THE STORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT of political thought in the Middle Ages must begin with an analysis of the most relevant source material: the Christian Scriptures and the works of authoritative Christian writers, both theologians and institutional Church authorities.¹ The standard approach to the subject has reflected this well-understood point, as the classic and conventional presentations of medieval political theory illustrate. But a simplistic understanding of method has sometimes produced a sterile and often distorted view of the political thought of medieval writers, the result of an excessively narrow analysis of, if not mere search for, concepts presumed to be essential elements in a proper theory of polity and therefore a legitimate object of search through the history of political thinking. The analysis has often been vitiated further by either or both of two other defects: first, the mistaken and mischievous notion, usually unacknowledged because largely unnoticed, that the concepts under examination contain a purely transcendental, ahistorical meaning intelligible today as it has been across the centuries; and secondly, an even more misguided assumption that political thought develops somehow in the disengaged minds of great thinkers independently of contemporary events.

It is no longer acceptable or even fashionable to employ so faulty a methodology. Nor am I aware of any instance in which earlier historians of political thought consciously did so. Nonetheless, it is worth drawing attention to this caricature of an appropriate intellectual frame of refer-

¹. The rubric sola Scriptura, of course, became a rallying cry only with Luther's sixteenth-century Reformation views; but even here there was an inevitable tendency to follow the authoritative statements of the new religious leaders as well as the Church Fathers. See infra, pp. 197ff.
ence. For the difficulty of eliminating distorting perspectives that surround the thought and attitudes of earlier thinkers is a persistent challenge; and the more removed in time and the more unlike us our predecessors may have been, the more difficult it is to get their views right.

Medieval political thinkers have been almost paradigm victims of this sort of distorting interpretive activity, for several reasons. The standard and traditional literary models in which medieval writers expressed their views were deliberately and, to modern literary tastes, even excruciatingly abstract in form; their authors employed considerable rigour in omitting any reference to personal interests and their contemporary political and social scene. Also, however much common sense and an intuitive notion of history might indicate that essential elements of the Western intellectual tradition had some origins in medieval Europe, a significant segment of contemporary scholarship and current Western intellectual attitudes, especially in the social sciences, still finds it difficult to acknowledge and understand this basic fact. It is as if, having in many respects left behind the religious and theological trappings with which Western society was both adorned and encumbered for so many centuries, we are ashamed of our past and, unthinkingly perhaps, prepared to ignore it where we do not actually deny it.

A third factor closely allied to the second is the notion that an adequately "scientific" approach to any field of intellectual enquiry involves a careful delineation of the bounds of rational discourse and a corresponding exclusion of whatever smacks of the irrational or subjectively emotional, elements assumed to have no place in properly scientific discourse. Where the presence of religious concerns seems overwhelming, something frequently judged to be the case in medieval writings, the inference is then drawn that all one can do is reject the whole body of thought as contaminated beyond hope of cleansing. Much of what remains of the traditional humanities in contemporary higher-education curricula continues to suffer from this superstitious attitude towards an acceptable mode of intellectual discourse, even though nostalgia for the classical liberal-arts curriculum still serves as a basis for retaining some of its vestiges. As long as excessive emphasis on a positivist methodological model persists, however, we shall continue to suffer from an inability to profit adequately from the lessons history can teach us.

What weakened earlier and even some current writing on Western political thought, as already suggested, was not so much the deliberate application of mistaken methodological assumptions as their largely un-
conscious implementation. Unfortunately, this has been true not only for medieval political thinkers but for modern ones as well. John Locke, for example, has only recently been accorded the benefit of having his political thought presented adequately within an appropriate historical context, thereby showing his considerable involvement in the political realities of Restoration England. Hobbes is undergoing similar revisionist refurbishment, but the process is still incomplete.

