ON HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY — A RESPONSE TO EDGE

POLIS. Vol. 28. No. 2, 2011

(See below for copy of original review)

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First I must thank Matt Edge for taking the time to respond to my review [*See below for copy of this review*]. I could wish that people would take my articles as seriously as he has taken that one review of mine. But I will be grateful for small mercies. There are a number of curiosities, nevertheless, about what Edge says. He presents his article as a criticism of my review and yet he agrees with me on almost everything of substance. He also thereby shows that what I intended in the review came across loud and clear. His distinction between two kinds of ideology is particularly striking in this regard. One kind he describes as fairly benign and as just referring to a theory or set of ideas. The other is pejorative and problematic and refers to a set of ideas that gets in the way of truth and is hostile and obstructive because of the values espoused. He then says, quite rightly, that what I complain about in my review is the second kind. Hence he and I agree that this kind of ideology is a bad thing and to be avoided. He only complains that I do not show how the contributors I criticize were ideological in this bad sense. Well I do, but I need to make some clarifications first. For Edge goes on to muddy the fine distinction he has just drawn.

The first kind of ideology is, after all, not ideology but just another name for thinking. Edge describes it as the fact that we have no access to a world independent of our senses and judgments. Indeed. No one can think without thinking and, since we are sensing creatures, without sensing either. But Edge then immediately slides into a *suggestio falsi* by glossing what he said as that we always think, when we think, with an inherited language-picture of the world. He then gives a further gloss that the drive to get beyond such a picture to 'the resplendent and glorious room of objectivity' is 'fruitless' because we cannot get to a place 'independent of human thought, talk, language and belief'. Of course not. But whoever thought one had to in order to get to objectivity, to truth, to the way things are? One gets to objectivity by thinking. Edge is insinuating that we cannot get to objectivity by thinking because thinking is always a picturing and picturing is always a something we impose on things. Hence what we think is always ideological because we are always using pictures to think with and the pictures are neither objective nor stay the same from age to age. There is no 'unvarnished news' to report, he says quoting Skinner. In other words, we never get to objective truth, or never know for sure that we have. Hence Edge persistently fights shy in his article of the word 'truth' (and also 'facts').

But this view is radically incoherent, despite the big names Edge marshals

in its support. For to say that we cannot reach truth or know that we have reached it is to say that it is true and that we know that we cannot reach truth or cannot know that we have reached it, which is self-refuting. Either we get to truth or we don't. But if we don't then we can't say or know that we don't, because our saying or knowing it would be a getting to truth, namely the truth we get to when we think about what we get to when we think. So either we become like plants and say and think nothing, or we speak and think sensibly and say that we sometimes get to truth and not always to some picture or theory other than the truth. Pictures, if we want to speak of them, are half-way points, or hypotheses, that we use to enable us to get a first or second shot at things that are obscure and do not reveal themselves readily. It may indeed be that sometimes we cannot get beyond hypotheses and must be content with a balance of probabilities. But it cannot be that we never get to truth about anything, or that all we ever get to is a picture between us and the truth and not the truth itself.

There must of necessity, then, be one truth we can reach and know, namely the truth that we can reach and know truth. This abstract and self-reflexive truth does not, admittedly, amount to much, but what it implies amounts to a very great deal. For if we can get to this one truth, then we are in principle capable of truth, and nothing can in principle stand in our way of getting to truths elsewhere and about other things. Perhaps such truths will not be many and not easy to discover. But we certainly cannot say that we can never get to truth, and to truth the way it objectively is and not the way we make it or picture it. Hence we can definitely dismiss Edge's picture theory of knowledge if that picture theory is saying that we only ever get to what we make and not to an objective truth we find. So we can definitely dismiss the idea that his first and benign sense of ideology is an ideology at all. Thinking is not us imposing our ideas on things but us letting things impose their ideas (or their intelligibility) on us — the Quines, Wittgensteins, Skinners and Davidsons notwithstanding.

