the potential value of approaching intellectual relics from the past from such a perspective. What Bevir does reject – and what thereby constitutes his ethic of specialization – is that the historian of ideas might also engage in the pursuit of non-historical meanings. Bevir argues, in other words, that to be a historian of ideas involves not simply reading a relic as a work, but reading it *only as a work*.⁹ Historical modes of interpretation are to be entirely separated from non-historical modes. This separation is realized in the norm that historians of ideas must not also engage in non-historical modes of

⁸ Q. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 3–53; J. Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 9.

⁹ Bevir, *Logic*, 75, 122.

interpretation or, if they do, they must explicitly and sharply separate their non-historical analyses from their historical ones.

In arguing against Bevir's implicit ethic of specialization, I shall make five claims – claims that rely on Bevir's own impressive conceptual apparatus even as they try to show why this apparatus ought not ground specialization but, on the contrary, ought to encourage historians of ideas to *integrate*, rather than separate, historical and non-historical approaches. First, in section 1, I make clear the costs of specialization: to interpret an intellectual relic from the past strictly as a historian of ideas narrows the relic's relevance to generally backward-looking questions of what the author of the relic meant and how the relic responded to prior intellectual traditions. Bevir, of course, does not deny that specialization has its costs, but argues that the costs are worth it: specifically, that the alternative of allowing historians of ideas to integrate non-historical modes of interpretation would undermine the integrity of the historical enterprise. Bevir makes at least three arguments for separating the history of ideas from non-historical approaches. The history of ideas should be kept distinct because: (1) history studies the past and so would become unintelligible if it concerned itself, say, with contemporary matters;¹⁰ (2) through specialization the history of ideas can, like other scientific specialties, achieve objectivity in its results;¹¹ and (3) non-historical modes of interpretation are indeterminate and thus threaten to destabilize findings in the history of

¹⁰ Ibid., 75: "There is nothing wrong with people saying that an utterance means something to them or their contemporaries: it is just that these meanings are contemporary, not historical. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with people finding interesting ideas in an utterance and writing about these ideas: it is just that unless they give evidence to suggest that a historical figure understood the utterance to convey these ideas, these meanings too will be contemporary, not historical. More generally, there is no reason why people should not treat utterances as something other than historical objects: it is just if they do so, they are not doing history. As historians, we must study meanings that actually existed in the past."

¹¹ Thus Bevir distinguishes properly conducted historical interpretations (which limit themselves to identifying the meaning of an intellectual relic for its author) from what he calls "structural" interpretations (i.e., all other forms of interpretation): "From now on I will simplify my argument by adopting a simple contrast between a hermeneutic meaning, defined as the meaning an utterance has for a particular individual, and a structural meaning, defined as any other form of meaning an utterance might have" (Ibid., 57). Structural meanings, for Bevir, lack objectivity insofar as they are limitless and exist outside time: "We cannot identify structural meanings with any specific instance of an utterance, so they must exist outside of time, and being outside of time, they cannot be said to alter with time. Thus,

ideas.¹² In sections 2 through 4, I resist these three arguments. Section 2 argues that Bevir's insistence that historians of ideas must study the past in fact reduces to the much more contestable claim that the historian of ideas ought to exclude his or her own interpretation from the analysis. Section 3 argues that while the history of ideas is in principle capable of producing objective outcomes, the objectivity it generates is much less stable than that found in the natural and (some) social sciences. Because of the instability of its results, the history of ideas has less to lose, and more to gain, by incorporating non-historical approaches. Section 4 argues that Bevir's objection to the indeterminacy of non-historical analysis is overstated: that non-historical interpretations, though limitless, are not necessarily arbitrary since they might still be bound by the two standards of *conceptual coherence* and *success in competitive rivalry with other interpretations* – standards Bevir himself employs in defense of the non-arbitrary nature of historical explanations. The final section, section 5, makes clear that, far from calling into question the discipline of history as such, my arguments are directed specifically against specialization in the history of ideas; there are unique features of the history of ideas which both distinguish it from history proper and substantiate the propriety of integrating non-historical approaches.

1. The Costs of the Ethic of Specialization: Limited Relevance

That there is a conceptual difference between reading a relic historically as a work and non-historically as a text seems clear and Bevir provides a robust array of arguments by which to establish and comprehend this difference. But conceptual differentiation does not necessarily imply a specialization of practices. A linguist will want to conceptualize the difference between nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives as parts of speech that follow different grammatical rules and serve different linguistic functions. But no one would suggest that there either is or ought to be a “verbalist” who only uses verbs (such a person would be confined to uttering commands in the

if we focus on structural meanings, we leave ourselves with no way of explaining linguistic change. Structural meanings . . . are of no concern to historians” (Ibid., 60).

¹²⁾ For example, Bevir argues that scholars who read a work ahistorically “make it an indeterminate entity which always possesses a ‘surplus meaning.’ The indeterminacy of a text so defined makes it irrelevant to historians” (Ibid., 58).

imperative mood). In this instance, conceptual differentiation is meant to serve an *integrative practice* (that joins together distinct parts of speech in sentences), not a practice of specialization. The question is whether the notion of a historian of ideas resembles the over-specialization of the “verbalist.”