It is now commonplace for historians of all stripes and areas of specialized study to become circumspect about the methodology they employ and to address directly the issue of how, if at all, to justify the validity of their approach and conclusions. Much of this self-awareness among historians and social scientists in general has been caused by the pervasiveness and thrust of the methodology of the empirical sciences, and by conscious efforts to conform to this paradigm of scientific knowledge, a move begun in the second half of the nineteenth century with the first flowering of scientific history and the correspondingly anxious and ultimately anxiety-producing efforts to discover the laws of history.

Today’s conventional model of academic discourse is even more self-conscious as regards method; but it reflects contemporary philosophical more than scientific models. Of course, there is a sense in which philosophical thought and methodology also aspire to be scientific, but, except in certain rapidly shrinking areas of philosophy in the English-speaking world, the classical distinction between philosophy and science is still generally accepted. European intellectual circles in the decades since the Second World War, however, have spawned a new set of increasingly and deliberately comprehensive theories designed to circumscribe, as well as prescribe for, the whole of human knowledge. Often annoyingly prolix and intellectually opaque in formulation, a number of new “isms” have been articulated by post-war and self-described post-modern European thinkers, to produce what has been called “the return of grand theory in the human sciences.”

2. See Dunn, Political Thought of John Locke; Tully, Discourse on Property; Ashcraft, “Problem of Methodology,” Revolutionary Politics, and “Two Treatises and the Exclusion Crisis.”


These focus on and contain an analysis of human thought and language that aims to show the inevitable structuring, modelling, and ultimately distorting effects produced on the data of consciousness by the human mind’s efforts to give form and expression to what impinges on it from without. Constructionism, deconstructionism, semiotics, and the various forms of hermeneutical formulations all describe the inevitable and allegedly unbridgeable gap between the reality in which we exist and the knowledge that constitutes and expresses our understanding of it. Long gone, at least among serious Western intellectuals, is anything in the way of a theory of knowledge remotely akin to the ordinary mortal’s unreflective, commonsense notion that things really are the way we perceive them.

Much of the attraction of these various epistemologies undoubtedly involves the fact that they suggest, upon minimal reflection even by ordinary readers, that we all necessarily organize and structure our knowledge to give it coherence for ourselves and others to whom we may wish to express it. The knowing subject in some sense does “intervene” between reality and our own structured experience of it. We all must acknowledge this basic epistemological insight whenever attention is drawn to it. Does this mean, however, that all our knowledge is so irremediably subjective in both formulation and expression as to be radically incommunicable to any other human being, if not simply unintelligible; that no one else can identify the meaning contained in the language we employ to express “our” knowledge, even when that other person might employ the same language to express their own experience?

The most dramatic way of responding affirmatively to this question is to maintain that words and statements are susceptible of any number of distinct meanings; hence no one meaning is “correct” for any verbal expression or written text. But however startling and insightful such an intellectual posture may appear, it is in the final analysis silly and even self-contradictory, at least insofar as its formulation for the purpose of communicating a truth about the nature of human knowledge is self-denying.

We do need to be mindful of the need to acknowledge and measure the limitations and structure we impose on our own knowing and on its expression through the language we employ. We must do all we can to recognize the limited character of our knowledge and the equally limited and irremediably problematic nature of the language we use to express it, language that may seem to, but does not always, communicate
identical content to someone else who thinks they understand it. Self-consistency of theory regarding the fundamental issue of knowledge and truth value, however, admits of only two positions. The first entails basic, total silence in recognition of the "fact" that knowledge formation and communication are simply impossible. As Plato's sophist opponent Gorgias is alleged to have put it: nothing exists; if anything does, it cannot be known; and if anything can be known, it cannot be communicated. The other option is to accept that human knowledge is "realistic" at some basic level, that it does involve somehow an apprehension of the external world of objects human beings share a common ability to grasp, and that we can communicate with one another through common and mutually intelligible language.