Our aim, then, as thinkers is and must be getting and knowing the truth as it is, not as we picture it. Such an aim is not ideology, not even in a benign sense; it is just what thinking is. Ideology in the other sense, the bad sense distinguished by Edge, is in fact the only proper sense of ideology, and is the one that Edge admits it is right to reject and that he also admits is what I am complaining about in my review. It is the ideology where one's pre-espoused views or values get in the way of understanding and prevent one from seeing or admitting truth. It is prejudice, in short, or *parti pris* — the assumption that the position one has adopted is correct, not because one has shown it to be true, but because one prefers it, or because one's age prefers it. Hence it prompts one to ignore or deny or discredit any evidence that comes along which is contrary to one's prejudice merely because it is contrary to one's prejudice. Note, therefore, that a prejudice need not be false. It could be true. Only it would be insisted on, not because it was true or known to be true (even if it was), but because one preferred it, and because one was so minded that one would go on preferring it even in the face of contrary evidence — which

evidence one would then typically get rid of, not by carefully examining and refuting it (as one would and should if truth were one's motive), but by ignoring it or bad-mouthing it or distorting it. Ideology, then, is prejudice and only differs from mere prejudice in that ideology is a prejudice more or less theoretically organized and more or less the platform of a particular party or group.

Edge claims that I did not give this definition of ideology in my review. Well I did at one point use the phrase 'ideological prejudice', which sort of gives the game away. But a review is a review, as Edge concedes; not a systematic exposition of concepts. I assumed my audience would understand what I had in mind; and I was right so to assume. At least Edge himself, as he admits, had no difficulty recognizing what I meant by the term. Besides, if my review did not define ideology verbally, it did do so ostensively, by pointing to instances. Edge refers to one such instance but fails to quote the relevant part, namely the way the editor condemns himself in the act of condemning others. For when the editor says that 'respect for certain traditions combined with neglect or contempt of others and the anti-individualistic emphasis on community . . . are not attractive possibilities for our time' he is, as I pointed out, showing 'neglect or contempt' for the 'tradition' of communitarians like Sandel and MacIntyre. How the editor could have missed so open a self- referential paradox is surprising. But he suggests the answer himself: the 'anti-individualistic emphasis on community' is not an 'attractive possibility for our time'. In other words, he rejects the communitarianism of people like Sandel and MacIntyre because our time does not like it, not because of concern with truth. The absurdity here, of course, is that communitarianism, if one judges by its popularity among students of political thought, is a very attractive possibility for our time. One is forced, then, to wonder if the editor is not just a Rawlsian ideologue.

My other instances are more like one-liners, but they are one-liners designed to alert readers about what to expect when they themselves read the piece. Sissa, for example, in the article I criticize, herself criticizes ancient thinkers because they did not think like us — as if that fact alone could condemn them. Plainly, however, that fact cannot show, for instance, that the way they thought or acted was unfair if the term 'unfair' is only allowed to mean what we want or prefer it to mean. Such a procedure just begs the question in our favour against them. Admittedly one could, by way of exercise, look at what the ancients said entirely from the point of view of some modern opinion, but such an exercise would be about understanding us who accept that opinion, not about understanding them. Sissa's article does take that form and only manages to tell us something about the ancients because it first tells us what they said before condemning it. So why not just tell us what they said and skip the condemnation, which here serves but to flatter us for being us? Wallace's article, and Sissa's other article in the same volume, are welcome reliefs, and show how to write informatively about the ancients, and indeed about us too, without the self-flattery.

