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## On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Teaching Political Theory to Undergraduates

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*This paper argues that the standard approach to teaching the history of political thought does not serve the ultimate goals of political theory education, and that alternative approaches are needed to make the history of thought appropriate for undergraduates. A history of political thought for life ought to enhance a person's capacity to act as a political animal in three ways: as a moral person, as a free person, and as a citizen. But the most common practices in teaching the history of political thought suffer from the same criticisms that have been leveled at contemporary research in political theory, thereby undermining the study of political theory for life. Teaching the history of political thought should be based on a model where classical texts serve as Socratic gadflies that provide alternative perspectives on the perennial questions posed by contemporary political practice. Two alternative models can integrate both traditional approaches to the history of political thought with contemporary political practice to produce a history of political thought for life that is appropriate to the purposes of undergraduate education in political theory.*

**Keywords** curriculum, history of political thought, Nietzsche, political theory

Education in the history of political thought at the graduate level is, for rather obvious reasons, vocational. The main goal of graduate education is to produce scholars capable of researching and teaching in political thought. This demands a knowledge of political theory primarily as a literature, one in which the core is a set of canonical texts stretching back to ancient Greece. The professional theorist must know these texts and the secondary literature regarding them—collectively, the history of political thought—in order to properly research and to teach in the field. But why do undergraduates need to know political theory, and especially the history thereof? Few will become political theorists or even political scientists; the conventional wisdom among educational professionals is that the majority of college graduates will never work in a field related to their major. Hence the history of political thought must have some other purpose in undergraduate education. And the way that professional political theorists teach it should, presumably, serve that purpose. What might that purpose be, and how should we teach the history of political thought so as to best serve that purpose?

This paper argues that the standard approach to teaching the history of political thought does not serve the ultimate goals of political theory education, and that

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alternative approaches are needed to make the history of thought appropriate for undergraduates. Nietzsche's *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* proposes a use of history to empower individuals, contributing to their capacity for creative action. This applies to the history of political thought as well. A history of political thought for life ought to enhance a person's capacity to act as a political animal in three ways, which will be explained in this article: as a free person, as a moral person, and as a citizen.

But the most common practices in teaching the history of political thought, the "Standard Model" of a sequence of courses that focus on the history of political thought as intellectual history, suffer from the same criticisms that have been leveled at contemporary research in political theory, thereby undermining the study of political theory for life. This paper argues, instead, for teaching the history of political thought through a model where classical texts serve as Socratic gadflies that provide alternative perspectives on the perennial questions posed by contemporary political practice. Two alternative models of the political theory curriculum, those of Marquette University and the University of Oklahoma, integrate both traditional approaches to the history of political thought with its importance for contemporary political practice to produce a history of political thought for life that is appropriate to the purposes of undergraduate education in political theory.

### Political Theory for Life

The history of political thought cannot make a sound contribution to political education if by political education we mean at best vocational or at worst disciplinary preparation for the job of being a citizen of a particular regime, a common sentiment expressed on history of political thought syllabi. We can begin to construct an alternate purpose to teaching the history of political thought by looking not toward liberalism but instead to one of its strongest critics: Nietzsche. In the preface to *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Nietzsche proposes an aim for the study of history that informs his entire philosophical project:

Our aim will be to show why instruction which fails to quicken activity, why knowledge which enfeebles activity, why history as a costly intellectual excess and luxury must, in the spirit of Goethe's words, be seriously hated; for we still lack what is most necessary, and superfluous excess is the enemy of the necessary. . . . That is, we require history for life and action, not for the smug avoidance of life and action, or even to white-wash a selfish life and cowardly acts. Only so far as history serves life will we serve it. (Nietzsche 1980, preface)

This was written while Nietzsche was a professor of classical philology, one who studied the history of ideas, not merely the history of events (Ansell-Pearson 1994, xvii). One can thus take from this that Nietzsche seeks more than a use of historical writing; he seeks a use of philosophy itself for life and action.

But Nietzsche does not look merely for a philosophy that allows one to go through the daily tasks in some way that is more meaningful than a blind acceptance of daily routine. Such a philosophy would be a "knowledge that enfeebles activity," or a philosophy for a "smug avoidance of life and action." Nietzsche seeks a philosophy that generates life in the form of a will to power. Life is, Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

[E]ssentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation. (Nietzsche 1989, §259).

Those who live are those who seek to exercise their power on the world, making it "theirs," dominating that around them.