This second view does not rest on any simple-minded assumption that a universal language exists, or can be developed, to express in a comprehensive way the transcendental content of the indefinite range of human concepts and ideas. Still less does it entail the Platonic metaphysics of ideas as themselves the ultimate realities whose unchanging contents are the object of every genuine human act of knowing. An appropriately sophisticated theory of knowledge must balance claims to truth against the recognition that this "true" content is always grasped imperfectly and expressed in language that further limits the adequacy of our grasp while carrying the additional risk of a second distortion when communicating with others.

On the other hand, reflection on the nature of human thought and language suggests that there is a certain hierarchy among ideas and the terms used to express them. The mind produces a variety of ideas in the activity of comprehending, some of which convey a broader rational content than others. More universal or abstract ideas, scientific in the Aristotelian sense, are of this sort; and the more universal their logical extension, the greater their organizing potential for the formulation of intellectual theory. This is why a history of ideas ultimately makes sense. Some ideas, the most important elements in the intellectual baggage humans carry in their collective journey through existence, have a history. They do; and yet in a sense they do not. Really fundamental con-

5. Sextus Empiricus, Against the Logicians, p. 65.
6. Cf. the nuanced position that rests a realist approach on at least the adequacy of an assumption, in Dunn, "Practising History and Social Science on 'Realist' Assumptions," in Hookway and Pettit, eds., Action and Interpretation. Cf. also Taylor, "Philosophy and Its History," pp. 17-30. For a more extensive presentation of Taylor's views, see his collection of essays, Philosophy and the Human Sciences.
cepts, being omnipresent, are somehow transhistorical; at the same time they exhibit a kind of unfolding by way of specification as individual human beings achieve a fuller understanding of their meaning in different conditions of actual need and circumstance. Ideas of this kind are simply the essential ingredients that the human mind employs for thinking about reality.

This is not to say that humans are ever required to think about any given issue; the human mind is not "determined" to think about any given question, even though failure to do so can lead to human misery and even destruction. There are many issues about which, arguably, we should be thinking profoundly but do not consider at all, and we are the worse off for the omission. The point is that, if humans ever have raised a specific question, or if they begin at some phase of human historical development to raise a specific question, certain conceptual ingredients—call them core concepts—are essential to the relevant thought process. They are the rational building blocks used by the human mind to address the issue, and they constitute its basic intellectual frame of reference.

Kant satisfied himself that the space/time forms of pure intuition and the twelve pure categories of mind expressed a fundamental conceptual structure for the whole of human knowledge, although the transcendental character of his theory, as he himself insisted, can be appreciated without accepting his identification and enumeration of its basic elements. In a comparable manner, H. L. A. Hart and Lon Fuller have spoken about the necessary "forms" for a coherent theory of law, a set of concepts apparently inseparable from any rational effort to think about law. In their view, what Kant would call the "matter" or content of one specifically articulated system of law might differ from that of another—for example, the matter of Roman from that of Chinese law—but a necessary similarity, even an identity, exists in respect of form. Every system of law will contain "formal" elements such as an identification of the locus of coercive power, a means of identifying what a law is and of interpreting its meaning, etc.; lack of these elements signals the absence of a theory or system of law as such.

Similarly, it can be argued that a rational theory about human beings living together in some form of community or society will contain similar

7. Hart, Concept of Law; Fuller, Morality of Law.
8. Fuller is particularly effective on this point with his discussion of the commands of a forgetful ruler. Fuller, Morality of Law, pp. 33–38; cf. Hart, Concept of Law, pp. 77–96, especially 89–96.
A comprehensive intellectual awareness by members of a political community of what is involved in their living together, their notion or theory about "where they are" politically and socially, is not _de facto_ essential. But they must have some notion of what they are involved in, what they are doing; otherwise they are not functioning consciously at all: they literally do not "know" what they are doing.