Apropos the article by Depew, I raise a pointed question about the way he

speaks of Aristotle. The question is meant to suggest that he is not treating Aristotle and his arguments with the requisite seriousness, and that he is failing to do so (like Sissa in her first article) because Aristotle espouses views, as about women and slaves, that we don't like. Chappell in his article is even more blunt, telling us openly he is a liberal individualist and so finds Aristotle's political naturalism unacceptable (p. 395). Of course. But we do not learn therefrom that or why or in what respect Aristotle was wrong and we are right. The rightness of our view is assumed from the start and is driving the discussion accordingly. So just tell us how Aristotle is different and why, and skip the self-serving praise and blame. The instance I give about Liddell (which is not a one-liner) is so plain it needs little comment. His preference for the thing we call democracy is so strong that it prevents him seeing that ancient democrats, whom he wishes to enlist on our side, would hate it and want to destroy it. All these instances are of the sort of ideology that Edge and I reject, namely pre-conceived opinions and values getting in the way of truth and understanding. But these instances and these articles are the exceptions in the book. By far the majority of the articles are not ideological but commendable pieces of sound scholarship. I give high praise to several by name (though of course limitations of space prevented me giving praise to all that deserved it).

I am mystified, therefore, as to why Edge gets so upset about what I say of his and Cartledge's piece. For their article is plainly one of those I praise and commend for repudiating bad ideology (which they do in fact do even though they do not say, nor have need to say, that they are doing it). Such ideology is what Edge now expressly says he rejects and would be mortified to be found guilty of. So clearly I must have understood that article well enough if I spotted what Edge believes before I heard him say it. That I throw a 'good heavens' into my comments and italicize a 'not' is for rhetorical effect, to show to the ideologists that here are people so clearly and so rightly rejecting ideology that they are able to understand how freedom can exist even in the absence of a doctrine of rights. This fact should indeed be surprising to moderns who connect freedom to rights, as Sissa, for instance, when in her first article she writes: 'To ignore human rights creates a predictable . . . legitimation of unfairness [sc. as regards freedom]' (p. 112), to which remark we should favourably oppose Edge's and Cartledge's remark that: 'The Athenians did not understand the concept of rights, but they did understand the concept of individual liberty' (p. 159). Edge and Cartledge speak better here precisely because they are not being ideological (even though, by stepping back from the ideology, one could perhaps elaborate on distinctions to show how Sissa's and their views might both in a way be right).

Note too that I do not say, as Edge complains, that he and Cartledge say the Athenians were freer *simpliciter* because they did not believe in rights. I added, to be sure, no qualification to my use of the word 'freer', but for the obvious reason that what is noteworthy and commendable in Edge's and Cartledge's article is how well they show that the absence of a doctrine of rights enabled the Athenians to

achieve freedoms which we lack. Had I added that the Athenians were nevertheless not free in ways in which we are (as Edge wishes I had done, because he and Cartledge say it, although in fact, when they speak, on the same page and following, of the 'hegemonic authority' of rights talk, they are expressing themselves far more positively in favour of Athenian freedom than a mere 'free in this respect but not in that' allows for) — had I made that addition, it would have been beside the point and would have ruined the force of my remark. I wanted to stress the good and the new in Edge's and Cartledge's article, so as to show how well-worth reading it is, not to mute my praise with qualifications that, if they might be required in a scholarly article, are out of place in a review giving quick advice to others as to what is worth reading and why.

ORIGINAL REVIEW.
Polis, 27.2 (2010), pp. 366–71.

Blackwell Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought. Ed. Ryan K. Balot. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. pp. xxviii + 659, includes index.

The first thing to consider when reviewing a book of this sort is its purpose, both as regards the kind of book in general and as regards this one in particular. The book is part of a series of Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World of which the general purpose is said to be to provide "sophisticated and authoritative overviews of periods of ancient history, genres of classical literature, and the most important themes in ancient culture." Twenty one volumes have already appeared (including the present one) and at least three are in preparation. Such companions are clearly in demand, for publishers would not go on publishing them if they were not (and there are other presses besides Blackwell producing them). Of this particular volume, the blurb on the cover says that it is "an authoritative guide to the ancient Greek and Roman political questions that continue to shape and challenge the modern world." The editor, Ryan Balot, says in his introduction that the aim is "to introduce the central concepts of Greek and Roman political thought to students and teachers of political science, classics, philosophy, and history," the motive being, in part, that scholars in these disciplines "have begun to communicate with each other intensively" over the past 20 years and this interdisciplinary "cross-fertilization" has led to "a significantly deeper understanding of ancient political thought as a product of, and response to, the political world of classical antiquity" (p. 3).