Nietzsche's concept of power should not be considered synonymous with coercive force or political authority as we see it today. The word that Nietzsche uses for power, *Macht*, derives from the German words for desire and potentiality (Ansell-Pearson 1994, 46) and shares a common root with *machen*, "to make." This suggests a close relation between power and creative activity. The will to power cannot be considered simply a will to force or authority in a Weberian sense; it is a will to creative action, a will to realize one's potential to remake the world. Life is thus about not merely force, but creative action, "self-overcoming." The person who lives for the will to power, Nietzsche writes, "must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live" (1980, §3), to create something new from what has been destroyed. When Nietzsche describes life as "essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering..." et cetera, the appropriation, suppression, and exploitation is not of another's person as much as it is of another's creation, or more to the point, the lack thereof. History, for Nietzsche, is thus properly used, used advantageously, when it contributes to life, that is, to creative action.

To be sure, there is much controversy in the interpretation of Nietzsche, far too much to engage systematically here. Many scholars have found in precisely this creative activity at least a dangerous potential for breaking down, if not an active subversion of, peaceful political order (Detwiler 1990, for example). Certainly, Nietzsche himself saw his thought in such terms, as the passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* quoted above shows. But the above interpretation is not as implausible as it may seem at first glance. Those who see Nietzsche in strongly individualistic terms, such as Kaufmann (1974), may be quite sympathetic to a view of Nietzsche's will to power as a creative will. Deleuze's (1983) view of a pluralistic Nietzsche rife with conflicts and aphorias that are central to his thinking has much room for this approach as well. Conceptions of agonistic democracy rooted in Nietzsche like that offered by Hatab (1995) build on Nietzsche's principles in ways similar to my arguments above. More broadly speaking, there is a well-recognized middle period to Nietzsche's thought in which he accepts a place for democratic practices (Ansell-Pearson 1994, 90–91). Detwiler's claim that this period represents a deviation for his core themes before and after and that Nietzsche ultimately rejects the ideas characteristic of works like *Human, All Too Human* and *The Gay Science* (1990, 180–188) is compelling with regard to understanding Nietzsche's intellectual development. That Nietzsche entertained similar claims for a substantially more democratic view of life as the will to power, however, supports considering these claims on their own merits, apart from the direction in which Nietzsche himself takes them.

Education in this understanding aims to enhance one's capacity for creative action. This is different from Flathman's liberal education, which aims to enhance the student's autonomy by aiding one's capacity to choose among competing conceptions of the good life (1996, 6–15). Here we wish to make the student not freer (in a decidedly liberal sense) but better, that is, more capable of effective action. In Hobbesian language, we enhance not the student's freedom by removing the obstacles to their action but the student's power by adding to their own capacity to act.

But to see where education specifically in political theory contributes to life understood as creative activity, we must part ways with Nietzsche. While Nietzsche understood life ultimately in individual terms and sought a separation of the self from social life, such a separation is not possible in the contemporary world, if it ever was. Our activities take place in a world in which others, too, exist. Indeed if this were not the case it would not be necessary to negate the activity of others in order to live one's own life. We come back, ultimately, to Aristotle's contention that humans are indeed political animals, beings which by our very nature live in a political community (Aristotle 1981, 1253a).

Life as a political animal poses a set of problems involving cooperation and competition among individuals in the political community.<sup>1</sup> The problems of cooperation and conflict posed by humanity's political nature become fundamental problems of human action, of living life as Nietzsche understood it, when that life takes place in a community. Humans constantly face problematic situations; i.e., situations in which they do not automatically know what to do. Political theory for life aims to inform one's choice of action in those situations where humans choose as political animals. Such choices pose three kinds of problems: problems about thought, problems about responsibility for one's actions, and problems about how to manage cooperation and conflict with others. In each case, political theory education helps in understanding these choices and making decisions about one's actions in the context of a political community. There is a mode of education in political theory appropriate to each kind of choice.

The first mode of education is critical or liberal education, understood as education appropriate to one who must think for one's self. While there is a tendency among social creatures to defer to the social being for their ideas, the possibility of independent thought poses a choice for the thinker: shall I accept the ideas of whatever authority or power structure controls my society, or should I accept the ideas that seem best according to my own reason and experience? The clear answer of philosophy is that of Socrates: "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato 1984, 38a). As Isaiah Berlin argues, to not want to know what we believe and for what reasons we believe it is to abdicate our powers of reasoning. Rational curiosity, the desire for justification and explanation, is thus at the heart of political theory (Berlin 1979, 172). In our courses this answer goes without saying, often literally. But having made that decision with—or perhaps imposed it on—our students, it is incumbent upon political thought to enable them to critically evaluate the ideas that they confront. And political theory does this both substantively, by promoting the examination of specific ideas, and structurally, by developing claims about how ideas come to be held by society at large.

