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On the interpretation of historical texts with examples from Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nichomachean Ethics*

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A distinction between two different ways of reading historical texts:

- One way concentrates on what is regarded to be of interest from a contemporary perspective.
- The other way concentrates on a historical reading.

Daniel Russel poses a question from a modern perspective (about the moral relevance of self-respect) and writes that he “can find the basic outline of ... an answer ... in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* ...” (Russel 2005: 102).

Russell reads Aristotle as if he were a contemporary philosopher in the sense that one can enter directly into a discussion with Aristotle.

Rosalind Hursthouse writes that with exception from Aristotle's view on slaves and woman and some of the virtues, neo-Aristotelianism aim "to stick pretty close to his ethical writings wherever else it can"

R. Hursthouse 1999: 6.

Bertrand Russell writes the following about Plato:

“The problem with which we are now concerned [the nature of relations] is a very old one, since it was brought into philosophy by Plato. Plato's 'theory of ideas' is an attempt to solve this very problem, and in my opinion it is one of the most successful attempts hitherto made.”

Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 1912

If we read texts as something purely historical “they cannot emerge into the present except as a set of museum pieces”

A. MacIntyre, 1984: 31

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- The German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer writes that all understanding presupposes a pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*).
 - We always necessarily understand from the background of our prejudices (*Vorurteile*).

Doubtless they [our prejudices] cannot be avoided altogether. It is deservedly a commonplace of recent hermeneutic theories that, as Hans Georg Gadamer in particular has emphasised, we are likely to be constrained in our imaginative grasp of historical texts in ways that we cannot even be confident of bringing to consciousness.

All I am proposing is that, instead of bowing to this limitation and erecting it into a principle, we should fight against it with all the weapons that historians have already fashioned in their efforts to reconstruct without anachronism the alien *mentalités* of earlier periods.

Q. Skinner 2002: 195

The distinction (introduced by Austin in *How to do Things with Words* and further developed by John Searle in *Speech Acts*) between

- *different kinds of speech acts and*
- *the content of the speech act*

The purpose of political science is not knowledge (*gnôsis*), but action (*praxis*) *NE* 1095a5).

Speech act

kinds of act

propositional content

I know, I doubt, I hope

that the car will be repaired tomorrow

I fear, I promise etc

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- The purpose of political science is not knowledge (*gnôsis*), but action (*praxis*) (*NE* 1095a5).
 - Aristotle presupposes that the listeners have a mature character and so are not led by their feelings.

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- The political science includes both ethical and political issues.
 - In the opening chapter of *NE* Aristotle underlines that a central part of the political science is lawgiving, which as he says “... lay down laws as to what people shall do and what things they shall refrain from doing ...” (*NE* 1094b6)

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- The students of political science needs to be cultivated or molded already, something that Aristotle repeats several times, as for instance when he in more poetic terms says that “... the soil must have been previously tilled if it is to foster the seed ... ” (1179b25).
 - The listener to the political discourse that teaches political science has already got ethical virtue.
 - **So what does it then mean that the political science is a *practical science and that its goal is action?***

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- I take it that the listeners to the lectures that are gathered in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are supposed to learn what they need to learn in order to be moral educators.
 - Notice that moral education and lawgiving is intimately related.

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- The listener is to learn political science, and as part of this the science of lawgiving. And so I assume that the listeners are future politicians and lawgivers. This fits well to the relation Aristotle sees between virtue and lawgiving. Ethical issues are a part of the political science as a practical science. The purpose is action. The only way to become good, at least for the most part, is by habit, not by teaching (1179b20-22). And the best way to develop good habits is normally good laws:

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- ... it is difficult to obtain a right education in virtue from youth up without being brought up under good laws ...;
 - ... hence the nurture and exercises of the young should be regulated by law ...
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But doubtless it is not enough for people to receive the right nurture and discipline in youth; they must also practice the lessons they have learnt, and confirm them by habit, when they are grown up.

Accordingly we shall need laws to regulate the discipline of adults as well, and in fact the whole life of the people generally; for the many are more amenable to compulsion and punishment than to reason and moral ideals.

(*NE* 1179b32-1180a10)

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- As then the question of legislation has been left uninvestigated by previous thinkers, it will perhaps be well if we consider it for ourselves, together with the whole question of the constitution of the state, in order to complete as far as possible our philosophy of human affairs (he philosophia peri ta anthrôpina)

(*NE* 1181b12-b15)

The purpose of political science is not knowledge (*gnôsis*), but action (*praxis*) *NE* 1095a5).

Since there is one end for the whole city, clearly it is necessary that education too be one and the same for all, and care for this education must be a common project and not a private matter, which is the present way of going about it:

each cares for his own children privately and teaches whatever private subject is best. But it is necessary, when things are a common concern, that preparation for them also be made common.

At the same time, one should in no way think that any of the citizens belongs to himself, rather all of them belong to the city. And it is natural that care for each part should look to care for the whole.

One might for this reason praise the Lacedaimonians, for they show the greatest seriousness about children, and they make this a common project.

Politics 1337a21-32

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