Were it not for the phrase here last quoted I would have been inclined to wonder whom the editor thinks he is kidding. No one familiar with the work of scholars over the past 200 years could reasonably think that only in the last 20 have those in the aforesaid disciplines begun to communicate. Or, if anyone did think it, his doing so would likely be because he was also thinking, or noting, that only in the past 20 or 30 or more years have scholars become so narrowly focused that there are barriers over which they have had need to communicate. Was Grote or Newman or Wilamowitz or Barker or Jaeger so

narrow? Or if they were, was Nietzsche (who began as a professor of philology)? But the phrase last quoted saves the editor's claim by deflating it. For if the point of the book is to display an understanding of ancient political thought "as a product of and response to" its own time, then perhaps the likes of Wilamowitz and Barker and especially Jaeger are outdated. Their love of "histories of development", or *Entwicklungsgeschicte*, was far too dependent on Hegelian ideas of time and culture. We nowadays are post-modern and we need to write and read Companions for a post-modern audience. To be post-modern means, among other things, to believe that any development there may be is not "progress" (p. 5) or is not going anywhere (and certainly not towards some Hegelian final completion). There is no final completion, for indeed there is no final truth. There are only different points of view that reflect the time and place of their authors, and no Hegel's eye view that embraces and completes them all (there are no "uncorrupted or innocent 'starting points'" as Nietzsche warned, and Foucault too apparently, p. 7).

The book, therefore, is of and for the modern world, and reflects the editor's and the authors' "ethical commitment of making our academic work meaningful to inhabitants of the post-enlightenment nation-state" (p. 5). Contributors have thus aimed to locate "ancient political ideas in their political historical contexts." They have also aimed to give "careful consideration and intellectual respect" to the ancients' ambitions not to "understand themselves as unshakably entrenched in particular historical moments" (à la Hegel, I suppose), but rather "as exponents of what they took to be a natural or unchanging order, an order that…satisfied the basic requirements of our human nature" (p. 6). Lest such evocations of an "unchanging order" excite fears among "post-enlightenment" readers, the editor has also insisted that the book's attempt to recover ancient ideas is not enlisted "in the conservative project of establishing orthodoxies that have no real place in the modern world. Political hierarchy, gender inequality, respect for certain traditions combined with neglect or contempt of others, and the anti-individualistic emphasis on "community" – these are not attractive possibilities for our time" (p. 5). Respect, therefore, is due to followers in the tradition of Rawls but neglect or contempt to those in the tradition of Sandel or MacIntyre.

Chacun à son gout, as the French post-modernistically say, but the *gout* of the editor, as well as of some of the contributors, for ideological orthodoxy lies so thick on the ground one could cut it with a knife (if I may indulge my *gout* for mixing metaphors). To name names seems invidious but the duties of a reviewer more or less compel me. Among those, then, who have such thick *gouts* I would mention Giulia Sissa on 'Gendered Politics or the Self-Praise of *Andres Agathoi*', who does a splendid job of not making gender inequality attractive for our time, and also, if only by the violent contrast of her ideology with ancient practice, of telling us what the ancients actually thought about the unchanging nature of men and women and politics. (She thankfully fails to be ideological in her other essay 'Political Animals: Pathetic Animals', which is a fine discussion, and endorsement, of the place the ancients gave to emotions in politics and public speech.) Similarly, Timothy Chappel in '"Naturalism" in Aristotle's Political Philosophy', after some fine work drawing distinctions and clarifying confusions about the word 'nature', proceeds to give us plenty of ideology but not enough Aristotle, while David Depew in 'The Ethics of Aristotle's *Politics*' does give us plenty of Aristotle but feels he has to salve his conscience, as it were, by giving us plenty of ideology too, thus serving up a mix of insight and oversight about the ethical challenge of Aristotle's text