Two other kinds of choice involve one's choice not of beliefs but of actions and give rise to the problems of moral education, the education of one who is responsible for one's choices and wishes to choose the best possible action under the circumstances, and true civic education, the education of one who must act in ways that require the cooperation of or conflict with others.<sup>2</sup> While claims of an innate moral sense (such as Wilson 1993) might explain certain general principles that are widely held, it is still necessary to understand the details of hard cases, such as that of Sartre's forlorn would-be resistance fighter (1985, 24–28). A means of analyzing moral choices is necessary. A similar need confronts one in making choices that will affect others: how are those effects to be accounted for in my choices of action? This is, in essence, moral choice made political. Civic education is in this sense the education of

one whose choice of action must take place in common with others. Such education ceases to be vocational in this context and becomes personal, becoming a way of understanding and choosing one's own actions and not preparation for one's duties as a citizen of a particular regime.

Unlike Rawls (1996) and Gutmann (1999), this education is not education for society's needs. This kind of education for life is education for confronting the practical problems faced by humans who live in any political community and not a particular regime. All humans in all regimes must make these choices; they can be avoided only if inaction is fundamentally different from action, a principle generally rejected by political thought and one that most certainly cannot be applied collectively to every choice one might ever confront. The kinds of political questions that we encounter admit no simple solutions but require answers nonetheless (Berlin 1979, 147–150). Political theory is an analytical tool for answering those questions, for making the best choices possible when confronted by those problems encountered by political animals regardless of the regime under which they live or the comprehensive doctrine that they hold. As such, political theory, when it contributes to understanding and making such decisions, is political theory for life.

### **The Strange Silence of Political Theory Education**

The question that this poses, then, is whether the common ways of teaching the history of political thought are consistent with political theory for life. Answering this question is simplified greatly by the fact that the curriculum in political theory is relatively standardized. What we might call the “standard model” provides a common framework for teaching political theory. The standard model reflects the concerns prominent in the rebirth of the political theory during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; concerns expressed in the political thought of theorists such as Leo Strauss, Eric Vogelin, and Isaiah Berlin. This period placed emphasis on appreciating the concerns of the ancients and the break made between them and modern political theorists and held that the central task of political theory was the understanding of past theorists as they understood themselves. The resulting pedagogical model presents a common set of courses, a common framework for understanding the material, and for organizing exploration of specific topics in political theory. But it also presents the same problems that have been heavily criticized in the discipline's research.<sup>3</sup>

The standard model is characterized by two main features. The first is the organization of courses into a chronological sequence. Such a sequence usually begins with Plato and ends with Marx or Nietzsche, often broken into two courses either before or after Machiavelli. The history of thought sequence covers a standard set of texts that we consider canonical, texts that form the basic language of conversation in political theory. It is usually supplemented by a few topical courses, most commonly a course in contemporary political thought and one in American political thought. The second feature of the standard model is its focus on intellectual history. Commonly, the major learning objective includes not just substantive knowledge of theories but knowledge of how to interpret texts and how to relate them to each other historically. It is not uncommon that history of political thought courses have phrases such as “The Development of” or “Western Political Tradition” in the title, placing emphasis on the sequence of texts as a history of ideas constituting a unified tradition that has developed over time.

Perhaps the most surprising place that the standard model can be seen is in courses that are not, in principle, courses in the history of political thought. Courses in areas such as contemporary political thought, feminist political thought, and American political thought could be organized in many different ways. But the most common way of organizing these courses remains chronological. Contemporary political thought is frequently a course in the history of twentieth century political thought, picking up where the history of political thought sequence leaves off. Feminist thought often begins with the precursors of feminist thought in theorists like Christine de Pizan and Mary Wollstonecraft, moves through the three waves of late twentieth-century feminists and only then studies problems of contemporary feminism. American political thought begins with the Mayflower Compact, spends half of the term on the Founding Fathers and moves quickly through Dewey, King, and Rawls.<sup>4</sup>

Does this approach to political thought contribute to political theory for life? There is good reason to believe that it does not. Approaching the history of political thought as purely intellectual history poses the same problems that Isaac (1995) identified with research in political thought in his seminal essay "The Strange Silence of Political Theory." Isaac took political theory to task for its failure to address the fundamental political event that shaped politics in the 1990s: the revolutions of 1989. The failure, Isaac believed, was symptomatic of the problems of the discipline generally. "It seems almost beneath us," he wrote, "to examine mundane, practical political problems located in space and time, in particular places with particular histories" (1995, 645). This aversion to political practice has led, Isaac argued, to a discipline that is concerned more with itself and its progress as an academic discipline than with the politics of the real world. Isaac presented three particular criticisms of the discipline in the mid-1990s.<sup>5</sup> Each of these applies to the standard model for teaching the history of political thought as well.