As a first step in answering this question in the affirmative, the costs of specialization must be clarified. To this end, consider four different interpretations of Plato’s allegory of the cave:

1. *What the author intended – for example:* Plato’s allegory of the cave is a metaphor for his theory of education which contrasts two forms of perception: the chaos and meaningless flux of sensual perception versus the genuine insight of true, eternal being offered by reason.
2. *Why Plato intended to say what he did – for example:* Plato’s allegory of the cave, with its distinction between a chaotic world of flux and a realm of true being, synthesized two different intellectual traditions which informed Plato: Heraclitus’ insistence that all the world was in a process of unceasing change and Parmenides’ doctrine that all the world was uniform, unchanging, and eternal.
3. *The significance of the allegory in light of future intellectual traditions – for example:* Plato’s allegory of the cave stands at the origins of a tradition of Western rationalism which elevates a fictitious, disembodied faculty of reason over and against the body and the senses. In denigrating the body and the senses in the name of a nullity and the false universality it promises, Plato’s allegory of the cave marks the beginning of a long descent toward nihilism in the West, running through Christian theology and enlightenment philosophies like those of Descartes and Kant – and terminating in the modern disillusion that comes when it is realized that this nullity does not exist. (This is roughly the view of Plato and the allegory held by Nietzsche.¹³)
4. *Why the allegory is important to us today – for example:* Plato’s allegory of the cave denigrates not merely sensual perception, but the phenome-

¹³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1978) [1883–1885], 9–25 (Zarathustra’s Prologue); *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992) [1872], sections 10–15; *Twilight of the Idols*, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* (New York: Penguin, 2003) [1888], 39–45, 50–52).

non of mass spectatorship. By likening ordinary, uneducated experience to being unknowingly chained to one's seat, as a spectator, happily watching random shadows reflected on a cave wall, Plato alerts us to a base, primal urge to make judgments about random fluctuations watched on a flat screen: whether stock prices, reality TV shows, or other broadcast images that neither require nor enable the use of our reason.

With one important exception that I shall discuss momentarily, the historian of ideas is limited to making interpretations in the first two categories. The historian of ideas is interested to understand what Plato meant in writing the allegory and why he meant it. To interpret the allegory in the light of future intellectual developments – like Christianity, enlightenment philosophy, or nihilism – or to interpret it in light of contemporary problems – like mass spectatorship – might be valuable, Bevir would say, but these interpretations are simply not history.

This limitation impacts the kind of *relevance* a historian of ideas is permitted to locate in any given intellectual relic. By relevance, I understand the answer to the following questions: what is it about the intellectual relic that makes it worthy of our attention? What explains the interpreter's selection of *this* work as opposed to all others? What can someone learn from attending to the relic? Although Bevir does not explicitly thematize the concept of relevance, it is a vital dimension of analysis and one legitimated by the fact that all acts of interpretation presuppose relevance of some kind.¹⁴ As I have suggested, the historian of ideas (again, with one important exception to be confronted in a moment) is limited to answering the relevance question in one of two ways. The relevance of a historical interpretation of an intellectual relic is either that it tells us what the author meant by it, or, relatedly, it tells us why the author meant what s/he did. Insofar as this is the case, the historian of ideas is confined to a backward looking notion of relevance. The historian of ideas is not allowed to answer forward oriented questions like: what does the work explain? What future intellectual relics and traditions are anticipated by the work? What does one learn from the work in the manner of a *pupil* who seeks not merely to comprehend the work but to respond to it and apply it to his or her own

¹⁴) D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), esp. ch. 3.

time? What does the work have to say to us reading it here, right now, today?

But, as I have indicated, there is an important exception to this. The historian of ideas is not altogether prohibited from forward oriented interpretations: the historian of ideas can legitimately interpret the meaning of an intellectual relic by addressing the way that future readers of the work themselves understood it. Bevir justifies this important extension of the scope of historical analysis via his hermeneutical doctrine of “weak intentionalism” and the “non-authorial intentions” that are thereby established as relevant loci of study. I shall return to these important concepts in the next section. For now I simply want to recognize how the historian of ideas, according to Bevir, can in fact address the future influence of an intellectual relic so long as this influence is presented as what a future reader understood the work to mean: “A historian can recover only the particular, determinate works the author *and earlier readers* have already placed at the site that is the text” (58 [emphasis added]). Returning to the example of Plato, this means that the third form of interpretation is not necessarily prohibited. It just matters *who* it is that is making it. If the historian of ideas found that Descartes and Kant had read the allegory of the cave and that their philosophies did appear to elevate reason over and against the senses in a way similar to Plato, then the historian of ideas might be able to explain the significance of the allegory in terms of its influence on a later tradition of European enlightenment thought. By contrast, if we accept that there is no evidence that founders of the Christian religion read or were influenced by Plato, the historian of ideas could not claim that Plato influenced the emergence of Christianity;¹⁵ nor could the historian of ideas explain the influence of Plato on the basis of a concept of nihilism, unless it could be shown that modern exponents of nihilism, like Jacobi or Turgenev, were readers of the allegory who found it relevant to nihilism. *And yet even here there is an important exception.* Otherwise impermissible interpretations are permissible if someone else besides the historian of ideas makes them. So, insofar as the third interpretation of the allegory is Nietzsche’s interpretation, it is within the legitimate purview of the histo-

¹⁵ The influence of Plato, and Hellenic culture more generally, on early Christianity is in fact a contested issue, especially with regard to Paul who both spoke Greek and evinced knowledge of Greek philosophy. See, e.g., J. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31, 171–172.

rian of ideas so long as it is understood that *Nietzsche*, not Plato, interpreted the allegory as a proto-Christian, nihilistic document. And likewise, even the fourth interpretation, which understands the allegory in light of the contemporary issue of mass spectatorship, might be permissible if it could be discovered that someone besides the historian of ideas – such as Susan Sontag who linked the allegory to the development to modern photography,¹⁶ or other more recent cultural critics who linked it to cinema – themselves put forward such an interpretation.¹⁷

Why this prohibition on the historian of ideas from making his/her own interpretation of the future oriented relevance of the work? Why must all matters of contemporary relevance require that someone else, besides the historian of ideas, has written about them first? These questions reflect the costs imposed by Bevir's ethic of specialization – costs that Bevir no doubt would acknowledge, but nonetheless would insist are necessary. In what follows I argue against what I take to be Bevir's three main reasons for the necessity of incurring the costs of the ethic of specialization.