(for instance, whose "ideology" is "at work" when Aristotle's "cultural analysis" is said to give way to "reductionistic biological speculations" about slaves, or women, which "even he does not quite believe" p. 414?). Peter Liddell in his 'Democracy Ancient and Modern', while acknowledging that the term 'democracy' in each case refers to different things, is so thoroughly convinced of the value of modern democracy that he only examines ancient democracy (in commendable accord with the book's "ethical commitment") for how it can be made "meaningful to inhabitants of the post-enlightenment nation-state" in preserving and extending the modern kind. Thus he misses the fact that ancient democrats would consider modern democracy to be a totalizing form of oligarchy (any socio-economic profile of the ruling class in today's democracies would show them to have the hated marks of oligarchy: fewness and wealth), and that therefore ancient democrats would do everything they could to destroy what our ideology requires us so highly to admire. A similar criticism might be directed against Christopher Nadon's "Republicanism: Ancient, Medieval, and Beyond", which also fails to see how radically different, and radically hostile, ancient democracy was to what we moderns call democracy and republicanism.

The essays taken as a whole, however, are not marred by the ideological prejudice the editor says he wants to avoid but which his introduction does a great deal to inflict. A case in point is Robert Wallace's 'Personal Freedom in Greek Democracies, Republican Rome, and Modern Liberal States' which, with plain honest-to-goodness scholarship, nicely debunks, while delicately not mentioning (the author must be a gentleman), Sissa's 'Gendered Politics', thereby also proving how easy it is to write without ideology if one tries. In fact, only those essays I have noted are marred by ideology in any serious way (and Paul Cartledge's and Matt Edge's '"Rights," Individuals, and Communities in Ancient Greece' is, in contrast, distinguished by repudiation of ideology, or modern ideology, and goes so far as to suggest that the Athenians were, good heavens, freer than us because they did *not* believe in "rights"). The other essays present themselves as pieces of scholarship and can fairly be judged as such. Overall the scholarship is strong, though some essays are on the weak side as being more summary than analysis or as being more about the opinions of other scholars than about the ancient world.

Summaries of contemporary scholarship can be useful for getting a handle on that scholarship (as Dean Hammer's 'What is Politics in the Ancient World'), but if such is all or mainly what they are they will not tell us anything about the ancient world (as Hammer's piece does not, for it is only about what different schools of scholars *think* politics is in the ancient world). Summaries of what scholars have discovered about the ancient world will indeed tell us about that world, but if they lack depth of analysis they will only inform and not also enlighten (a purely ideological essay would be better in this respect if only because of the reaction it might provoke). Some of the essays fall into this latter class, but I would say – expressing now thanks to the editor and not complaints – very few on the whole. Most repay the reading, and some handsomely so. There is also a certain amount of cross-fertilization between disciplines, but the one essay that really does try cross-fertilization, Kurt Raaflaub's 'Early Greek Political Thought in its Mediterranean Context' (it commendably seeks to combine Classics with Egyptology and Mesopotamiology), is more of a first or second shot at the question of how the Greeks took ideas and practices from their Asian and African neighbors than a piece of finished research (he rightly thinks the 'Black Athena' controversy generated more heat than light,

p. 38). Moreover he has to beg the indulgence, and solicit the assistance, of Mesopotamian and Egyptian specialists because he is trespassing into fields where, he admits, he is not properly trained (p. 55). One admires his courage and wishes him well in his efforts but one hesitates to follow him, for it is hard to see how anyone could achieve such facility in all these fields as to be able to bring them together in fruitful cross-fertilization. Raaflaub's conclusion that the Greeks actually took from their Eastern and Southern neighbors less than even they thought they did is provocatively argued, but getting the interdisciplinary competence necessary to establish the fact looks to be an even more remote ideal than ever.