When humans become conscious of themselves _in situ_, so to speak, another integral feature of human behaviour comes into play: interest in and concern for self-regulation and efficiency. As Aristotle understood so well and, for the first time in the history of human intellectual self-awareness, expressed so carefully, self-regulation has two features. First, humans aware of what they are doing are drawn naturally to consider how best to perform a given activity, how to act most efficiently; the second, more difficult feature concerns the purpose behind the activity itself: _why_ do X, as distinct from _how_ to do it effectively. A fundamental and often problematic distinction between the descriptive and prescriptive meanings of "natural" may illustrate the point. Humans are often said to be "naturally" selfish, meaning that we actually do perform acts directed exclusively to self-interest. On the other hand, we are also called "naturally" unselfish or self-sacrificing, in the sense that it is ethically proper to so behave in certain circumstances. Individuals, at least sometimes, do act from self-interest; and individuals are obliged, at least sometimes, to act out of interest for others.

The contention that certain fundamental features of human social behaviour and human society are essential to the structure of any functional set of relationships among human individuals living together in an integral and self-sustaining community also seems historically verifiable. Humans knowingly engaged in this form of activity can be said to realize and recognize the fundamental features, the "how" and "why" (efficiency and purpose), of the project itself. Giving expression to this awareness yields what we call political thought.

Accordingly, an appropriate method for presenting the history of political thought will identify certain fundamental elements in political society and examine what various societies and communities and their prominent thinkers have understood by them. The material under examination can be expected to differ somewhat across a wide range of specification because of the broad nature of these elements; it may even appear that different persons or groups in different times and circumstances had opposed, even contradictory, perceptions of what is involved in one or another basic notion. It is an error, however, to ignore or reject...
the point that common threads run through the continuum of human social and political history. At the least, such an attitude signals failure to keep a sufficiently open mind and the mistake of concluding that others think differently than we do simply because their understanding of a particular notion seems directly at odds with our own: X did (does) not have a "real" notion of Q because either they do not use Q at all or, if they do, do not mean by it what we do.9

Some have argued, for example, that the modern notion of "state" did not exist in the Middle Ages because the term did not appear there in its modern meaning.10 The absence of any earlier intellectual awareness of what the modern term connotes does not follow, however; some other term might have been doing at least partial service in conveying what we now understand by "state." Foreshortening of historical and, therefore, intelligible perspective is often the result of unconscious contemporary conceptual egocentrism. It makes more sense in the long run and yields a more comprehensive account of human intellectual development to post notices identifying basic common denominators in the many examples of political thinking across history, and to clarify and compare various ways individuals in concrete and differing circumstances specified their understanding of essential features of the human condition.

Elsewhere I have employed three basic concepts in political thought that are crucial for any coherent theory of polity: consent, coercion, and limit.11 This approach has been challenged on the not implausible grounds that these notions are too broad and too vague, and with the suggestion that power and right would be more useful concepts.12

9. A measure of how far modern scholarship has come in tracing key concepts in the history of political thought, and of how much farther it has yet to go, can be found in Ball, Farr, and Hanson, eds., Political Innovation. This recent collection of essays examines notions such as state, representation, rights, and property. The various contributors start with the Greek understanding of items in their glossary and make some mention of Roman contributions and medieval theories in a few specific instances. But the general impression is that little is known about the medieval history of these terms or its relevance, and there is a tendency to jump from the Greeks to Calvin and the Levellers, and to scant any notion of a general continuity across the classical, medieval, and modern periods.

10. Even Skinner holds the view that one cannot be certain about the conscious adoption and use of a given term until it is used in an earlier text with the meaning we now give it. Skinner, Foundations, 2:352. He also singles out the modern concept of state for specific consideration: ibid., 1:xix and note 1; and 2:349-58. Skinner’s views on this subject, however, have undergone significant change: see his article, “The Modern State.”