2. Bevir's First Argument for the Ethic of Specialization: Historians of Ideas are Necessarily Confined to Studying the Past

One argument Bevir puts forward for incurring the costs of specialization is that such costs are necessary to any practice of history which as such must confront intellectual relics from the past in terms of their *past* meaning. Non-historical interpretations are not necessarily wrong, but because they go beyond the past they simply are not history.¹⁸

But what precisely is involved in the criterion that the historian of ideas must, as a historian, only study the past? What, after all, is meant by "the past"? One definition Bevir presents of what it means for historians of ideas to limit their focus to the past is that the historians of ideas must not engage in *anachronism*. That is to say, the historian of ideas must not interpret

¹⁶ *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), esp. ch. 1 ("In Plato's Cave").

¹⁷ John Partridge, "Plato's Cave and *The Matrix*," in Christopher Grau ed., *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Barbara Gabriella Renzi and Stephen Rainey eds., *From Plato's Cave to the Multiplex: Contemporary Philosophy and Film* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006).

¹⁸ See note 10.

intellectual relics from the past in light of future ideas and developments that were unavailable to the author of the work. So, for example, Bevir argues that to interpret an eighteenth century author's utterance "hallelujah lass" to refer to a female member of the Salvation Army, an organization founded in the nineteenth century, would be "an unacceptable anachronism" (159).

However, the avoidance of anachronism is *not* in fact determinative of Bevir's insistence that historians of ideas must limit themselves to the past. It is not so because Bevir's understanding of what constitutes permissible historical interpretations actually includes the possibility of anachronistic interpretations. Bevir argues for a principle of "weak intentionalism" to guide the historian of ideas' efforts to uncover the intended meaning of an intellectual relic. Among its many features, one central practice enabled by weak intentionalism is that the historian of ideas need not focus only what a work meant to its author, but might also attend to what it meant to subsequent readers of the work:

Weak intentionalists . . . adopt a procedural individualism according to which hermeneutic meanings must be meanings for specific individuals but not necessarily for the authors of relevant utterances. According to weak intentionalists, utterances can have non-authorial meanings. Moreover, because utterances can have non-authorial meanings, they can come to possess public meanings of greater historical import than the meanings they have for their authors. Imagine that an author intends an utterance to mean one thing but a reader understands it to mean another. When this happens, weak intentionalists will say that as a matter of historical fact the utterance meant what the reader understood it to mean, although, of course, it did so for the reader, not the author. (72)

Bevir's interest in defending the hermeneutic status of all historical meaning leads him to overlook a different kind of concern: that his endorsement of non-authorial meanings establishes anachronism as a legitimate historical practice. It does this in two senses. The first of these – i.e., that once we accept that the historical meaning of an intellectual relic can include what later interpreters understand it to mean, we transgress the strict "chronistic" requirement that relics from the past be interpreted in their own terms and not on the basis of what comes later – is an argument that Bevir would

find objectionable. I will mostly pass over it here.¹⁹ But the notion of non-authorial intentions imports anachronism into the history of ideas in a second, more drastic way. This is that a subsequent reader who him/herself interprets a prior work anachronistically is a permissible subject matter for the historian of ideas. If the historian of ideas claims that Plato's allegory of the cave is proto-Christian and nihilistic, it is an impermissible anachronism. Yet, if the historian of ideas repeats the identical interpretation, but attributes it to Nietzsche, it is entirely legitimate. It is legitimate since Nietzsche was in fact a subsequent reader of Plato who happened to interpret the allegory of the cave in this fashion. And it is legitimate, further, because the notion of non-authorial meanings explicitly allows subsequent readers to understand an earlier work to have meanings entirely distinct from the intended viewpoint of the original author. This indifference to the actual content of the interpretation shows that what is anathema to the historian of ideas is not anachronism as such, but only anachronism that is presented by the historian of ideas him/herself.

If the avoidance of anachronism is not in fact what is at stake in Bevir's insistence that historians of ideas, as historians, must only concern themselves with the past, a much more credible – though still ultimately flawed – standard is that historians of ideas must limit themselves to works with “appropriate temporal links.” The designation is somewhat misleading,

¹⁹ Bevir would reply that when later interpretations are involved, there is no anachronism but only a multiplicity of works: when the historian of ideas considers the *author's* intended meaning, there is one work; and when the historian of ideas considers the meaning attached to that work by a *subsequent reader*, there is actually a second work being analyzed (*Logic*, 69). But while this argument does preserve the hermeneutic status of historical meaning (since in both cases it is an individual's intended viewpoint being examined), it does not answer the charge of anachronism. It is no less anachronistic for historians of ideas to fluctuate without limit among various different authors from different time periods than it is to study a single work on the basis of later developments unknown to the author. In other words, what Bevir's notion on non-authorial intentions enables is a profound instability as to the ultimate subject matter of any study in the history of ideas. A strict reading of Bevir requires that any history on a given thinker's ideas that also examined the way subsequent readers analyzed those ideas would not be doing a single history on that thinker, but would be doing as many histories simultaneously as the number of discrete individual viewpoints being examined. At best, the historian of ideas would be undertaking a study of a *tradition of readership*, not a study of a given author and a single set of works.

since what Bevir signifies with the notion of “temporal links” is not inherently “chronistic,” but rather relates to whether one individual has read, or at least is aware of, another. So, for example, Bevir argues that even if American Indians and Chinese Buddhists share beliefs resembling modern anarchists, it would be incorrect to link all three in a common tradition of anarchism. It would be incorrect, not because of anachronism (indeed all three groups are contemporaries), but because there is no evidence that these otherwise similar practices were influenced by each other or grew out of a common source of influence. In this sense they lack the “appropriate temporal links” (204, 205, 208).

