Some Facts of Life
A Tool of Humble Rationalism for the Selection of Method in Political Philosophy

Introduction

My project here is firstly to set out as clearly as possible what some of the necessary features of our pre-philosophical lives offer us in terms of both resources and limitations in how we choose to do political philosophy. Once these are set out, in the second part of this essay, some current methods, those of Leo Strauss and John Rawls, will be read from the perspective of someone who is just beginning the activity of political philosophy but is attentive and unusually self-aware (a posture in reading that will be argued for later). That is, each text will be read in a naively textualist way, but with an awareness of the resources and limitations that we necessarily have as potential political philosophers, what I will call “the facts of life”. It will be contended that under these circumstances the potential political philosopher will need to consider at least four things about a thinker’s work before his or her method can be selected: intelligibility, credibility, promise, and feasibility.

As will become clear, which theories we look at, which texts, preconceptions about those texts, and tools to understand and interpret those texts are available to us at this malleable point in our intellectual development is an essentially contingent matter. Consequently, this exercise cannot be an exhaustive, and may not even be an ultimately accurate (although accuracy will be strived for), evaluation of either the Straussian or Rawlsian approaches. This exercise should rather be understood as a demonstration of a reading tool, compatible with others, e.g. contextualist, Straussian, Marxist, etc. The purpose of this tool is to render our thinking about the doing of political philosophy more explicit in a way that integrates some of the most important grounds for doubt of the very possibility of rational inquiry into rational inquiry.

I term this approach humble rationalism since its fundamental contention is that (1) reason is better exercised by explicitly recognizing and engaging with our necessary limits and particularities than by attempting to deny or overcome them, and consequently (2) these limits and particularities are not themselves fatal to reason. It is my goal in this paper to argue for and showcase some of the practical
implications of the first part of this claim as it relates to political philosophy. The second part of this claim is outside the scope of this paper. While this approach is epistemological, it may be more readily accepted and indeed prove more immediately useful as a pedagogical approach—though, as we will see, there are grounds to doubt this distinction. I have therefore written this paper with students and educators of political philosophy in mind, particularly at the early stages. This is why I have chosen to focus on the “beginning” of one’s inquiries into political philosophy; however, the approach can be used at any point in time to evaluate or re-evaluate methodological options at hand.

Part 1A: Paths Well Trodden

However diverse political philosophers may be in their arguments and approaches, they all have at least one thing in common: there was a time in their lives before they did political (or any other kind of) philosophy. This does not necessarily entail that they began political philosophy at a discrete moment. Whereas we can debate who is actually doing political philosophy, we cannot reasonably debate that, for instance, as each political philosopher was once a baby, that baby was not engaged in the activities that we tend to recognize as political philosophy. Furthermore, there are certain very thin facts that to this point in time have universally characterized this pre-philosophical stage of life, such as the fact of original dependence (i.e. we were all born categorically dependent), limited capacity (i.e. intellectual, physical, and other resources external to us), and ongoing plurality (of perspectives certainly, but also, after a certain time in history, of deeply developed schools of thought, disciplines, and ways of life).¹

The role this pre-philosophical time of life plays in a political philosopher’s thinking has been recognized as crucially important by various schools of thought. For instance, Antonio Gramsci (1999) among other historicists points out that “in acquiring [i.e. before it is acquired] one’s conception of the world, one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting” (emphasis and comment added) (627). It is the effect of these social

¹ This commonality is being asserted while recognizing the extreme diversity possible in how each of these facts are true.
elements on our thinking that have to be worked on critically in order to develop philosophically (Gramsci, 1999: 627). Michael Oakeshott (1, 1991), as well as other conservatives, point to how our notions of rational conduct in philosophy, as well as elsewhere, are always embedded within the particular tradition of which we are a part. There are numerous other approaches and schools that call our attention to other elements of a political philosopher’s pre-philosophical life and surroundings. All of this is just to say that the rather mundane observation that political philosophers come from somewhere already lies at the intersection of many well-trodden paths.