As for this particular volume, apart from Raaflaub's essay, all the others are confined to Greece or Rome or both. Since the volume's title refers to both Greek and Roman political thought, those essays that deal with both answer more completely to its purpose. Still, the Greeks inevitably get the lion's share of attention. They have left us more thought while the Romans have left us more facts, and the intellectual bearing of facts is hard to assess (modern Europe's borders are still fundamentally those imposed by Rome but how does one assess the political significance of those borders, whether today or in the past?). Thus there is a section in the book on the Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle but none on the Rome of Caesar, Cicero, and Augustus. Rome is not ignored, to be sure, and the likes of Cicero especially, but also Livy, Seneca, Tacitus, and Pliny, and the writings about Rome of Polybius and Plutarch get treated. But, all things considered, Rome is short-changed. Exceptions are Jeffrey Tatum's 'Roman Democracy?' (an able defense of the view that Polybius' analysis of the Roman political system, despite the doubts of scholars, was basically right); Carlos Noreña's 'The Ethics of Autocracy in the Roman World' (which unfortunately deals with so many authors about how one is to live in a world run by autocratic emperors that it lacks depth of analysis); Robert Kaster's 'Some Passionate Performances in Late Republican Rome' (an insightful analysis of how Cicero's tiresome obsession with telling the story of his saving Rome from Catiline could be tolerated and endorsed by others because it helped to exemplify and promote the larger goal of Rome's republican ideal); Malcolm Schofield's 'Republican Virtues' (a learned exposition, correcting others' misreadings, of Cicero's catalog of preferred virtues in both its philosophical and its political context).

There is also a fine essay on perhaps the greatest of all Roman political thinkers, Augustine: Todd Breyfogle's 'Citizenship and Signs: Rethinking Augustine on the Two Cities'. Augustine is also perhaps the greatest of the Christian political thinkers and certainly the one who most influenced the medieval period that followed. Breyfogle's piece also suggests, interestingly, that Augustine is the most relevant to modern concerns of all the thinkers the book covers, for he is the one who best traced the fundamental tensions that mark the human condition (including the modern human condition). Thus Augustine, the last of the ancients and the first of the medievals, is also, suggests Breyfogle, the first of the moderns. If so he is the exemplar of what the blurb claims for the book: "an authoritative guide to the ancient Greek and Roman political questions that continue to shape and challenge the modern world." It is a pity, therefore, that the book has no section devoted to religion in general or to Christianity in particular. Religion does get treated incidentally in several of the essays and expressly in Robin Osborne's 'The Religious Contexts of Ancient Political Thought' (he is able, however, to do little more than scratch the surface). But since, as Breyfogle indicates (p. 523), the political-religious

problems are those that have especially marked the modern world (one thinks of Hobbes, but Rawls too seems to have been moved to political liberalism by fear of religious war), one would have expected religion to figure in the book as an express if not even as a central theme.

Still, *non possumus omnia omnes*. We should accept the book and assess it as it is, and here come my final comments as well as reservations. Most of the essays, as I say, are gratifyingly informative, insightful, and deserve to be made available in published form. What I am less sure about is whether they deserve to be made available in the form of this book. The sort of information and analyses that it and other so-called 'Companions' profess to contain are already available elsewhere, as notably in the *OCD* and Pauly-Wissowa, which, I must confess, is where I would and do regularly go when I want to find out about this or that aspect of the ancient world. Admittedly the *OCD* and Pauly-Wissowa are not up to date with all the latest scholarship, but these 'Companions' also fail, as soon as they are published, to be up to date. The scholarship piles up more quickly than anything printed can be up to date with.

The answer? Leave the task of being companions to the *OCD*, Pauly-Wissowa, and the like; publish these essays, or most of them, in disparate scholarly collections (where their thematic unities can be more carefully attended to); scrap the ideology, post-modern and otherwise (or confine it to volumes expressly devoted to the idea); re-read Grote and Wilamowitz; throw this review away now that you've finished it.