This concept of “appropriate temporal links” suggests, then, another basis on which to make sense of Bevir’s claim that historians of ideas must limit themselves to the study of the past. A historian of ideas *cannot* speak about Plato’s influence on Christianity because it seems that Christianity’s founders had neither read nor been influenced by Plato.²⁰ A historian of ideas *can* discuss Nietzsche’s argument that Plato is a proto-Christian because Nietzsche did read Plato and thus established a temporal link between himself and Plato. Unlike the criterion of avoiding anachronism, I find this standard of temporal links – which might be better defined as “readership links” – an effective grounds for historians of ideas to determine which works they may permissibly study and in what connections. But it cannot explain why the historian of ideas should not also have the legitimate right, without violating the status of being a historian of ideas, to also include his/her own interpretation of the meaning of intellectual relics. After all, the historian of ideas is also a reader of the works and, as a result of this very relation, possesses genuine temporal links with which-ever relics from the past s/he studies. The standard of appropriate temporal links would appear to bestow upon the historian of ideas, who is preeminently a reader, permission to respond to intellectual relics from the past with his or her own independent interpretation.

Bevir’s likely reply – which points to a third element of his argument that historians of ideas must be confined to the study of the past – is that historians of ideas cannot engage in their own interpretations because such interpretations would be contemporary interpretations – and contemporary interpretations are *ipso facto* opposed to historical analysis:

²⁰ But see note 15.

There is nothing wrong with people saying that an utterance means something to them or their contemporaries: it is just that these meanings are contemporary, not historical. . . . As historians, we must study meanings that actually existed in the past (75).

For this final standard to be meaningful, however, it needs to be defined: just what does it mean to refrain from contemporary interpretations of an intellectual relic? Bevir does not analyze the concept “contemporary,” but invokes it casually as if it were well-understood. And, further, Bevir assumes that avoiding contemporary interpretations would rule out a wide array of approaches as non-historical. Upon reflection, however, it appears that what this standard means, in effect, is that *any* interpretation of the meaning of an intellectual relic from the past is permissible subject matter for the historian of ideas, *except* for the historian of ideas’ own interpretation. After all, from the perspective of any individual historian of ideas about to sit down to work, all intellectual relics – and all subsequent interpretations of them – are in the past. Only the historian’s own voice is strictly contemporary. This means that rather than rule out a wide array of practices, the avoidance of contemporary interpretations turns out to be an almost empty constraint. The only definite thing that is required by the assertion “historians must study the past” is in itself not even directly related to the past: this is the prohibition on the historian interpreting relics on the basis of autonomous, independent insight.

To sum up, the three “chronistic” definitions Bevir provides for what is meant by studying the past in actuality reduce to the non-chronistic norm that forbids historians of ideas from putting forward their own judgments about what meaning a relic might have beyond its author’s (and subsequent readers’) intended viewpoint. It is this limitation on the historian’s own voice, and not any special respect for the past as such, that appears to be at stake.

3. Bevir’s Second Argument for the Ethic of Specialization: The Objectivity Achieved by the History of Ideas

Another reason to specialize is to produce superior results. That a complex foot operation will be better performed by a foot surgeon than a general physician is obvious. Bevir suggests that a similar situation obtains for

historians of ideas: a history of ideas will be better for being *only* a history of ideas. One of the principal arguments that Bevir makes on behalf of such a claim is that because the history of ideas can produce objective knowledge, whereas non-historical modes of interpretation cannot on account of their “indeterminacy,” the intrusion of non-historical modes of interpretations threatens to upset the objective character of histories of ideas.²¹

I do not want to dispute Bevir’s claim that the history of ideas is susceptible to objective outcomes – i.e., that it is theoretically possible to say that one interpretation of an author’s intended viewpoint is truer than another interpretation – but I do want to dispute what I consider a weakness in Bevir’s argument: his failure to distinguish the objectivity produced by historical interpretation from the objectivity produced by the natural and (some) social sciences. It is indeed a very surprising feature of Bevir’s book that while it insists so strongly on distinguishing historical and scientific modes of explanation, it does not distinguish historical and scientific modes of objectivity.

Bevir’s failure to differentiate scientific from historical objectivity is the unintended result of the way in which he defends historical interpretation from the charge that it has no claim to objectivity. Bevir is interested to oppose irrationalists who argue that because it is impossible to have unmediated access to the past, the history of ideas – which tries to recover a past author’s intended meaning – is itself impossible in the sense of not being able to produce objective knowledge. Bevir’s reply is not to deny that historians of ideas do not have unmediated access to the past, but to deny that “unmediated access” is the proper standard for evaluating objectivity. Bevir makes two arguments. First, the objectivity of a historical interpretation inheres not in its capacity to have unmediated access to the past, but rather from the fact that it is possible to compare rival histories (each one providing only a mediated access to the past) and come to a consensus that one is better than another. Bevir labels this conceptualization of objectivity “anthropological epistemology.” Second – and this is the crucial claim – anthropological epistemology is in no way confined to historical interpretation, but actually defines the objectivity of the natural sciences, which

²¹ See note 11.

themselves are unable to achieve “unmediated access” to the objects they study.²²

Such an argument is an effective weapon against its intended target: “irrationalist post-modernism” which denies that there can be any objectivity in the history of ideas (128). But an unintended consequence of this argument is to suggest – indeed to explicitly argue – that the kind of objectivity produced by history and natural science is the same: “we no longer have any reason to draw a qualitative distinction between objectivity in history and objectivity in the natural sciences” (123). But this is clearly overdrawn. Even if an anthropological epistemology guides both history and natural science, it is abundantly clear that there are important differences in the *stability* of the results that each pursuit achieves. To see this, consider three examples Bevir employs in suggesting that both the history of ideas and the natural sciences are informed by the same standard of objectivity:

- Two naturalists watch a wolf through binoculars, making an assumption about the optical reliability of the binoculars. Their observation is mediated because of the binoculars (99).
- Someone observes that a falling object is a stone. This perception is also mediated because it involves numerous categorizations: that the object is a *stone* and not, say, a slate – and also that there are such things as a *stone* and *falling* (98–99).
- In the history of ideas, there has been a debate over the interpretation of John Locke’s views on property. First C. B. Macpherson argued that Locke is a philosopher “who defended the rationality of unlimited desire.” Alan Ryan criticized this interpretation, arguing “Macpherson was wrong to say Locke thought rationality was restricted to the one class of people who go in for the acquisition of capital goods.” John Dunn also criticized Macpherson because he “ignored the religious faith which provided the unifying theme of Locke’s thought.” James Tully later expanded Dunn’s critique, “presenting Locke’s political thought in the context of his religious faith as an attempt to defend a self-governing community composed of small proprietors who enjoy the security to harvest the fruits of their labor.” Macpherson did not reply to these critics, but Neal Wood

²²) Bevir, *Logic*, 98, 123, 127.

has. Wood rehabilitates Macpherson's Marxist outlook but also explains the failings of Macpherson's earlier interpretation, "portraying Locke as a theorist of agrarian capitalism, not an apologist for the mercantile and manufacturing bourgeoisie" (104–106).

Bevir is surely right to question the purity of experience available in any of these instances. But there is a major difference pertaining to the stability of the judgments. In the first two cases, there is a clear understanding that the objective statements will continue to be agreed upon tomorrow, next year, next century. Perhaps there will be some fundamental revolution in our understanding of the physical world – which does after all happen – but there is a strong sense that the truth being presented will be shared by one's grandchildren.²³

But it is precisely this stability of judgment that does not apply in the third case. What is striking about the Locke example – and what distinguishes it sharply from the observations about the wolf and the falling stone – is that it is not clear what the ultimate perception (i.e., objective piece of knowledge) regarding Locke even is. For one thing, the works do not address the same exact issue – at least not as they are presented by Bevir. Macpherson claims that Locke "defended the rationality" of unlimited desire, whereas critics like Ryan and Tully reject that Locke *restricted* rationality to those who acquire. But it is possible for both sides to be right: that Locke did validate the rationality of unlimited acquisition without reducing rationality to acquisition. Moreover, without some *instrumentalization* of the history of ideas, it is impossible to be sure which interpretation has prevailed. If, to return to the first example, we shoot the wolf and we hit it, we have reason to validate the binoculars. But when it comes to Locke's

²³) Perhaps Bevir would not disagree and would admit that while historians and natural scientists employ the same *criteria for making true statements* (anthropological epistemology), the *stability of the truth achieved* is qualitatively different in the two cases. However, Bevir does not differentiate between these two distinct aspects of objectivity (criteria of truth versus stability of truth), even though, as I show below, it is a tribute to Bevir's *Logic* that it provides the tools for conceptualizing this difference. In any case, the main point is that not pursuing the difference between these two aspects of objectivity results in an exaggerated estimation of the objectivity achieved by historians of ideas, at least those who work within the tradition of political thought.

theory of property, there is no context of instrumentalization in which we can be sure which theory is dominant.

It is not hard to understand why there should be less stability with the objectivity generated by the history of ideas. Bevir himself points to at least three factors, though not in the spirit of making such an argument. First, as has been mentioned, in uncovering the intention of the author of an intellectual relic, the historian of ideas is guided not by a strong intentionalism (which requires that the historian be limited to the conscious intention of the author) but by weak intentionalism (which permits the historian to examine preconscious or unconscious intentions): “Weak intentionalism does not commit itself to any particular view of the awareness authors have of their intentions” (71). Such a wide conception of what constitutes intentionality not only greatly expands the likelihood that historians of ideas will come to radically different interpretations of the historical relics they study, but provides a virtually limitless grounds upon which new, unorthodox, or seemingly original interpretations might be based. Second, the greater instability of the objectivity at stake in the history of ideas comes from the fact that whereas natural scientists seek to make intelligible objects which are not themselves products of intelligence, in the history of ideas the object of study is *the idea*: another intelligent being’s attempt to render the world intelligible (178). This reflexivity – by which one creative mind analyzes the creativity of another – renders the history of ideas rich in its humanism but without the superior exactness of natural science whose objects of examination are static not dynamic, inanimate not creative, simple not complex. Third, the history of ideas must face the problem that an intellectual relic – unlike an object of nature – can reveal itself to contain inconsistencies. Regardless of whether inconsistency is a fundamental feature of the human capacity for creative thought – a condition suggested, for example, by Kant’s antinomies, honored by Emerson (“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”), and celebrated by Whitman (“Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes”) – it is nevertheless clear that historians of ideas must face the problem that their objects of study very often do not admit of a fully satisfying rational unity. While Bevir argues that historians of ideas ought to be guided by a presumption that the intellectual relics they confront are consistent, he nonetheless admits that in practice there will be inconsistencies – so that a superior historical interpretation will have,

ceteris paribus, fewer than its rivals but not necessarily none. But once we accept the reality that intellectual relics, unlike objects of nature, can be mired in inconsistency, we acknowledge a very important reason why objectivity in the history of ideas is much less stable than in the natural sciences.