Perhaps. But, unlike consent and limit, the suggested alternatives are peculiarly modern conceptual tools. And because they are not found as such in the lexicon of medieval political terms, focusing on them can lead to a needless denigration of the quality of medieval political thought, and even a distortion. In fact, of course, the modern concept of power is reflected in the seemingly more concrete medieval concept of coercion, with its distinctions between physical and spiritual forms and external and internal forums, while the notion of sovereignty is found at least indirectly under the medieval concept of limit as a qualifier of authority and in the formula *princeps legibus solutus*, "the ruler is above the law." The notion of right, however, is much more difficult to deal with in trying to argue for an historical continuum from medieval to modern thought paradigms. The term right (*ius*) existed in Roman private law and was commonplace in medieval philosophical, theological, and legal texts; but its gradual shadings of meaning as political ideology developed towards current notions can be tricky to delineate. There is, as well, the issue of consensus regarding the modern meaning of the term. As already noted, denial that modern notions existed in the Middle Ages can be countered with the suggestion that comparable medieval notions appeared under a different rubric and related differently to more fundamental conceptual structures than apparently important present-day concepts do.

Earlier academic writers were, for the most part, far less self-conscious and inclined to make a profession of how they intended to go about their task. In the current dispensation of scholarly publication, however, one is expected to give an account of one’s methodology and, to reiterate, there are good, even compelling, epistemological reasons for this. The simple view that knowledge is somehow conditioned by the structure and form of our minds and experience and that language adds further structure to what we say and write are points accepted by all. Accordingly, we probably do not need all the complex lessons that are read to us by various contemporary ideologues of language structure and hermeneutics; the methodological cautionary tale to be understood and assimilated by historians has long been recognized to be very complex, as attested to by a general unwillingness to accept either the simple-minded assumption that what one says is true only to the extent that it

13. Richard Tuck, for example, argues that the early and high medieval era was one of two periods in our history where explicit advocacy of a natural rights theory can be found, the other being the run-up to and aftermath of the English Revolution. Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*. 
exactly mirrors reality, or the equally simple-minded scepticism about anyone being able to "re-present" reality at all. The rapidly burgeoning science of hermeneutics and the lively renewal of philosophical interest in theory of knowledge exemplify this: it is even common now for some to enquire whether "objective" philosophy is even possible.\(^\text{14}\)

A current standard for historico-political writing has been set by Quentin Skinner, whose first-rate account of the foundations of modern political thought was preceded by extensive and sensitive discussion of the problem of method.\(^\text{15}\) This is not the place to offer either an account or a critique of Skinner's theory of methodology, but I am inclined to accept it for the most part, particularly in two fundamental respects. Skinner maintains that political writings, especially those exhibiting signs of novelty, are deliberate efforts to react to existing political and social conditions and aim consciously at a specific audience: new political thought rarely, if ever, originates in a purely speculative context. Accordingly, understanding texts that either directly or indirectly reflect political thought requires knowledge and appreciation of the historical realities in which this thought was produced, an appreciation of the form of discourse in which it is presented, and a grasp of the contemporary meaning of the terms in which it is expressed. Even great thinkers who may have been aloof from the actual political and social events of their own day—their number is almost certainly fewer than we suspect—would have been conditioned by the realities of their own time and the form and terms of its conventional discourse. Current social, economic, and political conditions necessarily influence thought in any period, whether or not this fact is acknowledged, and whether or not the influence is consciously felt, a truism that might be thought virtually self-evident had it, too, not been ignored so often, particularly by writers of intellectual history.

\(^{14}\) See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and his "Pragmatism and Philosophy," in Baynes et al., eds., *After Philosophy*, and other essays in this interesting collection. See also a variety of answers to the question whether even the hard sciences describe reality "as it really is," in McMullin, ed., *Construction and Constraint*.