**Part 1B: Starting Somewhere**

In this paper, it is not my intention to go down any of these paths, but to stop awhile at this particular juncture and take stock, so to speak, of our resources and limitations before we set out down any particular philosophical path. My justification for doing so is simple:

“Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and consequently what I afterwards based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the [political] sciences” (note added) (2 Descartes, 1974: 112).

The reader may be familiar with how Descartes’ project unfolded. After findings grounds to doubt everything else, he could not doubt the precondition of the doubt itself, namely, himself, the thinking thing (2 Descartes, 1974: 121). The reader, therefore, should not be surprised if I--after reading many works of political philosophy pointing out my erroneous thinking and expounding the reasons to doubt the very possibility of political knowledge--should seek the preconditions of political philosophy itself, that is, the preconditions of the political philosopher, so that I might hope to rebuild my own thinking in a way that recognizes the legitimate causes of doubt, without succumbing to them absolutely.
I will be upfront, though, about a number of fundamental differences between Descartes’ project and my own. Firstly and most importantly, Descartes’ doubt would easily sweep away what I will offer as firm ground. I accept this because I am not offering this ground metaphysically but practically. Said differently, whereas Descartes was looking to put aside all that could be doubted (2 Descartes, 1974: 112), I am only looking to put aside all that would be doubted by someone who has not yet embarked on a philosophical path. I am therefore attempting to adopt a naive perspective on the strength that such a perspective is a practical (if not logical) prerequisite for the conduct of political philosophy and has therefore been occupied by everyone who has done political philosophy and is available to anyone who could potentially do political philosophy. Consequently, it is a touchstone, whereas a more philosophically rigorous analysis of what could be doubted in the pre-philosophical stage of life (such as Gramsci’s, Freud’s, or numerous others) would require that we have already done and understood the methods and reasons to believe particular kinds of philosophy--political or otherwise. Insights yielded from those methods may even ultimately be correct, but they require going down a philosophical path to truly understand why they are correct. Since I am inquiring precisely into the process of selecting a path, it would beg the question to presuppose one.

There is another set of fundamental differences between Descartes’ project and my own; namely, whereas he is interested in a firm foundation for scientific knowledge, I am more interested in finding a firmer stance on our current foundation for knowing. The first difference in the above is that where Descartes aimed for a new foundation, I am aiming to help us find our footing on a foundation that I will

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2 For instance, someone could doubt whether there is a persistent self, such that the same thing that was born is doing political philosophy. I will not consider such arguments. One problem I haven’t solved though is the issue of someone who has been dogmatically raised under a system of thought, be it philosophical, religious, political, or otherwise, that rejects any of the claims I will make. I cannot think of an example, but it is an empirical issue and I’m sure someone could find one if they looked hard enough.

3 A common name should not disguise the fact that there is a huge amount of variation in people’s naïve perspectives, but I maintain that my starting premises are mundane enough that even with this diversity, there would be a basic acceptance of them.

4 The reader may wonder how undertaking a Cartesian project does not itself beg the question. I would point out that one does not need to have actually read Descartes beyond what I have said here to understand the project I am undertaking. Indeed, I am mainly outlining my inspiration. One need have no more faith in Descartes himself than that faith dictated by the minimum level of confidence required of the reader to have in me as the author in order to keep reading.
argue, beneath our vast differences, we all necessarily have already (i.e. I am not offering a new explanation of our starting point, but pointing things out that we already know\(^5\)). To borrow a Cartesian metaphor, whereas he was looking to engineer a single minded building, believing that such a structure would be inherently superior to the ancient structures that have been repurposed and semi-consciously extended throughout the ages by many minds (1 Descartes, 1974: 46-47), I am only looking for a better way for us to live in and build on where we already are. This difference is necessitated both by my limited ability and time, and by a sensitivity to the many critics of the idea that the former truly is better than the latter (2 Oakeshott, 1991).