It is not just that an inconsistency might be interpreted legitimately in various different ways, but that coming to an agreement that there is an inconsistency is one of the least likely outcomes of historical study. In the face of an alleged gap in the reasoning of an author, there always will be two camps: those who explain it away and those who remain troubled by it. But who can say which side is right? Take Locke's view on slavery, for example. The problem is not simply that Locke makes a stable historical interpretation about his views toward slavery difficult because he offers at least three different claims: repudiating slavery in the *First Treatise*, specifying the conditions when it is justifiable (as in the case of those captured in a just war) in the *Second Treatise*, and legalizing African slavery in South Carolina and Virginia in his role as constitutional drafter and colonial administrator. There is the further problem that a stability of interpretation about Locke's attitude toward slavery has been stymied insofar as there is debate as to whether these three views are inconsistent with each other.²⁴ In parallel fashion, vagueness in intellectual relics provides a similar double problem to the stability of historical interpretation: generating reasonable debate and itself hard to establish convincingly.

Taken together, all of these factors do not refute Bevir's claim that historical interpretation is capable of achieving objective outcomes along the lines of an anthropological epistemology, but they do explain why such outcomes have far less stability than the findings of natural science. Moreover, these factors explain certain *phenomenological facts* about the reading, writing, and teaching of the history of ideas. They explain, for example, why no one reads a work in the history of ideas with the expectation that it will be the last word, finally establishing a consensus interpretation about the author being studied. They explain, further, why no responsible stu-

²⁴ For the claim of consistency, see David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 27; for inconsistency, see Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations of Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10–11, 50–51, 203–206. For a critique of Bevir's insufficient attention to the problems of incoherence and inconsistency, see Stuurman, "On Intellectual Innovation and the Methodology of the History of Ideas," 312.

dent of past ideas would neglect to read those ideas as expressed by the original author, as if there were some history that was sufficiently complete and uncontested as to render attention to the primary sources superfluous. They explain, too, why even historians of ideas, in complete divergence from their colleagues in scientific fields like medicine, want their students to be original in their historical interpretations, rather than passively accept time-honored doctrine.

Because historians of ideas have less to protect than natural scientists whose objective findings are stable (and who can reasonably expect their grandchildren to accept their findings), historians of ideas ought to be at least open to complementing their historical interpretations with non-historical ones. Moreover, when one considers that non-historical interpretations can provide an added layer of relevance to the relic being examined – a kind of significance not ultimately grounded in the effort to get to the final truth regarding the relic, but only the local truth of the interpreter's own insight in light of the problems and concerns of the time s/he occupies – the inclusion of such interpretations offers the historian of ideas an opportunity to anchor his/her history in something more personal and proximate, and for that reason more *stable*, than the attempt to provide the ultimate historical interpretation of a relic from the past.

4. Bevir's Third Argument for the Ethic of Specialization: The Indeterminacy of Non-historical Interpretation

One final reason Bevir supplies for the ethic of specialization is the following. Once we read an intellectual relic not merely as a work (as something intended by a specific author) but as a text whose meaning also will be supplemented by those who come after the author, there arises the problem of inescapable *indeterminacy*: "because we cannot establish any limits to the works a text so defined might inspire, [a scholar treating a relic as a text] makes it an indeterminate entity which always possesses a 'surplus meaning.' The indeterminacy of a text so defined makes it irrelevant to historians. A historian cannot recover a text so defined if only because its nature remains to be decided by the meanings future readers attach to it" (58).

But how well does this argument about the indeterminacy of non-historical interpretations work? In taking issue with it, it is helpful to make

a distinction between two separate sub-components of Bevir's concern about indeterminacy. One is limitlessness: a text is indeterminate because it is subject to limitless different interpretations.²⁵ The other is arbitrariness: a text is indeterminate because, once we dislodge ourselves from trying to figure out what the author meant, there is no way of saying which interpretation is better than another.²⁶ My claim is that non-historical interpretations are indeed limitless but they need not be arbitrary – and that, further, limitlessness-without-arbitrariness is, as Bevir himself points out, something that characterizes historical explanations as well.

Now there can be no doubt that a non-historical interpretation, which links a relic's meaning to later developments, carries with it a kind of limitlessness. To return to the example of Plato's allegory of the cave, once we can interpret the allegory, as Nietzsche does, as a Christian allegory or, as contemporary social critics do, as a caution against watching too much television, there is obviously no end to the potential interpretations one might make of the text. But there are clear reasons for not taking this limitlessness as supportive of Bevir's ethic of specialization. Most of all, as Bevir himself argues, historical interpretation itself becomes limitless insofar as it concerns itself not merely with understanding what the author said, but *explaining* why the author meant what s/he did. Explanation is not optional for the historian of ideas, but fundamental and co-original with understanding.²⁷ Historians answer the explanatory question by situating a relic within an author's wider web of beliefs, which in turn are situated within a tradition. The problem, however, is that there is no single tradition in which authors might be located and that historians select traditions to suit whichever particular angle they want to emphasize when treating an author. True, not all traditions are appropriate. The historian of ideas can delineate only those traditions that “embody appropriate temporal and conceptual connections” to the author (211). But there is no fixed number of these. Rather, Bevir speaks of explanatory processes in terms of “boundless, spherical networks” (191).²⁸ Accordingly, “there is a very real

²⁵ As in the quotation above: “because we cannot establish any limits to the works a text so defined might inspire . . .” Bevir, *Logic*, 58.

²⁶ This concern is reflected in Bevir's opposition to what he calls “structural” interpretations (i.e., all interpretations that do not read a relic as a work written by a particular author).

²⁷ Bevir, *Logic*, 175–176.

²⁸ See also, Mark Bevir, “On Tradition,” *Humanitas* 13 (2000), 28–53.

sense, therefore, in which historians define traditions according to their own purposes” (210).