First, Isaac argued that political theory had become primarily normal science,<sup>6</sup> concerned primarily with the problems raised in our theories rather than those of political practice. We have become, for example, more concerned with whether processes of public reasoning in democratic deliberation impose Foucauldian disciplines than with what the practice of presenting group presentations to a class tells us about the preconditions of deliberation. In our teaching the temptation is strong to focus on these kinds of problems, since these are the ones in which we are trained. But these are not the problems faced by political animals; they are the problems faced by academic professionals. In my Locke lecture, for example, I am fascinated by the idea of God as the laboring creator of the universe (Locke 1988, §6) and the implications of this for the primacy of natural law over divine law. While an important problem in Locke's theory, does it help the students understand contemporary politics better? Perhaps it does show them just how much of Locke's individualism is rooted in property, but it probably draws the students away from concrete political practice and into consideration of abstract theology instead.

Isaac also criticized political theory for its relationship to the canon. Political theory remains nearly obsessed with the conventional list of major figures; the same list that fills the syllabi of most history of political thought courses. In research, Isaac argued that this focus on the canon cuts both ways, enabling us to create new conversations through a common language but often obscuring novel questions by insisting on understanding them only through the language of some other canonical work. In teaching, the canon does the same thing. It is undoubtedly necessary to

teach the canon so that students can share a common language for understanding politics. But when that language becomes the only way that students can express their ideas then the canon becomes an obstacle to actually using political theory. And when all of our work must go through the canon, other languages—those of non-Western texts or marginalized figures in the history of political thought—become excluded from the conversation, at best ghettoized into courses in “Eastern,” “Feminist,” or “African American” political thought, and often excluded from the conversation at all.

The same can happen with marginal subjects as well, even when the subjects are discussed by a canonical figure. How many undergraduates, for example, read any work on the place of technology in political life in a political thought course? Despite the fact that my current research is on electronic democracy and the human genome project, Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* is cut under pressure to cover five different versions of social contract theory. A proposed course on the political theories of science and technology is likely to be rejected because it is overly narrow (especially in small programs oriented solely toward undergraduate education), where a similar course on political theories of the economy is accepted. Surely both capitalism and technology are equally important features of the modern world, and both are the subject of extensive literatures. But the former finds only a few works in the canon, while the latter is addressed by most canonical figures. Science and technology is a narrow topic only among the canonical writers. The absence of a conversation among canonical figures about issues like technology that would legitimize the subject as one that political thought should engage best explains why it is left out of the curriculum.

The final concern that Isaac identified is a preference for theoretical depth and an associated aversion to first-order questions. Political theory studies political practices by studying metatheory: understanding the epistemological foundations and metaphysical assumptions, as revealed through historical or genealogical exegesis, of past thinkers who studied the practices in question. Isaac uses the example of studies of Habermas or Locke on constitutionalism, which teach us not about constitutions but about Locke or Habermas. Much the same often happens in teaching the history of political theory. My approach to Plato’s (1991) critique of democracy relies on a debate over antismoking laws. In principle, this is an opportunity to explore the tension between justice and rights, to consider what the preservation of liberty requires us to give up in the pursuit of the good. In practice it is merely a resonating example of Plato’s argument about democracy being slavery to one’s passions. Rather than teach political analysis through Plato’s texts, I most commonly teach Plato’s text as the end; one served by political analysis.

The major consequence of these three failings is irrelevance: political theory tells us everything about political theory over the past three millennia and nothing about politics today. This is on one level an intellectual failure: we want people to listen to us, and clearly they do not. But Isaac sees this more importantly as a moral failure:

Current events present serious choices regarding moral responsibility, political membership, and constitutional foundations, choices that political theory might truly help to illuminate. The nondecisions of political theorists in this matter—the decisions to attend to other things—do have ethical consequences. Political theory fiddles while the fire of freedom spreads, and perhaps the world burns. (1995, 649)

The silence of political theory is a moral failure ultimately in that we fail to illuminate the moral choices that political animals must make—precisely the task of political theory for life.

### History of Political Thought for Life

How, then, can the history of political thought be taught so that it does illuminate these moral choices that are faced inevitably by political animals? What would it mean to have a history of political thought for life? Euben's (1997) use of the canon in *Corrupting Youth* begins to show an approach to this. Euben argues that what he calls "conservative canonists" who see the canon as the foundation of Western civilization and "multiculturalists" who see the canon as a bastion of privileged dead while males both miss the possibility of the canon. Using a series of ancient Greek texts, he challenges both camps to use classical texts to promote education for radical democracy (1997, 16–27).