The second difference is that I am primarily interested not in knowledge itself but in the activities required to obtain, produce, understand, and practice knowledge. While there may be good philosophical reasons to doubt such a distinction (i.e. knowledge and knowledge production), I make it in order to call attention to the point that I am interested in political philosophy firstly as an activity, and therefore a part of, rather than separated somehow from, the rest of life’s activities (eating, sleeping, being sick, raising children, etc.).

In sum, I am looking to establish a firmer stance on a foundation we already possess to help us do political philosophy better, in particular, by assisting in the question of selecting a method. Now that the project has been explained, we may turn to that foundation.

PART 1C: Some Facts of Life

The following three things could be said truly of the lives of all potential political philosophers: we were born categorically dependent; we have limited time, ability, and resources; and there are already multiple perspectives around us. I will call these three circumstances together the facts of life. Individually, I will call the first the fact of original dependence, the second the fact of limited capacity, and the third the fact of ongoing plurality. There may indeed be other facts of life. This list is not meant to

\(^5\) One result of this is that I will make recommendations that reflect practices we already engage in and make observations about texts we are likely to inquire after anyway. I will however argue, that under framework I am offering these familiar practices and insights take on a new significance.
be comprehensive. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge that there is a huge amount of diversity within each of these facts. That I was born to someone does not indicate whether they had enough money to feed me, or whether I had one parent or two raise me, or whether I lived in Ancient Babylon or modern day New York. That I have limited capacity does not indicate whether I am a genius or a pauper, an olympic runner or a single mother with three jobs. Finally, there may be only the hint of plurality in a highly orthodox or totalitarian context, or there may be very free and open plurality in some utopian intellectual commune. There is a huge range, so each of these facts may be considered more akin to necessary variables. And yet, we can still derive substantial implications for how we do political philosophy that will be common across this wide diversity. But before we can do that it will be useful to derive, with almost deductive precision, some further premises from these axiomatic facts of life.

Let us begin with the implications of original dependence. Firstly, dependence implies needs, in our case, physical, emotional, cognitive, etc. Consequently, to get to a point where we could engage in any intellectual pursuit such as political philosophy, we must have first had these needs provided for (for most people, this happens for several years). We were being provided for by people who were already engaged in a particular way of life or “tradition”, of which we must have formed a part. If we are capable of engaging in an intellectual pursuit, the tools to do so, whatever those may be, e.g. language, scrolls, pencils, books, an oral tradition, telescopes, etc., must have been provided to us through that way (or those ways) of life. In particular, intellectual tools (language, reasoning, etc.) must be provided, whether intentionally or otherwise, by one or more individuals, who themselves have received these tools, at least in part, from others.

These “teachers” therefore have acquired what they pass on under the same fundamental facts of life (including all the limitations) that we have. Because this categorical dependence is also an intellectual dependence, the “student” (although no formal education or teacher-student relationship need be in place), most notably at the beginning, must take these intellectual tools as a matter of faith, since any challenge the student may pose to the “teacher” must already presuppose at least some of these tools. Additionally, we may derive that if someone has deeply understood and known the answer to any
question (an intellectual pursuit), they must have first lived for some time without it. Therefore, in the special case of the question “how best to live?” or “how best to live together?”, one must always have some explicitly or tacitly held provisional answer. I will this “living in the meantime”. There is much more we can say on this matter, but I believe this is sufficient for now.

With regard to our limited time, ability, and resources, allow me to first clarify what I mean by ability and resources. By ability, I mean at least intellectual, physical, and dispositional. Among all three we might consider ability the intersection between potential and development. That is, I may have a very great potential to learn languages that is never realized because I live in a monolingual corner of the world out of touch with all other peoples. If someone were to ask me, what am I able to speak, I could only list that one language. Indeed, no individual knows all languages. Another important consequence of considering development as part of ability is that one does not know the limits of one’s ability until it has been fully developed. By dispositional ability, I am referring to abilities such as resilience, self-control, courage, and so on. Additionally, aptitude is here defined as uneven intellectual ability caused by a mix of preference and increased receptivity to certain kinds of learning and activities. I raise this definition here, because one may also consider aptitude partly dispositional, e.g. I may be good at math but have no patience for it.