Given that historical interpretation has a limitless quality because it relies on traditions which are themselves limitless, what prevents the history of ideas from falling into the other dimension of indeterminacy: arbitrariness? Bevir offers at least three answers here. The first of these – that a superior historical explanation will involve *genuine temporal links* (i.e., authors must be situated in traditions which they were aware of and influenced by) – is one that I have already discussed and tried to extend to apply to non-historical forms of interpretation (insofar as the historian, *qua* reader, is entitled to participate in, and not just report, the intellectual tradition being uncovered). The two others, however, not only offer effective protections against arbitrariness, but do so in a way fully exportable to non-historical, future-oriented interpretations of a work which, as we have seen, are also limitless. One is that interpretations must bear an appropriate *conceptual* link.²⁹ For all Bevir’s emphasis on temporal connections, it is nonetheless a key part of his argument that conceptual linkages are both possible and necessary. Even though Bevir argues that the resemblance between two otherwise unrelated ideas is “mere snapshot” since a legitimate tradition “must consist of more than a series of instances that happen to resemble each other,” this very argument nonetheless accepts that it is possible to discover resemblances between two works and that such resemblances are a necessary if insufficient feature of historical analysis (205). Once we accept the reality of conceptual links, we accept a means for separating arbitrary non-historical interpretations from non-arbitrary ones. Nietzsche’s interpretation of Plato as a proto-Christian, for example, is anachronistic but not arbitrary, insofar as there is a conceptual link between Plato’s philosophy and Christian theology (both affirm an other-worldly realm, characterized by true being, compared to which the human world and the human body are denigrated).

Besides appropriate conceptual linkages, the other way the potential limitlessness of historical interpretation does not fall into arbitrariness is that interpretations must compete against each other in a marketplace of rival historical theories. Because the superiority of a historical explanation

²⁹ “Conceptual links reveal a pattern in beliefs that persisted together through time” (*Logic*, 213; cf. 206–212, 236).

depends in part on its ability to be recognized as such, there is the assurance that genuinely arbitrary and random attempts at historical meaning will not gain recognition from other historians and thinkers.³⁰ While I have voiced some skepticism about how to arbitrate success in the marketplace of rival historical interpretations, the point in this context is simply that there is no reason to suppose that this criterion of success might not be just as effectively employed for keeping non-historical interpretations within the bounds of non-arbitrariness. If numerous interpreters focus on Plato's proto-Christianity or his implicit critique of mass spectatorship, we have reason to find assurance that these interpretations, though non-historical, are non-arbitrary. Upon reflection, what is genuinely objectionable about certain postmodern textual interpretations is not that they are non-historical, but that they are idiosyncratic and obscure to the point that it is impossible to imagine them prevailing in a marketplace of competing theories: they are the interpretation of a single person not sufficiently committed to persuading a wider public to understand and share his/her view.

So, in sum, it can be said that Bevir's accusation that non-historical interpretations are indeterminate is not persuasive. To the extent he means to indict the limitlessness of non-historical interpretation, historical interpretation suffers from its own limitless. And further, two of the ways historical interpretation avoids the arbitrariness threatened by its limitlessness – conceptual linkages and success in rivalry – are just as applicable to non-historical modes of interpretation where they likewise can serve to prevent limitlessness from slipping into arbitrariness.

5. Why Ordinary Historians Have More Reason for Specialization than Historians of Ideas

Bevir might reply that if one accepts my arguments against an ethic of specialization, then all forms of history are thereby called into question. But I do not believe this is the case. I think there are important differences between the general study of history and the particular study of the history

³⁰ "Historians can come to know what a work means only by comparing rival webs of belief, each of which presumably includes not only an understanding of the work and various other works but also explanatory theories linking these understandings to one another" (Bevir, *Logic*, 175; cf. 206, 219, 233, 249).

of ideas – differences which further substantiate overcoming an ethic of specialization and having the historian of ideas (but not the historian) also engage in non-historical modes of analysis. For one thing, the historian of ideas' hermeneutic principle of "weak intentionalism" is specific to the history of ideas. Moreover, numerous problems besetting the stability of objective findings in the history of ideas – inconsistency, vagueness, the reflective quality of analysis (one intelligence examining another), and the relevance of preconscious and unconscious motives – do not apply when general historians set out to represent non-intellectual relics from the past like social structures, institutions, and events.³¹

In conclusion I would like to emphasize two other features which distinguish the history of ideas from history proper and which further caution against the ethic of specialization. One of these is that the specific object of the history of ideas – *the idea* (especially in its written, published form) – is fundamentally different from other objects of historical study insofar as it reflects a conscious intention by its author to leap beyond the present and speak to the future. An intellectual relic uniquely anticipates a future beyond itself for its meaning. An author intends to be read, but a reader can only come after the relic has been written. In this sense the future is inscribed in intellectual relics (at least intentionally published ones) in a way that is lacking in other objects of historical research. What Thucydides said of his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1972, 1.22.4) and what so distinguished his intellectual relic (the history) from the non-intellectual occurrences it covered (the events, decisions, and battles that comprised the war) – "My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever" – is in fact an implicit premise of generally all intellectual relics – at least all *philosophies* – that have been published by their authors.³² A historian proper might recover

³¹ This is not to say that history proper is not engulfed in its own persistent and perhaps intractable debates about social structures, institutions, and events, but only that these debates are not intensified by the additional problems undermining stability of findings in areas like the history of political thought.

³² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, R. Warner (trans.), New York: Penguin, 1972), 1.22.4. Similar explicit expressions of the otherwise implicit way in which published intellectual relics anticipate an undifferentiated and endless future public audience include: Adorno's likening of philosophy to a *Flaschenpost* [message in a bottle] (*Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974) [1951]), 209; Thoreau's claim that whereas the orator "yields to the inspiration of the

written tax documents from a customs house to explain how revenue collection operated. Here the writing being examined is documentary. But it is distinctive of intellectual relics, such as past works of philosophy, that they are consciously written to posterity. They are not merely documents of the age in which they were written, but explicit attempts by their authors to escape the confines of their time and make their thought available to an unbounded heritage of future readership.³³ This means that a historian of ideas who reads an intellectual relic is, unlike the historian who studies past events, social structures, and institutions, an *addressee* of that relic and, as such, the bearer of an implicit invitation to respond.

But should the historian of ideas answer this invitation and supplement the history with autonomous own efforts to explain the significance of the work in light of his/her own insight and the circumstances of his/her own time? While I do not think I have decisively shown that a historian of ideas must also engage in non-historical modes of interpretation, I do believe I have shown that doing so is not necessarily contradictory with the historical creed.³⁴ And I think I have also exposed this unwillingness to speak in one's own voice as much more determinative of the ethic of specialization than a concern for the past, the commitment of objectivity, or the desire to avoid indeterminacy.

Still, it will be responded that this criterion of avoiding subjectivity is a real and sufficient grounds on which to justify the ethic of specialization. In reply, I shall make one last point. If it is true that the historian of ideas will refuse to inject his/her own voice into the historical traditions s/he

transient occasion," the writer "speaks to the intellect and heart of mankind, to all in any age who can *understand* him" (*Walden* (New York: Penguin, 1983 [1854]), 147); and Machiavelli's famous dictum I cite as an epigraph to this essay.

³³) This need not mean that philosophers and political thinkers among others intend to be read by *everyone* – since, as Leo Strauss and others have shown, esoteric writing written for the initiated few has played an important role in the tradition of political philosophy – but this in no way disqualifies the claim that political thinkers and philosophers generally intend to be read by future readers.

³⁴) John Dunn's explicit retraction of his earlier (*The Political Thought of John Locke*, x) claim that he "simply cannot conceive of constructing an analysis of any issue in contemporary political theory around the affirmation or negation of what Locke says about political matters" is an example of the kind of transformation I mean to defend. J. Dunn, "What is living and what is dead in the political thought of John Locke?" in J. Dunn (ed.) *Interpreting Political Responsibility* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 25.

uncovers, we are left with the odd and striking circumstance that the historian of ideas chooses to study precisely that which s/he will not engage in: creative thought that does not simply recover past traditions, but also revises and reshapes them in light of future developments. I know of no other specialization that is defined by an insistence that its practitioners abstain from that which it otherwise celebrates.³⁵ For who is the paradigmatic figure studied in the history of ideas? It is, as Bevir calls it, a *pupil*: someone who, like the historian of ideas, is consciously aware of past intellectual traditions but, unlike the historian of ideas, seeks to extend, modify, and update such traditions in light of the distinctive concerns and developments of the pupil's own time. All of the intellectual figures discussed in the history of ideas – Plato, Locke, Nietzsche, etc. – are pupils in this sense. The pupil does not only try to understand past traditions, but to learn from them by asking how they might be relevant to him/herself and his/her time. This means that the pupil does two things the historian of ideas will not do. The pupil will revise or break with past tradition in light of contemporary problems or his/her own injection of creative insight: “We have found that pupils can extend and modify traditions of their teachers in an unlimited number of ways” (218).³⁶ And, second, the pupil will start new traditions by linking otherwise unrelated intellectual heritages together in his/her own thought. So, to return to an earlier example, someone who noticed that American Indians and Chinese Buddhists shared beliefs resembling modern anarchists could put forward – if s/he were committed to developing anarchist thought and reading these works in the manner of a pupil – a new theory of anarchism that did integrate these diverse and otherwise (temporally) unrelated traditions. That is to say, to the extent that a pupil can choose his/her own teachers, a pupil can establish temporal links where none existed before.³⁷

³⁵ To be clear, my point is not that historians of ideas celebrate the past, but that they celebrate, insofar as they are students of the history of political thought and philosophy, *creative and original thinking*.

³⁶ Cf.: “As beliefs pass from teacher to pupil, so the pupil modifies and extends the themes, or conceptual connections, that linked the beliefs to each other” (Bevir, *Logic*, 204).

³⁷ As Bevir says: “The existence of the appropriate temporal connections, however, need not have been a result of any deliberate design. Nobody need have intended to pass on the relevant set of beliefs, nor even have been conscious of doing so . . . Thus, although we must be able to trace a historical line from the start of a tradition to its finish, the development

The ethic of specialization requires that historians report on the creative thought of others without themselves engaging in creative thought. It requires that they trace past intellectual traditions without extending them. It requires, in short, that they study pupils (students of past thought who responded to it independently) without becoming pupils themselves. By contrast, a pupil in understanding traditions also participates in them. As Bevir himself acknowledges, for the pupil this participation is inseparable from the understanding process itself:

Every time people reflect on the beliefs they inherited from their teachers, they are liable to become aware of a difficulty in their understanding of the beliefs. Even if people think they are trying only to understand correctly a tradition they regard as sacrosanct, their effort to do so will generally involve their exercising their reason, which, in turn, will entail their developing the tradition they are trying to understand . . . [C]onceptual change occurs because all of us are individual agents who reflect on the traditions we inherit in the light of our own experiences and thereby alter these traditions in accord with our own reasoning (224–225).

This passage is a rare instance when Bevir suggests that historical processes of understanding ultimately and necessarily blend with non-historical processes of learning in the manner of a pupil. My remarks here have been devoted to more explicitly elaborating and defending the propriety of such a mix.

introduced by its successive adherents might be such that the start and finish have nothing in common apart from their temporal link" (*Logic*, 204).