How is it that ancient texts can be radical in the contemporary world? Euben notes that classical texts are both alien and familiar and can thus speak to the contemporary world in ways that contemporary texts do not (1997, xiii). This is especially so in a society dominated by liberal political thought. In an important sense, our students do not need to be taught liberalism: they live it every day and know it as simply the way the world is. The political debates that they know, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, take place within the basic principles of liberal political thought: the primacy of the individual, the equality and freedom of all people, government by consent, rule of law. When those students face choices as independent thinkers, responsible persons, and political animals and in the absence of proper education, they can do so only within the liberal framework that they intuitively know.

In ancient Athens, Socrates challenged the dominant ideas by going around asking questions, trying to rouse the Athenians from their sleep and to encourage them to care for truth and virtue; he was the gadfly of Athenian politics (Plato 1984, 29a–31a). He (and the rest of the history of political thought) can play the same role in the contemporary classroom. Important texts in the history of political thought can be used as Socratic gadflies in contemporary politics, providing alternative and challenging perspectives on contemporary political choices. This history of political thought does this in three ways.

In the first place, the history of political thought is inherently critical. It shows that the practices of contemporary politics could be otherwise. Iris Marion Young sees this as one of the fundamental tasks of political theory and the central observation of critical theory (1990, 5–7). By showing that those outside of the Western liberal tradition have understood the problems that we face today in very different ways, the history of political thought opens the students' minds to alternative answers that they might not have considered otherwise, allowing them to make choices that they might not have made. Studying the history of political thought thus allows them to make a choice that is more fully aware of the possibilities for action.

When society confronts the problem of force in a post-9/11 world, for example, the Munich metaphor dominates the discussion: there shall be no appeasement of terrorists. Terrorists will listen only to force, and so we must be as strong as we can. But when political theorists teach Hobbes's understanding of equality—that we are all equal in the state of nature because we are all equally capable of being

killed, and that this means that it is impossible to secure ourselves with our own strength (Hobbes 1985, ch. 13)—we teach that force (especially unilateral force) is likely to be insufficient for our security; some cooperative framework is necessary. The tactical success of the attacks seems to reinforce this idea if the students are aware of it. And yet we recall as well Machiavelli's injunction to rely on our own arms as much as we can (1950, ch. VI) and find this idea reinforced by the reluctance of many of America's European allies to support the war in Iraq. What was conventional wisdom becomes a serious debate over what choice we will make as a state and a nation; a debate made possible by the additional possibilities posed by the history of political thought.

The history of political thought is also inherently radical. In addition to other possibilities of action, there are other values to be pursued as well. Berlin argues that political philosophy is possible only where ends collide. "To acknowledge the reality of political questions presupposes a pluralism of values" that is incompatible with monistic societies (Berlin 1979, 147–152). The history of political thought exposes us to those values that liberalism might otherwise shun. Debating such values enhances the capacity to make the kinds of decisions that political animals must make. Rather than accepting a dominant value as the obvious solution, the pluralism present in the history of political thought identifies other values that might form the basis of a solution to a problem of social action. In a world where individual rights prevail universally, Plato shows us that claims of a "right" to something are often rights to do injustice. In a world where equality is assumed, Nietzsche challenges us to see the virtue of hierarchy. And in a world where freedom is everything, Hobbes shows us that legal freedom is of little value without security.

Perhaps the most valuable characteristic of the history of political thought, though, is that it inherently challenges dogmatic belief. While Mill's arguments about the value of free speech for finding truth are his most famous, it is his arguments regarding the defense of ideas that we know are wrong (1999, 79–85) that are the most compelling. Truth unchallenged becomes prejudice and dogma: we like the opinion but do not know why we believe it or what it means, nor does it become the basis for our actions and not just our professions. The history of political thought challenges what we know to be true, giving us a living understanding of it. We all accept that slavery is wrong, but are we willing to do something about forms of slavery as they exist around the world today (or even acknowledge that there is still slavery in the world)?<sup>7</sup> After a vigorous debate over Aristotle's claims about natural slavery (1981, 1253b–1255b)—and perhaps a strong defense of Aristotle from the instructor—students are far more likely to understand and act on their own beliefs about slavery today and in the future.

These features of the history of political thought make it of vital importance for contemporary politics. The history of political thought challenges students to see their choices in a broader context, to reflect on their ideas more fully and deeply, to understand that they are responsible not just for the choices that conventional wisdom poses but for much more. The history of political thought, treated as a Socratic gadfly, is truly history of political thought for the life of a political animal. The history of political thought for life is best served when canonical texts are integrated with the study of the substantive questions that political theory asks. In this way, the history of political thought informs the study of those questions as they are posed in contemporary politics and not just as they develop chronologically.

