**Political Philosophy as Apprenticeship and Practice**

Political philosophy seems to have fallen on hard times. Though plenty of academics in departments of Philosophy and Political Science still lay claim to the field, those who actually have something illuminating to say about our political world are few and far between. We have no modern-day Plato or Aristotle, no Hobbes or Hegel, not even a Hannah Arendt or a Michael Oakeshott to offer us much-needed perspective. Why is this? Why are we more likely to learn something fresh about politics today from elite journalists, sociologists, and psychologists than from political philosophers? What is going on in our undergraduate and graduate curricula that stunts the development of political philosophy? Why are our professional journals filled more with articles about the *history* of political philosophy than with political philosophy itself?

These are hard questions to answer, but they nevertheless deserve attention. In my view something has gone wrong—or rather many things have gone wrong—with the kind of pedagogy that is likely to make political philosophy possible. Our pedagogy has been corrupted by those who undervalue as well as those who overvalue the great texts of the discipline. It has been undercut by the overly cynical and suspicious. And it has too often been shaped by apologists, activists, and ideologues rather than those who take the fundamental *questions* of politics seriously. In this essay I want to describe what I take to be a solid political-philosophical pedagogy and to respond to some of the distracting ideas and practices that now get in its way. In so doing, I hope to show how political philosophy might once again become valued and practiced.

1. **The Idea of Apprenticeship**

By far the best way to begin the practice of political philosophy is to apprentice oneself to the tradition. Why? Why look to the past instead of starting fresh, seeking insights of one’s own? The answer will be obvious to anyone who understands what traditions actually are and how they function pedagogically. Traditions are literally a “handing down,” an inheritance from one generation to the next (*trans*—"cross” + *dare*—“to give” 🡪 *tradere—*“to deliver”). In them we find recorded ideas, diverse ways of seeing and knowing, and also practices that have been found repeatedly to yield desirable results. Traditions thus save us from error in profligate experimentation and set us on a promising path from the start.

An example will crystallize the point. In the domain of philosophical reflection on war there is a body of thought known as the “just war tradition,” which stretches as far back as St. Augustine of Hippo and forward to numerous writers today who self-consciously analyze war in its terms and categories. The value of this tradition not only as a body of doctrine but also (and more importantly) as a pedagogy for the novice inquirer will become clear if we imagine putting an identical question to someone schooled in, and someone *not* schooled in, its ways. To the unschooled novice we might ask the simple question, “Was World War II a just war?” How will the novice go about arriving at an answer? What is likely to be the response? Probably the causes of the war will be considered—the evil of the enemy and the terrible costs of doing nothing—and the novice will pronounce the war just. But now imagine putting the same question to someone schooled in the just war tradition, and what kind of answer is likely? A war can be just or unjust in three major senses: the justice (or not) of *entering* the war (*“jus ad bellum*”), the justice of one’s conduct *in* the war (*“jus in bello*”), and the justice of conduct *after* the war (“*jus* *post bellum*”). Moreover, these diverse considerations of justice do not always line up. For instance, a war might be just *ad bellum*, but not *in bello*—as was arguably the case with World War II. It may be just *post bellum* but not in the initial going to war. Further still, each of these three dimensions of justice houses numerous subdimensions which all bear directly on the question of justice. The question of *jus ad bellum*, for instance, contains sub-questions about “just cause,” “legitimate authority,” “last resort,” and the “likelihood of success.” Thus, the student who reflects on war in light of the *tradition* of just war thinking has, ready to hand, a highly differentiated, expertly articulated sense of the epistemological terrain. He learns to pursue his questions in a far more penetrating way than a novice ever could.

A number of quick points about traditions are here worth stressing. One is that traditions are not—or not necessarily—*constraining*. Students often act today as if traditions are but a body of rules (usually “do-nots”) made up by someone else, in order to limit what can be said or done. But this is a woefully inadequate understanding of traditions. In the example above, the student equipped with the just war tradition is in a real sense *freer* than the student without it. He is free from ignorance, free to inquire fruitfully into profoundly important questions of concern to himself and society. Second, traditions are not simply *somebody else’s* creation. They are almost always the work of many hands and frequently are composed of conflicting ideas and possibilities. Moreover, traditions come alive only when then are appropriated and applied *by us* to ever-changing historical realities. Traditions are thus *ours* as much as they are someone else’s. Like a piece of property handed down through generations, they fall to us to use or not use as we think best. This leads to a final point about traditions: there is nothing inherent in traditions that requires them to be *static*. Rather they welcome improvement as those who take them up adapt them to their needs. Traditions do not, in other words, declare apodictically what is true or right in any given domain, but rather engage the apprentice in a kind of pedagogy that is fluid and evolving. The apprentice listens and learns. A high degree of deference is no doubt appropriate toward well-tested ideas and practices. And yet change is always possible within traditions, and it is *we* who get to be the agents of change.