By resources, I mean access to anything that might be of assistance (in the case of this essay) for political philosophy. This may include money or the equivalent in societies without money, wise teachers, writing tools, food, safety, social support, encouragement, assistants, weaponry, etc.⁶ Now, the result of our limited time combined with our dependence means that an intellectual pursuit will always be one of many pursuits, some of which will be more immediately pressing at least some of the time, including feeding ourselves, sleeping, protecting ourselves both from the elements and others, etc. Our resources may substantially decrease the amount of time that we are required to invest in these other pursuits, but

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⁶ In what sense is weaponry a resource for an intellectual pursuit? Firstly, if one is attacked and cannot fend off the attacker, one will not likely be able to engage in intellectual pursuits for much longer. Secondly, if one wanted to learn about war, it may prove useful to go to war as a soldier. This example should make clear that almost anything could be considered a resource under this definition.
they have never been fully eliminated. We therefore have limited time to engage in intellectual pursuits. As a result, any intellectual pursuit is always a choice, at least between it and other non-intellectual demands.

Finally, as we emerge intellectually in the world, we will likely find that there are already multiple perspectives, investigations, and ongoing debates. While this condition may at first seem far more contingent than the others, consider that, however minimally, it is filled by any disagreement (e.g. “that’s not your doll!”). Even if in the unlikely scenario that a person is not ever exposed to any disagreement, it remains true that there is disagreement out there. This plurality of perspectives is important because some of these perspectives can be and have been developed through the investment of time and resources, for instance, written word, into ongoing schools of thought, disciplines, art forms, religions, etc. Although this last point is not universal but has become true over time, it originates from the combination of the three universal conditions. That is, there are a plurality of perspectives, which people have invested their limited, time, intellect, and resources into, possibly over generations. We enter into this plurality part way through since we are born into it already going on.

The result of this, combined with the choice indicated above, is that pursuing study of one of these perspectives or deeply developed perspectives (e.g. school of thought, religion, etc.) will always be at the expense of some other (although compatibilities may also be found). Because these viewpoints exist in many languages, across many books, scrolls, in the minds of a wide variety of people across many places, one’s very choice of study will always be limited by the place and time of their birth, intellectual ability, and resources (such as available teachers, books, oral traditions, internet, etc.). The consequence of this is that selection of the study of a particular viewpoint is never exclusively, and not even primarily, informed by its intellectual merit in any absolute sense (though possibly in a relative sense across limited options): accessibility, limited time, non-intellectual demands, the need to live in the meantime all play key roles in deciding.⁷

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⁷ It will not be explored here, but all the premises are in place to begin deriving certain basic insights into the history of political philosophy, such as how some perspectives may cease to be developed for
PART 1D: Setting Out

Now that I have set out the facts of original dependence, limited capacity, and ongoing plurality, as well as a number of their practical implications and interactions, it may be helpful to capture it all together in another Cartesian metaphor. “...those who travel very slowly may yet make far greater progress, provided they keep always to the straight road [i.e. the correct method], that those who, while they run, foresake it” (comment added) (1 Descartes, 1974: 39). In this image, Descartes is commenting on how our limited capacity, relative to others, need not discourage us from undertaking the pursuit of knowledge, since having a greater capacity may help, but without the correct method can actually hinder us all the more. Based on the aforementioned facts of life, we can add to this image that people do not all start off in the same place. Travellers can be born among mountains, on islands, on plains, in swamps, cities, or villages, etc. Each terrain offers very different advantages and obstacles. Travellers are carried before they can walk, and in addition to being taught how to walk, they may be taught how to use diverse means of transportation, cars, trains, horses, canoes, sleds, etc. that are themselves only suitable to certain terrains. While they may know how to use them they may or may not have access to these means of transportation for all or parts of their life. These technologies are helpful since we have limited time to get to where we are going, but as Descartes points out, while our capacity might be greater we can get that much farther off track that much faster. Finally, there are a range of places each person believes they need to get to (as well as many who will want to stay home) and even where people agree on where they are going, there will no doubt be many partial and often conflicting maps along the way, not to mention fellow travellers giving direction. I believe with this fuller image we have a much better sense of the necessary, though variable circumstances, that attend the potential political philosopher as well as any other.\textsuperscript{8} Now, I will turn to the way we choose paths.\textsuperscript{9}
Part 2A: Choosing a Path