## Curricular Approaches

If the implications of Isaac's analysis for teaching are correct, the standard model cannot accomplish these goals. At least two models for the history of political thought curriculum currently in use, however, can. Marquette University's Jesuit tradition is clearly reflected in its political theory tradition. Education in the classical works of political thought is more than simply the main point of the curriculum; it is the entirety of it: the online syllabi for its main theory courses reveals that texts prior to Hobbes—Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare—make up the majority of the university's political theory curriculum. Certainly this appears to be a curriculum firmly on the side of Euben's conservative canonists, as befits the traditionally Straussian inclination of its theorists.<sup>8</sup> But it is not the selection of texts that makes Marquette's program a model; indeed, its core graduate seminar in political philosophy studies only Plato's *Republic*. It is the organization of these texts into a sequence of courses in which the history of political thought is used to explore a series of fundamental questions about the nature of political practice: the relationship between justice and power, human nature and its relationship to politics, the ideal political regime, and democracy.

The University of Oklahoma's political theory curriculum has a more traditional structure. The two-semester sequence is a chronological study of political thought from Plato to Nietzsche, broken between Nietzsche and Machiavelli, as is quite typical of standard-model programs. But Oklahoma deviates from the standard model in that its sequence is organized, again, around two core problems confronted by political animals. The first course is subtitled "the Classic Art of Politics"; the second is titled "The Idea of a Liberal Society." These two topics pose a framework for understanding more than just the development of a series of ideas but the ways in which those ideas relate to the problems of political practice.

These curricula are valuable ways to pursue the history of political thought for life. In both cases, the history of thought is used to ask questions that students raised in a modern liberal society would not ask and to suggest answers that they might not consider. This history of thought is a living conversation not a selection of dead theorists. The absence of a major modern component at Marquette actually works to the advantage of the program, enhancing the extent to which ancient texts challenge the students' contemporary ideas. This integration of the contemporary and the historical and of both theory and practice through central themes is the model approach to teaching the history of political thought for life. History of political thought in these curricula is a set of analytical tools for understanding political questions, not political theories.

Marquette's approach gives the most flexibility in this regard. There is in principle no reason that these courses could not incorporate contemporary thinkers as well as ancient ones. Indeed, comparing three versions of the introductory Justice and Power course reveals this. Dobbs's (2005) course does not go beyond Shakespeare; Hanley's (2005) includes Hobbes and Rousseau. But a visiting faculty member included Arendt, Foucault, and Rawls as well as classical and modern theorists in the same course (Johnson 2002). In each of these courses, various texts in the history of political thought are used to engage students in the study of core questions of political practice, not of political theorizing. The topical emphasis ensures that the questions are the focus of the course, with the texts used as tools for engaging those questions.

Oklahoma's program conforms to the standards of the discipline more directly, which gives it less flexibility in the matter of selecting material. But it maintains the fundamental pattern of reasoning that is the essence of the history of political thought for life: studying the history of political thought as a way of answering the questions encountered by political animals. And it has practical advantages when it comes to administration. Conforming to commonly used catalog courses ensures transferability, an especially important issue at many regional institutions. More importantly, though, the Oklahoma approach can be implemented in virtually any institution without going through the often difficult process of rewriting the catalog itself. To teach these one needs to change one's lectures, not one's program.

Assessing whether these proposals actually do help the students learn the history of political thought in a way that contributes to their ability to make the decisions described above is difficult, but at the same time absolutely necessary. That the matter concerns political theorists does not excuse us from looking at the empirical world, especially when the proposal at hand concerns the ability of our students to relate what we teach to that same world. Political philosophers, it seems, should be especially sensitive to the need to carry on our discussions from the perspective of, as Misak (1999) characterizes it, "truth-seeking," a need that compels us to recognize when empirical evidence is relevant to our arguments.

Unfortunately, this assessment is a long-term project at best. Assessment instruments for political theory knowledge commonly in use include the evaluation of student writing portfolios and the use of subfield scores on the Educational Testing Service Major Field Test. Neither of these instruments allows effective inter-institutional evaluation of whether theory curricula effectively teach the history of political thought for life. Papers are assigned and portfolios are evaluated according to a myriad of rubrics of varying degrees of formality, thus preventing comparison across programs. The MFT is consistent across institutions but asks questions primarily involving the recall of information or the analysis of arguments rather than the use of concepts (which is exceptionally difficult with multiple-choice tests in any event). Portfolio evaluations suffer from this problem as well in many cases; programs where the focus is on intellectual history may not include papers that ask the students to engage the kinds of questions described above.