1. **Anti-Apprenticeship**

Students who miss out on the benefits of apprenticeship generally fall into three basic groups: the logicians, the compulsively hygienic, and the would-be masters of suspicion. To the first group belong those whose initial exposure to philosophy typically occurs in an “analytic” environment. They take classes where they receive not an apprenticeship to their teachers or to the great masters so much as a basic set of analytical tools centering on logic. Their goal as students and later as practitioners is to apply their tools, like so many instruments of torture, to contemporary political beliefs and practices. Typically, they enjoy tearing down and debunking more than building up or maintaining. The word “fallacy” is ever on their lips. One can often spot these students by the wildly outlandish examples they invent in order to press a point—a train, a switch in the tracks, the death of an innocent child versus the obliteration of a densely populated city. They invent examples in part because they have little relevant experience to consult either firsthand or through texts. They invent also because they lack an appropriate *reverence* for reality; ideas are like so many chess pieces to be moved around according to rules of logic; and “wisdom” consists merely in making interesting moves. For these students the idea of apprenticeship to tradition, one that stretches back beyond Russell, Wittgenstein, and Moore, seems an absurd waste of time. What they want is not an *education* in ways of understanding political life, but a *training*, a crash course in the latest tools of the trade.

Quite different are the compulsively hygienic. They know about the tradition of political philosophy but refuse to come into close contact with it, because they fear contamination. These are the students who assume that *traditional* ideas and practices must be somehow imperfect or outmoded. And yet it is difficult to determine precisely where error lies. Thus, fearing that past misconceptions may somehow insinuate themselves into their minds, they deem it best to jettison tradition altogether (as if this were possible), to do all their thinking on their own, reasoning from the ground up, as it were. As I see it, the “compulsively hygienic” come in two varieties, one *Cartesian*, the other *Millian*. The first regards tradition as little more than a body of unexamined opinions standing in the way of a proper quest for certainty: “Regarding the opinions which I had previously held, I couldn’t do better than set out to get rid of them all at one go, so as then to replace them afterwards with better opinions or even with the same ones after I had straightened them out using reason’s plumb-line.” Thus writes Descartes. The Millian variety is similar, but in addition to the search for truth there is also deep anxiety about *authenticity*. “Human nature is not a machine,” writes Mill, “to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the *inward* forces which make it a living thing.” Again, the hygienic concern is that a sustained apprenticeship to tradition might stifle one’s authentic self, one’s inward genius and originality. In terms of political philosophy, the concern would be that one’s original “take” on politics, one’s unique perspective, might be crowded out by the effort to conform to tradition.

Finally, the would-be “masters of suspicion.” This is a phrase coined by Paul Ricoeur to describe the thought of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. But I use it here in a looser sense. Would-be masters of suspicion are students who refuse to apprentice themselves to tradition because they suppose they already know the single-most important thing about tradition, namely that it tells lies about man’s real nature and motives, usually for self-interested reasons. Of course, the tradition of political philosophy contains much salutary and edifying talk about the *summum bonum* and the common good, about the mastery of virtues both moral and intellectual, and about natural law and divine providence. But what really motivates human beings is nothing so exalted. It is more like the desire for material well-being (Marx), or power (Nietzsche), or sex and pleasure (Freud and Bentham). Because the tradition thus traffics in lies, apprenticing oneself to it necessarily signals a disposition fundamentally opposed to genuine philosophy. Interestingly, the would-be masters of suspicion do not typically abandon the tradition of political philosophy as their hygienic counterparts do. Rather, they devote considerable energy to “unmasking” it and “deconstructing” it in order to reveal its many “illusions.” They therefore *know* the tradition both inside and out (or suppose they do), yet their disposition toward it is markedly different from the spirit of apprenticeship.