A second important Skinnerian idea concerns specific terms of discourse: their actual use provides clear evidence that the ideas they express have been recognized in the thought structure of the time; explicit use of a particular concept or term shows that it is consciously employed as an intellectual tool. Skinner’s example is the concept of “state.” As he contends, the notion became a conceptual building block in political theory no later than the first time it was given the specific meaning now associated with it. This point too would seem virtually self-evident were it not that so many writers of intellectual history have appeared unable or unwilling to accept it. A qualification can be added, however, to Skinner’s cautionary point about a reading of modern notions back into historical contexts that are too early, and whose ideology and language offer no warrant for doing so. The earliest use of a term with its current meaning does signal the beginning of the thought structure in which it is similarly employed; but this does not by itself establish that the general notion to which the term is connected, and for which it performs a specific function in current ideology, was not served at least in some loosely parallel though less specific way by an earlier form of language or terminology.

A further methodological note suggested but not explicitly emphasized by Skinner is that history must be read “forward,” not backward. A surprising number of interpreters of the ideology of the past have had a terrible time with this commonsense nostrum, and much twentieth-century intellectual history has failed to take it seriously enough. Earlier writings simply cannot adequately be understood in terms of what their language and set of conceptual tools might convey to a modern reader. A text’s meaning is the one it had when it was written, and this may not be the meaning conventionally given the same set of words today.

The two points in this contention, especially the second, must be emphasized. Reading history “forward” entails the view that the proper perspective from which to understand a document is that of the period in which it was written and that of the earlier period from which it emerged: the period before a text was written is a crucial feature of its context. Initial assumptions concerning the meaning of a text, then, relate to what its terms meant at the time they were being used and earlier, not to their meaning today. To understand what Locke meant by property, for example, requires an appreciation of what that term meant when Locke employed it, and what it meant in the earlier Western intel-

lectual tradition in which he was operating.\textsuperscript{17} This is not to deny that Locke may have given it a novel meaning. Indeed, what happens when great thinkers produce new paradigms of meaning is precisely that they appropriate into their language of discourse an element not previously realized or understood.

Sometimes the addition is made by way of completely new terminology, the coining of new language. But usually intellectual novelty occurs through clarification of or addition to the meaning of terms in current use; new theories and doctrines are normally developed in this way. Nonetheless, and once more the point is obvious but not unimportant, understanding the novelty and value of a “new” doctrine is better achieved from the perspective of where it came from rather than from where it ended up. To repeat the same general example, careful study of seventeenth-century political thought is better done by examining its medieval forerunners than its twentieth-century successors. One reviewer has praised Skinner’s \textit{Foundations of Political Thought} by suggesting that its author did for his subject what Étienne Gilson did for modern (i.e., Cartesian) philosophy: he added greatly to its understanding by investigating its medieval roots. This work has a similar purpose and employs a similar approach.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Coleman, “Dominium,” and “Medieval Discussions of Property.” Tuck’s recent work, \textit{Natural Rights}, is wonderfully problematic in this respect when he connects the modern concept of natural rights with C. B. MacPherson’s interpretation of seventeenth-century English political thought, principally Hobbes and Locke, in terms of “possessive individualism” and reads both concepts back into the thirteenth century. It is now commonplace to accept that MacPherson’s modern intellectual chisel was inappropriately applied to the marble slab of seventeenth-century political thought, and Tuck himself has been criticized for finding natural rights in a medieval context where they may not have been spoken of at all. Cf. supra, note 13, and Tierney, “Tuck on Rights.”

\textsuperscript{18} I do not mean to be insensitive to two other issues made problematic by recent authors: that of adequately tracing an intellectual tradition (cf. Hemming, “Archaeology, Deconstruction and Intellectual History,” in Capra and Kaplan, eds., \textit{Modern European Intellectual History}); and the narrower issue of establishing the influence of one writer on another (cf. Condren, \textit{The Status and Appraisal of Classic Texts}).

\textit{Pace} Condren, however, the term “influence” need not be evaluative when asserting connection between doctrines and texts; at least this is not how I employ it. I accept that lines of doctrinal affiliation cannot be established a priori but only on the evidence and may denote nothing more than that a later writer found an earlier doctrine useful for his or her purposes. Cf. Alberigo, \textit{Chiesa conciliare}.