There is, however, indirect evidence that suggests that this curriculum is useful in the form of the practical judgments that political theorists have made regarding the curricula at their institutions. If these curricula are ineffective, one should expect that they will not be used by political science programs, especially where these programs lack the resources to teach a wide range of theory courses, as is the case for institutions with large graduate programs. To test this, the course catalogs of 162 programs in the APSA directory of programs that categorized themselves as "B.A. Separate," "B.A. Combined," or "B.A. Social Science" were evaluated to determine the curricular model used. The sample (comprising approximately 20% of such programs) was categorized into five groups as follows:<sup>9</sup>

1. **Programs that do not teach political theory.** This group includes programs that require undergraduate students to take a course in social and political philosophy offered under a philosophy course number but not courses that cross-list such courses with philosophy courses.
2. **Programs that do not teach political theory historically.** This group consists primarily of programs that offer only courses in political ideologies, American

- political thought, or a cross-listed social and political philosophy course with a philosophy course number and a nonhistorical course description.
3. **Programs that teach the history of political thought through thematic courses (Marquette Model).** This group includes all programs offering courses that are on a specific theme not identifiable with a specific time period in the history of political thought and that included figures from more than one period in the history of political thought.
  4. **Programs that teach the history of political thought in relation to specific themes (Oklahoma Model).** This group includes all programs offering courses in specific periods in the history of political thought that are designed around a single issue or small subset of issues. Courses that list more than three issues or are described as possibly including those issues were not considered thematic.
  5. **Programs that teach the history of political thought sequentially (Standard Model).** This group includes all programs that offer either a single course or sequence of courses that address the history of political thought through the study of a primarily chronological sequence of theorists without any clear guidance as to an organizing theme other than the historical trajectory of the core ideas of the period.

Using online course catalog descriptions, programs were categorized through a step-wise process in the order listed above (i.e., programs meeting the requirements of one category were not evaluated for consideration in subsequent categories). Data was not available online for 21 programs.

This survey shows that smaller programs find these curricular models to be useful ways of teaching students (see Table 1). While the standard model clearly dominates the discipline, early one in five programs that include the history of political thought in their curricula find the approach sufficiently problematic to implement a different approach. Of the 141 programs for which course descriptions are available online, 13 offer courses that teach the history of political thought thematically rather than chronologically using a model similar to the Marquette approach described above. At least five others build their history of political thought courses around a specific theme rather than a general intellectual history, as is done at the University of Oklahoma. This analysis, however, certainly underestimates the frequency with which this model is used in practice, as it does not identify programs in which decisions are made to narrow the scope of history of thought courses to specific themes in the design of the course syllabus rather than in writing the catalog descriptions.

One surprising finding in this data is the extent to which political science programs do not feel the need to teach the history of political thought: more than one-fourth of the undergraduate programs surveyed do not offer any courses in the subject. While a few programs that offer no theory courses require a cognate course in social philosophy, most in this category have no theory requirement at all. Most of the programs that offer theory courses in a nonhistorical form do so through courses in political ideologies. Certainly this should be of concern to those who see any form of education as promoting the ability to make critically informed decisions about one's actions. The history of political thought for life seems to imply more generally knowledge for life, and the inability to evaluate the normative aspects of that life is a great handicap for students who wish to be free and moral citizens rather than merely rational utility maximizers or the sites of causal behavioral processes. For reasons already described, the history of political thought especially

**Table 1.** Undergraduate political theory curricula

Type of program	<i>n</i>	% of politics programs	% of theory programs	% of history of thought programs
Standard	87	61.7	73.7	82.9
Oklahoma	5	3.5	4.2	4.8
Marquette	13	9.2	11.0	12.4
Nonhistorical	13	9.2	11.0	
No Theory	23	16.3		
No Data	21			

Data may not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

is central to developing knowledge for life and is more so the more the ideas in question are far removed from the central ideological positions of our own time.

To be sure, this data is a very indirect assessment measure. A hallmark of the move toward greater assessment in political science is the claim that what we as educators assume to be true about our teaching methods may not be so, and that we have no way of knowing so if we lack reliable means of making these assessments. Political theorists remain in part political scientists, and as such we should be the last ones who need to be told that implementing a policy does not end the process of making it. A more rigorous study of political theory curricula, perhaps one that compares student performance on a common instrument across institutions and curricular models, is needed to fully evaluate whether any of these models is in fact successful. However, that a sizeable number of programs do use alternative to the standard model tells us at least that these models have not been glaring failures, since such failures are usually obvious to those involved. These models thus, at the very least, warrant consideration in curriculum design—as well as the further study needed to assess their effectiveness.