Anti-apprenticeship in all its varieties involves a prodigious arrogance, a vast overestimation of the powers of the individual to see and to understand here and now without the aid of past discoveries or practices of learning. Of course, there is often *something* good behind the anti-traditional spirit, which explains its enduring attraction to young minds. Many errors have indeed sprung from flawed logic and a lack of rigor in argumentation; thus analytic philosophy has its place. There are indeed dangers of intellectual contamination, as when we assent to commonly held beliefs that turn out to be false. And a certain degree of suspicion is, no doubt, appropriate when studying human beings, especially in their political aspect. But as reasonable as these justifications may seem, anti-apprenticeship remains an ill-bargain for the student of political philosophy, because it tends to throw out the essential with the non-essential, the true with the false, the useful with the useless. The problem is that the tradition of political philosophy is not simply (or even mostly) a tradition of errors. It is more like a tradition of luminous insights and truths interspersed, no doubt, with errors, exaggerations, and omissions. The challenge, therefore is not to escape from tradition, but rather to engage it in a way that is productive, to learn from it what one can while trying to be clear-minded about its defects. The advantages of doing this are immeasurable, as the example from the just war tradition already demonstrates. Just as one cannot write without words and genres, and one cannot sing without notes and melodic patterns, so one cannot *think* without engaging in the ideas and structures of traditions of thought. To engage in political philosophy is thus to engage a *tradition* of political philosophy whether one likes it or not. The question then becomes how to do this well.

1. **A Closer Look at Apprenticeship: Images, Teachings, and Method**

Having considered some of the intellectual obstacles to apprenticeship, I want to take a closer look at its substance. What does apprenticeship involve? A valued teacher once told me I could spend my time with the tradition of political philosophy either searching out things to “problematize” or searching for beauty and truth wherever it may appear. So too with academic writing: I could either focus on the negative—pointing out other people’s mistakes—or engage positively with the tradition in such a way as to tease out and illuminate the best insights it has to offer. For the most part I have taken the second path, and I have never regretted it, largely because of the cumulative effect this has had on my disposition as a scholar, but also, frankly, because of the effect it has had on my day-to-day experience with the world.

When one apprentices oneself to political philosophy in a spirit of charity and gratefulness rather than suspicion, one of the first things one sees are the lush and fecund *images* handed down to us from the past. In Plato’s *Republic* alone: the image of the “tripartite soul,” the “allegory of the cave,” the “divided line,” the five distinct soul-types with their unique psychological traits. One could go on and on. Beyond Plato: the image of the “City of God” and the “City of Man;” of “inferno,” “purgatorio,” and “paradiso;” of a “state of nature” and a “body politic;” and the image—much more recently—of a “veil of ignorance.” Images do tremendous work in political philosophy, and none of these images is merely flat or static. On the contrary, each is profoundly generative, designed to encourage and facilitate sustained reflection, even as we come to appreciate the ultimate inadequacy of the images themselves. Images in political philosophy are, in short, powerfully pedagogical.

But political philosophy is much more than mere images; it is also a body of *teachings*, more or less plainly articulated, about the nature of politics as a perennial yet variable phenomenon, and about the possibilities and limits of political association under different historical conditions. Sometimes the teachings of political philosophers seem difficult to grasp. One has to strain to make sense of them. But this “straining” is often synonymous with learning itself. The late British philosopher R.G. Collingwood captured this aspect of apprenticeship nicely:

The reader, on his side, must approach his philosophical author precisely as if he were a poet, in the sense that he must seek in his work the expression of an individual experience, something which the writer has actually lived through, and something which the reader *must live through in his turn by entering into the writer’s mind with his own*. To the basic and ultimate task of following or understanding his author, coming to see what he means by sharing his experience, the task of criticizing his doctrine, or determining how far it is true and how far false, is altogether secondary. A good reader, like a good listener, must be quiet in order to be attentive; able to refrain from obtruding his own thoughts, the better to apprehend those of the writer; not passive, but using his activity to follow where he is led, not to find a path of his own. A writer who does not deserve this silent, uninterrupting attention does not deserve to be read at all.

Apprenticeship, then, does not mean racing through a list of texts in order to approve or disapprove of their teachings. Nor is it “critical thinking,” as this phrase is bandied about in our universities today. Instead it must proceed from the initial assumption that the greatest authors actually have something insightful to teach us, that if they were alive today, they would probably understand *us* better than we would understand them.

Still, even when one strains in earnest to grasp the teachings of great texts, there will be times when one simply cannot understand. The teachings seem ultimately too obscure or complicated to follow. This feeling of discomfiture is also captured well in Collingwood’s account:

What we can get by reading any book is conditioned by what we bring to it; and in philosophy no one can get much good by reading the works of a writer whose problems have not already arisen spontaneously in the reader’s mind. Admitted to the intimacy of such a man’s thought, he cannot follow it in its movement, and soon loses sight of it altogether and may fall to condemning it as illogical or unintelligible, when the fault lies neither in the writer’s thought nor in his expression, nor even in the reader’s capacities, but only in the reader’s preparation. If he lays down the book, and comes back to it ripened by several years of philosophical labour, he may find it both intelligible and convincing.

