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Summaries

The Historical School

by Bart Tromp

In the late sixties and early seventies there emerged a new approach to political theory, known as the 'Historical' or 'Cambridge' school. This school seeks to change the study of political ideas, so that political thought is no longer viewed as a canon of classical texts containing the wisdom of the ages, but as the history of specific interventions by authors in the political debate of their time. Such an approach asks for a much more historical, i.e. contextual, way of analysing political thought. In this essay the theoretical claims, methodological precepts and substantive accomplishments of this school are discussed on the basis of the works of its two most prominent scholars, Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock.

Several conclusions are reached in this critical evaluation. In particular some theoretical claims of the school seem impossible to realize. The original intent to construct an anti-positivist researchprogram for the social sciences (Skinner) appears to have been abandoned and thus the methodological precepts of the school are (and cannot be but) rather general. This suggests that the school's differences with more traditional historians of political thought are less significant than the school's more programmatic statements would lead us to believe. The essay concludes that the school's attack on traditional approaches to the history of political theory is not wholly successful, firstly, because interest in political texts is not only historical in intent, and, secondly, because the meaning of political texts cannot be completely reduced to their contemporary context.

Babel and political theory

by W.J. Witteveen

There is such a multitude of perspectives on political theory, such a plethora of theoretical languages about language (second-order languages), that the situation of political theorists may well be compared to the situation in the biblical story of Babel. Every second-order language proclaims to reveal the mysteries of language, yet between these idioms communication seems to be seriously impaired. Because an interest in language is intrinsic to most efforts at political theorizing, and

because the second-order language of traditional rhetoric has fallen in disuse in the 18th century, it is necessary to assess new second-order languages.

The article groups new second-order languages in three categories: usefulness for the *analysis* of political language, usefulness for proposals to *reform* political language and practices, usefulness for understanding processes of *interpretation*. For purposes of analysis the New Rhetoric of Burke, structural and post-structural theories of Barthes and Foucault, and narratological and semiotic approaches (Genette, Bal, Eco) seem most promising. For purposes of reform, speech act theory (Austin, Searle) and pragmatics (Grice, Habermas) are clearly useful. The interpretation of texts and practices may profit from a variety of approaches, ranging from sociological (Goffman, Garfinkel) to anthropological (Geertz, Douglas) to literary theory (Richards, Gadamer, Fish).

Though all these second-order languages are potentially rewarding, applications to politics have not yet been tried with respect to all of them. As examples of fruitful applications to political theory the following are discussed: work on 'essentially contested concepts', narratological analysis of political speech, speech act theory, and work on frames and generative metaphor.

The conclusion is that the proliferation of second-order languages is on the whole a positive development for political theory. This is already apparent in the fields where theories have found application in politics. Also there is an increasing willingness to communicate with speakers of a different theoretical idiom. If this trend continues the metaphor of Babel will cease to describe the predicament of political theory after the linguistic turn.

Modern versus post-modern political philosophy. A comparison of Habermas and Lyotard

by Willem van Reijen

In this essay the approaches of Habermas and Lyotard are compared with respect to issues in ethics and the philosophy of law. There is an obvious reason for this comparison: both philosophers consider language to be both the pivot of as well as the means to social-political actions and events. The author discusses their diagnoses about the pathology of politics and society. Subsequently their different opinions about language, law, morality and the role of philosophy, politics and science are sketched against the background of their general philosophy. Habermas is a strong defender of the Enlightenment-project; he maintains that it must be possible to put philosophical ideas into practice in the interest of democratization and the nonviolent settlement of conflicts. Lyotard's post-modern philosophy, in contract, can be assessed as a 'language-ontology', that is, a philosophy which, by definition, cannot be applied to or in the social world. Lyotard argues that there is insoluble opposition and conflict with regard to every issue. No meta-discourse can exist that would allow real mediation and settlement of these conflicts other

than some form of compromise. Lyotard himself is well aware of the paradox this implies: to make such a philosophical statement about praxis amounts to asserting that, philosophically, nothing can be said about that praxis. In taking this stand he joins a long sceptical tradition.

The divided self: rationality and irrationality in political theory

by Grahame Lock

There are good reasons to believe that the mind – thus also the 'person' or the 'self' – are divided. In what way? And what are the consequences for the field of political theory?

First the general notion of the divided mind is discussed, in connexion with a number of remarks by Derek Parfit on identity. Next the claims of Quattrone and Tversky are examined. These authors argue in particular that a confusion between diagnostic and causal relations might be a source of the 'voter's illusion', namely of the voter's idea that his vote has more than a negligible influence. This discussion leads into a presentation of 'Newcomb's Problem', which interrogates the distinction between diagnosis and cause. Finally a presupposition of game theory is tested out against a strong theory of the divided mind, that of Freud.