## Conclusion

Though the evidence, while entirely consistent with these models, is indirect and limited, these models remain political theorists of a core discussion in our field: what are we trying to do in teaching political theory? Both Mill (1999) and Peirce (1877) remind us that it is the confrontation with ideas other than our own that spur inquiry into how and why we do what we do. By rethinking what we want to accomplish in teaching the history of political thought it becomes obvious that much of what we do now fails to meet certain goals that political theorists, whether focused on historical or contemporary issues, should hold for our students. This paper has argued for an alternative conception of the history of political thought, a history of political thought for life that focuses on teaching students how to deal with the fundamental challenges faced by humans living in political communities. This alternative conception leads to a new vision of the curriculum that uses the history of political thought as a Socratic gadfly, challenging the students to broaden their understanding of questions, answers, and ultimately action, becoming not just better vocational citizens but better people in the process.

## Notes

1. MacIntyre's (1984) interpretation of Aristotle focuses primarily on the cooperative nature of the political community, relying primarily on the idea of the community as a kind of cooperation that makes virtue possible. But Yack (1993) argues persuasively that Aristotle's attention to matters such as the distribution of political power reveal an emphasis on conflict rather than cooperation. It is likely that both are right; Aristotle's politics are about both cooperation and conflict, and these problems of action within a political community are fundamental elements of the human condition, as Arendt (1958) realizes in her critique of the modern rejection of the *bios politikos*.

2. The qualification "under the circumstances" is meant not to assert the superiority of situationalist principles over deontological principles but rather to sidestep that issue. If deontological approaches are in fact to be preferred, then the deontological solution will be best under any circumstances, including the ones faced by the chooser. If the situationalist perspective is right, the qualification is necessary to distinguish relevant differences in circumstances. I sidestep the issue here because it is irrelevant to my particular argument.

3. The identification of the standard model resulted primarily from Cameron University's program assessment process (Johnson 2005) and is based empirically on a qualitative survey of the curriculum of political science programs at state universities in Oklahoma. To identify a standard pedagogical model in the history of political thought is, of course, to grossly oversimplify the diversity of our teaching practices, especially if based formally on such a small and unrepresentative sample of programs. But while the model presented here does not necessarily characterize all (or perhaps even any) programs in every detail, the major principles are familiar enough in most programs that the model can be said to usefully characterize the general practices of the discipline.

4. While these are of course caricatures of any single course, a cursory survey of syllabi available on the Internet shows that these broad outlines characterize at least a large plurality if not a majority of these courses. And while I cannot offer systematic support for the claim that political thought is *typically* taught this way, the claim that it is *often* so very much reflects my own experience as a student as well as that of a fair number of my colleagues. The temptation to see this depiction as something of a straw-man argument may reflect the many very good teachers who already embrace this approach but must also be seen as something of a denial that these attitudes do characterize at least a significant portion of the discipline.

5. The discipline has clearly continued in the direction that Isaac identified. As of August 2004, the five most important journals in political thought as identified by Isaac—*Political Theory*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *Ethics*, *Polity*, and the *American Political Science Review*—had published collectively 198 articles on political theory but only four relevant to the September 11 attacks (one of which was clearly written before the attacks but published afterward) and two on the 2000 U.S. Presidential election. *APSR*, in fact, had not published a theory article on either topic.

6. To an extent I disagree with Isaac's characterization here. Kuhn's (1970, esp. ch. VI) idea of normal science does involve solving puzzles posed by theory, but the puzzles are solved with reference to empirical data. In this sense, the problem actually may be that political theory fails to do enough normal science, concerning itself with the problems of developing new theory in a sort of constant scientific revolution rather than exploring manifestations of existing theory in the real world that might reveal the theoretical anomalies that drive theory forward. Kuhn's puzzles were anomalies generated as much by the real world as by the theory itself (the black body effect, for example, was an observation that existing theory could not explain and drove the development of modern physics). In political theory, focusing too much on developing and extending Rawls rather than on exploring the relationship between Rawls's theory and real-world problems misses the opportunity to create better theory because we don't generate the kind of anomalies that move theory forward. That said, the difference between Isaac and I on this point is limited to whether the problem on which we agree is best characterized as normal science, a difference solely on interpreting Kuhn that affects only whether Kuhnian language is the best expression for the problem.

7. For example, the prevalence of child labor, military, and sexual slavery in Africa (UNICEF 2003).

8. See, for example, Dobbs 1994 and Rhodes 2003. One should not be surprised that a program influenced by Strauss should be at the forefront of teaching the history of political thought this way. While Straussians are often criticized for their obsession with the canon and textual exegesis (see Isaac 1995, 643), one must not forget that the fundamental point of Strauss's doctrine of natural right was to show that the ancients provide both the diagnosis of and the solution to the crisis of modern Western society (Strauss 1953).

9. No programs were included in a sixth category of programs using other historical approaches; that category will thus not be considered in that analysis.

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