How often have students had this experience of finding an author’s conclusions unintelligible only to return years later to find them perfectly clear? As a colleague of mine recently remarked: “I used to be highly critical of John Stuart Mill, but the older I get the wiser Mill becomes!”

Apprenticeship therefore necessarily takes time. But gradually something exciting occurs. Little by little, the pieces of the tradition start to converge into something like a holistic view, a more or less *full* understanding of the fundamental, alternative ways of thinking about and practicing politics. This is exciting, of course, because it gives one a sense of impending “wisdom,” the attainment of a “knowledge of the whole.” And this, in turn, allows one to analyze contemporary political beliefs into their paradigmatic “types.” We learn what it means to be “Rousseauian,” “Kantian,” “Thomistic,” or “Hobbesian” in politics; or to approach political problems in a “deontological” or “consequentialist” manner. Of course, to suppose that all or even most contemporary beliefs derive directly from great texts would be vastly over-simplistic. More likely is that contemporary beliefs derive from experiences similar to those that engendered the thoughts expressed in great texts. But, be that as it may, apprenticeship now begins to reveal the horizon of possible political forms, along with the paradigmatic expressions of these forms, and how they tend or tend not to fit together into coherent wholes. The patient apprentice is rewarded with a newborn power to see contemporary politics in historical and philosophical terms. He appreciates the direct *relevance* of the tradition for thinking through the clashing opinions expressed by contemporary political elites.

More could be said about the apprentice’s encounter with various “teachings” from the tradition—including the fact that these teachings *themselves* turn out to be clashing, and that, therefore, one stands in need of some higher form of reflection than awe-inspired receptivity. But now I want to draw attention to a third dimension of apprenticeship beyond images and teachings. There is also the matter of *method*. By method, I mean the way master thinkers move from point A to point B, from a puzzle to be solved to a solution of some kind. This aspect of apprenticeship is often neglected by teachers and students alike. We tend to focus first on a book’s teachings and on isolating the exact *problem* a thinker was trying to work out. Almost never do we focus on the matter of *how*. Yet this is in a sense the question that matters most if one hopes to move someday from apprenticeship to practice. If the apprentice can somehow master the various methods of political philosophy then perhaps he can *practice* it himself.

Many students of political philosophy never become “methodologically conscious.” I once knew a prominent political theorist who told me in a disdainful tone that he *did not have a method!*  He was a “theorist” not an “empiricist.” No doubt, he was thinking of those courses on “methodology” offered in political science departments today, which apply only to a narrow range of (often dull) questions. But, in any event, he was wrong. In political philosophy, one can employ sound and rigorous methods or flawed and careless ones; one can be methodologically conscious or unconscious, brilliant or naïve. But one cannot do political philosophy without a method. Method is simply the “way” one attempts to move from question to answer, the path one chooses to follow (from the Greek *meta*-*hodos*, a way through).

With methodological consciousness comes a host of exhilarating insights. It is one thing to learn the teaching of Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*, something else to learn how he arrived at it. Often, by studying method one reaches unprecedented clarity about the exact problem an author was trying to solve, or the limiting features of his solution. But this is a secondary benefit. The primary benefit of studying method is discovering the appropriate way to make progress on different sorts of problems. Sometimes the best thing to do is to dissect phenomena into their component parts in the way that Hobbes dissects a “Christian Commonwealth” into a commonwealth per se, then into the material that makes it up (namely, “man”), then into the various sources of motion within man, until, at last, he finds himself describing perception and the motions that press upon the organs of sense. At other times, insight is profitably gained not by taking things apart but by grouping them together into kinds, the way Plato in the Socratic dialogues moves from individual instances of a thing (say, acts of justice) to the *idea* that makes them recognizable (“justice” as an abstract concept), to the still-more abstract concepts in which justice is said to participate (“virtue” and “the good”). The number of methods available to political philosophy is quite staggering. From working deductively through a practical syllogism to working noetically through intuitive leaps; from illuminating via historical contextualization to illuminating via psychological exegesis; from phenomenology to ideal typology to recovering a narrative context. Probably, the number of methods is finite, not infinite, and yet there always seems to be a fresh approach or a fresh twist to an old approach that lends genius to a particular author’s work.

Methodological genius and creativity are among the finest fruits of serious apprenticeship. And they are tremendously liberating. For they allow one to pursue questions, even when there is no known method to address them. Typically, students in philosophy and political science departments learn a method, or a handful of methods, and then seek out problems for which their methods are appropriate. For instance, one learns how to run regressions and then asks:

“What research questions can I solve with regression analysis?” Or in political philosophy one learns an analytic method or a method of esoteric interpretation and then asks: what can I explore using these methods? But, of course, this approach is disappointingly limited. A freer approach would put “wonder” not “method” in the driver’s seat. It would allow puzzles and questions to determine what methods we require rather than the other way around. The philosopher Eric Voegelin was good on this point: “The subordination of theoretical relevance to method perverts the meaning of science on principle. Perversion will result *whatever* method should happen to be chosen as the model method. Hence, the principle must be carefully distinguished from its special manifestation.” Methodological genius and creativity are crucial for the practice of political philosophy, and its future. For if political philosophy is a quest for political *wisdom* (which it is), then there can be no artificial restrictions of the horizon. We must do our best to develop the necessary tools for the pursuit of questions that naturally arise.

1. **When is Apprenticeship Complete?**

It seems appropriate to say a word about when apprenticeship is complete, even though no firm or universal conclusions can be drawn on this topic. Some students choose to remain students forever. By this I mean that in their writing and teaching they focus primarily on major, or sometimes minor, figures in the tradition of political philosophy rather than on politics itself. To this kind of activity, I give the name “scholarship,” which is neither to diminish its value nor to bestow upon it any special dignity; it is merely to describe what is going on. Of course, the distinction between political philosophy and scholarship cannot be pressed too far, since to engage in one is, to some extent, to engage in the other. But to deny the distinction entirely would be to go too far in the other direction. There must be a way of doing political philosophy that focuses less on past masters and more on political *phenomena* themselves, less on texts and more on events or ideas as they occur in political reality. It is this kind of activity that I designate the *practice* of political philosophy, as opposed to apprenticeship.

For students who make this turn, I imagine something like the following occurring. The prospect of rereading a canonical text for the twelfth or twentieth time ceases to deliver the same degree of excitement as earlier readings and re-readings did. The hope of fresh illumination *from* the text and *into* the text gradually fades. At the same time, the extent to which actual political life—either contemporary or historical, domestic or foreign—seems startlingly *puzzling* begins gradually to increase. One starts to sense that the tradition of political philosophy, while invaluable and precious, simply does not answer all the questions about politics or throw sufficient light onto phenomena that seem not yet well understood.

At this point, the student may reflect on the fact that, for the most part, the major figures in the tradition of political philosophy were not themselves scholars of the tradition that preceded them, or that this is not *all* they did. To be sure, Hobbes translated Thucydides, and Isaiah Berlin wrote essays on Vico and Herder. But for neither was this their major contribution to political philosophy. Rather (again, for the most part) the great writers of the past wrote books about *politics*, not about other books.

In my own case, the desire to make this turn—to decrease my scholarship on books and authors, and to increase my exploration of political reality—did not occur at any of those junctures one might typically associate with an end to apprenticeship. It did not occur after my comprehensive exams or when I received the Ph.D. It did not occur with tenure or with promotion to the rank of full professor. Instead, it occurred after about twelve solid years of teaching the history of political philosophy to students at the graduate and undergraduate level. And, looking back, nothing seems more natural than that the gradual development of one’s philosophical attention and energy should move away from the masterworks of the tradition towards political life itself. In retrospect, I faintly recall one of my graduate school professors telling me in my first days in the program that to do political philosophy in its truest, most genuine sense means to engage philosophically with one’s current regime. It takes time and practice, he said, but that is the goal. This thought has stayed with me, and now it seems perfectly reasonable and true.

1. **Anti-Practice: Dogmatists, Exegetes, and *Eristikoi***

Just as there are intellectual voices that discourage apprenticeship, so there are those that discourage the *practice* of political philosophy. I’ll say a bit more about the nature of political philosophy below and the different ways it can be practiced. But for now let me describe it simply as an effort to shed light on puzzles and problems that emerge from political reality, not so much the “how-to” puzzles that typically occupy the minds of policy makers and strategists, as the “what-is” and “what-should-be” puzzles that have always marked philosophy as a genre of thought. There are indeed many who actively discourage political philosophy understood in these terms; and the novice practitioner will do well to recognize them along with their characteristic postures.

First, the “dogmatists” are those who are constitutionally incapable of political philosophy because they believe they are already wise. They do not experience that pregnant anxiety of not knowing. And yet not knowing is the very precondition for wonder, which in turn drives the philosophical search. In contrast to the philosophical disposition of searching for wisdom, the dogmatists are self-appointed “answer-keys.” As such, they appear in a number of guises. The most commonly encountered are what I like to call the “*zeitgeist* dogmatists” who believe adamantly that whatever just happens to be morally fashionable is also absolutely true. These can be found on the right or left of the political spectrum, depending on the leanings of any given culture or subculture. In America today at the national level, most *zeitgeist* dogmatists are leftists, easily recognizable by their campaign for moral absolutes in such areas as sexual liberation, gender fluidity, environmentalism, universal healthcare (*with* the right to abortion!), and gun control. These are, of course, weighty political matters which a less confident temperament might approach with a degree of circumspection (not to say fear and trembling). But for the *zeitgeist* dogmatist they are punctuated with exclamation points, not question marks. And the “correct” positions are too clear and urgently in need of advocacy to admit any space for philosophical wonder.

Dogmatists also appear in the form of religious apologists, young men (they’re almost always men)with a catechism in their pocket and a pertinent bible verse on their tongue. Like the *zeitgeist* dogmatist, the apologist has a ready answer for everything. But unlike his worldly counterpart, the apologist’s inscrutable wisdom hails from a transcendent beyond, and it is nothing if not *timeless* as well as absolute. There are of course many ways of being religious without absolutizing and dogmatizing the intimations of divine truth. But the “apologists” are especially noteworthy for their dogged resistance to political philosophy. For to engage in political philosophy is, on the face of it, to suppose that all the answers about politics are not given, that the domain of politics houses problems and puzzles that need to be worked out on their own terms. This the apologists, with their almost neurotic need for certainty and closure, cannot allow. If God has spoken at all, he has given us all we need to know. Political philosophy is at best unnecessary, at worst pernicious.

A much different sort of threat comes to political philosophy from those who cannot put down their books, what I like to call the “exegetes.” Like the dogmatists, they believe that the most important questions have already been answered, but they do not necessarily know the answers themselves, and they habitually look for them in the traditional books they have grown to love and admire. It is difficult to blame them. After all, the great texts of political philosophy *are* teeming with insights, many of which still throw light on contemporary conditions and problems. But when the habit of reaching for a supposedly authoritative book becomes too engrained, when it supplants wonder, when, instead of thinking through a problem on one’s own, one rather doubles down with a “deeper exegesis” of some classic text, forcing it to address problems it does not in fact address, the practice of political philosophy becomes well-nigh impossible.

The twentieth-century Thomist, Frederick Wilhelmsen described this problem well:

The understanding of the meaning of a text is not equivalent to the . . . “Philosophical Act.” Quite evidently nobody can become a professional philosopher who has not mastered the skills involved in reading a text. They have to do with disengaging a meaning which is not always evident on a first reading. But . . . philosophical reasoning, on the contrary, consists in forming propositions into premises yielding conclusions. The habit is by no means reducible to the first set of skills. The philosophical act, therefore, can be exercised upon a text, but it does not have to be: It might be exercised on the report of a text, on a problem presented in isolation of texts, or on any issue which demands philosophical penetration. The *explication des textes* hunts for “meaning,” not “truth.” Philosophical reasoning looks to concluding truths.

Even though I do not agree with Wilhelmsen in limiting philosophy to “forming propositions into premises yielding conclusions,” I do agree with his basic critique of exegesis as a substitute for philosophy. Regrettably, his point is likely to be lost on those who have come to *worship* great texts, who treat them “with the reverence and awe properly restricted to the Sacrament on the Altar.” For them, the art of unearthing the genuine (often esoteric) *meaning* of the text is synonymous with the search for truth itself; it points the way and discloses the truth. Probably, this is because the exegete has no other method to fall back on. This is the point that Wilhelmsen took pains to stress (and it is one I have already stressed above): when one allows method to determine the questions that can be asked and how to pursue them, one perverts the search for truth *in principle*.

A final obstacle to political philosophy: the *eristikoi*. I borrow this term from ancient Greek and regret that we have no equivalent in English. (We certainly have the characters!) The *eristikoi* are verbal wranglers, the word deriving from the Greek *eris* which means “strife.” They approach all conversations as contests in which one side must win and the other lose. Their goal is always victory, not enlightenment. In this way the *eristikoi* differ markedly from dogmatists and exegetes alike. For, dogmatists and exegetes are both deeply concerned for truth. Their weaknesses stem rather from believing they already possess it (dogmatists) or from artificially restricting the medium through which they seek it (exegetes). The *eristikoi* by contrast are willing to play fast and loose with truth, because truth is not ultimately what they are after. What they want is victory; and the reason they want it is that they are, at bottom, in love with power. It should come as no surprise that the *eristikoi* are frequently found in politics. They have *nothing whatsoever* to do with the practice of political philosophy. And yet, insofar as political philosophy comes into contact, or near contact, with politics itself, the *eristikoi* will frequently be there to attack it. Their techniques include mockery, pandering to the crowd, exaggeration and caricature, fast talking (so one cannot get a word in edgewise), and many a dirty trick besides. Because their skills are so finely honed, and because the political philosopher is not accustomed to thinking in such a manner, the *eristikoi* usually win the day. Though their victories are rarely more than “apparent,” they nevertheless do great damage to the practice of political philosophy. And the more a culture grows to admire them the less capable it becomes of serious philosophical reflection, theoretical or practical.

1. **The Practice of Political Philosophy**

By “practice,” I hope it will be clear that I do not mean the practice of *politics* but of political philosophy. I am discussing acts of reflection, not activism or advocacy. Much could be said about practice that I do not have room here to explore: where do one’s puzzles come from? How does one know what questions are likely to bear fruit and which are barren? What counts as illumination? Where does one find philosophical conversation partners and constructive critics? Where can one publish one’s work when it is not at all conventional and falls outside the usual genres? To what extent should one engage with other contemporary authors versus setting out one’s thoughts in a freestanding form? These and other questions would deserve attention if time and space allowed. But here I am going to limit myself to one simple reflection on the nature of political philosophy as it can and has been practiced. I want to distinguish between political philosophy in the *theoretical* mode and political philosophy in the *pragmatic* mode.

Theoretical political philosophy is not as widely known in the United States as it is in Britain. Americans are indeed too pragmatic to see much use in it. But it is a rewarding and oftentimes exhilarating activity nonetheless. In this mode, political philosophy aims not at all at improving the world but only at *understanding* it. It is, in this sense, a flat rejection of Marx’s final thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” It is, in other words, a deliberate siding with Hegelian idealism over Marxist materialism.

Why would anybody want to do this? One reason—the primary one—is that *understanding* is itself a human good, independent of anything one might *do* with an understanding. Aristotle was thus right when he wrote that “all human beings by nature desire to know [*eidenai*].” To test this, one might recollect those moments in one’s life, usually lightning fast and fleeting, when one suddenly came to understand something that was previously opaque. Revelation suddenly strikes, and the insights that attend it are “complete in themselves,” needing nothing in order to have more value. In fact, a moment’s reflection on these wonderful flashes of intellectual enlightenment reveals that nothing in our day-to-day experience presents itself as more valuable than this. The insights come to us as effortless, an unmitigated pleasure—a gift, as Heidegger once observed, from some transcendent beyond.

Secondly, theoretical philosophy is, in important respects, a guard against *misapplication*. After all, the application of philosophical understandings to political life is fraught with danger. For in philosophy things are never as they *really* are. Things are polished up, their imperfections removed; the impossible becomes possible, and only the limits of our imagination constrain us. Thus, even to consider “applying” genuinely philosophical ideas to embodied political life seems somehow to entail a category mistake. And rarely are there no consequences for the misapplication of philosophy to political life. To what extent was the chaos of 20th century European politics the effect of political leaders attempting to apply their philosophically airtight “systems” of thought to the vexingly intractable material of human nature? Against this temptation, Hegel helpfully reminds the would-be political philosopher that “the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at dusk,” which is one way of saying that by the time one comes adequately to understand historical phenomena, the window for intervention is usually closed.

If one seeks an example of what I am here calling theoretical political philosophy, I would point to the work of the late British Idealist, Michael Oakeshott—not so much to the witty essays in his famous collection, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, but rather to his magisterial book-length studies, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) and *On Human Conduct* (1975). And for profound reflections on the *method* of theoretical political philosophy, see his essay “Political Philosophy” (1946-50)*.*

*Pragmatic* political philosophy is quite different, because its goal is not mere understanding, but improvement; and this requires simultaneously an expansion and a contraction of the philosophical horizon. The horizon expands because the project of improvement demands *phronesis*, “practical wisdom” or what the Latins called “*prudentia*.” And phronesis is hard to come by. Causes and effects have to be considered; a million variables must be taken into account; and one must always be prepared to sacrifice the perfect for the good enough. At the same time, the horizon contracts, because *thinking* itself is dramatically limited by what is “useful” and “likely to succeed.” Practical political philosophy has no time for imaginary worlds. Nor does it enjoy the incredible surfeit of potentiality that theoretical philosophy enjoys—the fact that one can illuminate phenomena from multiple different perspectives without having to choose which *one* perspective is best.

An example of pragmatic political philosophy in action is the work of John Rawls, whose *Theory of Justice*, for instance, is clearly aimed at improving American political life by tidying up the way we think about justice. Of this mode of political philosophy, it is a valid criticism to say, “but this will never work!” or “there is an easier way to achieve the same results.” It is also valid to complain that the conclusions do not follow necessarily from the premises. This is because pragmatic political philosophy almost always takes a deductive form. Initial premises are set out that seem philosophically attractive (for instance Rawls’s two principles of justice); then conclusions are drawn about what these principles imply for the practice of politics. More often than not, the conclusions demand social and political change; they reveal the need to reform our cultural practices in order bring them more in line with “reason.” Yet, as I have already intimated, the effort to apply what is sometimes called “ideal theory” to actual political life is fraught with danger. Not only must one be sure that the starting points are correct—those “initial premises” that were derived from who-knows-where, but also one must be confident that in making deductions one includes all the relevant qualifications and conditions that make political life so difficult to manage.

1. **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this essay I suggested that something has gone wrong with the way we teach political philosophy today and that, consequently, its practice has fallen on hard times. We have now considered several reasons for the current state of affairs. First, the practice of political philosophy requires a lengthy apprenticeship, and there are seductive voices all around that actively discourage this. The “logicians,” the “compulsively hygienic,” and the “would-be masters of suspicion” all work in concert to undermine confidence in the tradition of political philosophy. In terms of its pedagogical power as well as its substance, the tradition tends to be viewed as useless, obsolete, or unsound. And yet, as we have seen, there is no better way to become expert in a domain such as political philosophy than to benefit from what has been handed down. “If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants,” wrote Newton in 1675, and he was undoubtedly correct. He was correct also in recognizing that apprenticeship to the masters does not impede amazing feats of discovery, but rather facilitates them.

Next, there are obstacles placed in the way of the turn from apprenticeship to practice. It is a precarious turn indeed; and, too often, the teachers of political philosophy do nothing to encourage it. They act as if the exegesis of great texts is itself the practice of political philosophy. To be sure, the art of exegesis is *related* to, and prepares one for, the practice of political philosophy. And yet Wilhelmsen was right to stress the degree to which a habitual recourse to texts regarded as authoritative, talisman-like in their powers of illumination, can obstruct the practice of political philosophy, discouraging it before it even begins.

Dogmatism is another dangerous obstacle to political philosophy because it looks so similar on the surface, at least to the uninitiated. If dogmatists have one thing, they have answers; and answers are a response to questions. Yet the apologists never *really* have questions in mind. Their need for answers borders on the neurotic. They have answers to questions they have never personally asked, and they are unwilling to have their answers come under close philosophical scrutiny. This is because they typically rank closure higher than truth, whether their motivations for doing so are ideological or religious.

A final hindrance to political philosophy is the seductive practice of eristics, according to which the goal of verbal exchange is neither the search for truth nor even clear communication. The goal is political victory. And this seems to become ever more popular as our culture becomes more polarized and the stakes of political battle increase. Even political philosophers might be forgiven an occasional slip into eristics, given the present cultural milieu. And yet philosophy and eristics are in no way compatible practices. Perhaps one could, in theory, engage in the search for truth while striving for victory over one’s opponents at the same time. But eventually the problem of corruption will set in. There will come a point at which one must ultimately decide whether truth or victory is the more important goal. And when that point is reached, one will not have been well served by feeding one’s appetite for victory.

As a closing thought, let me suggest that it is not good for our political culture, the political culture of the West, that the voice of political philosophy should fall silent. Political philosophy has never been a dominant voice in western culture, but it has always been a vital one. It has allowed those who will but listen to it, however briefly, to suspend momentarily their confident political aspirations in order to ask those most humbling philosophical questions: What *is* politics? And how *should* we go about practicing it together? These have always been civilizing questions, and they are, I believe, powerfully unifying questions despite the fact that they have never been adequately answered. Indeed, it is precisely because they have never been adequately answered that they represent something we have in common. We are all co-sufferers of the mystery of political life. The greatest danger to political community is, then, not that political philosophy should be allowed to explore its characteristic puzzles. The danger is rather when citizens all believe they possess certain answers to those puzzles, answers that are deemed unquestionably correct, and yet are not compatible with one another. It is dogmatism and the fierce struggle for power which attends it (what I have elsewhere called *dogmatomachy*) that is the real enemy of political life. Political philosophy is its antidote.