In the context of the image just articulated above, we might think of every text of political philosophy as a map or a map fragment\(^9\) (descriptions of thoughts) left behind by a fellow traveller, with a path (method) possibly noted therein. The first thing we should notice is that we come to the text interested. In the beginning of one’s journey the most pressing question is not the precise meaning of a given map (although establishing that may be good preparation for travel), but rather which path to follow (or at least what general direction to go in).\(^10\)\(^11\)\(^12\) Therefore, we are reading this map fragment because we expect it to help us do something, i.e. pick a path or at least direction.\(^13\) While we could appreciate it for its beauty and intricacy, as a map collector might, that is a different activity from our own.

\(^9\) My focus will be on the choice of path through maps. I admit that this is not universal, as the written word, and particularly its wide availability, is a specific historical and geographical phenomenon. I believe this focus is justified given the likely circumstance of my reader. But I will also note that while there are likely elements of my argument that would change if we talked about the oral giving and receiving of directions, I believe the arguments would be substantially similar.

\(^10\) The difference between a map and a map fragment depends on whether the work is constructed to be self-contained or not.

\(^11\) Under circumstances where a multiplicity of maps is not available, i.e. in a highly orthodox community, one may be justified in instead honing their skills by reading the available map as best as possible or else setting out on their own, but where plurality is accessible, and especially where no single map is trusted above all the others, knowing how to choose maps is primary. Ironically, if one was unable to choose and could not get past the plurality, it would seem to follow that they should take the same strategy as the traveller under orthodox conditions, i.e. work instead on one’s ability to read maps or set out on one’s own.

\(^12\) It may be wondered whether I am loading the question by presuming one path must be chosen. It should be pointed that is simply required if one is to get somewhere, but does not preclude detours, sojourns, and other explorations down different paths, so long as they’re generally in the same direction. Some may be opposed to this on the grounds that I am presuming that there is somewhere to get to. I would answer by saying that it should be recalled that my goal in all this paper is to suggest how we might work towards political knowledge. I am presuming there is somewhere (one or more place) we’re trying to get to, even if I’m not presuming what that place is.

\(^13\) I accept that most people do not start their philosophical endeavours in such a conscious way, but start down one or more paths out of sheer interest, only later to ask explicitly whether it was the right one. This very contingent pattern would almost follow, and is at least in the same spirit as, the facts of life set out above. Nevertheless, this exercise posits an unusual degree of self-awareness so that a moment of choice, even if usually made half-consciously, because it could potentially be made more or less consciously, it will made explicit here to see how it could be done best. Additionally, there is no reason the same exercise could not be done at any point down any number of paths, it just may have to be combined with something other than a naive textualist approach.
The question before us is, what must a path be for us to choose it? If the path noted on the map is to help us get to where we are going, it must be at least four things: intelligible, credible, promising, and feasible (in that order).

Firstly, for a path to be of any use to us, we must be able to make sense of it, that is, understand where it’s pointing us. If we can’t make heads or tails of a map it will hardly be of much use. This first criteria is grounded in the fact that we have limited intellectual ability, including knowledge of a limited number of languages. If a path, no matter how credible, promising, and feasible it might be, is not within our grasp (perhaps because it is only written in ancient Hebrew, or is just so full of technical language as to be incomprehensible), we will not choose it. The one exception to this rule may be that if we have heard in our home town, or along the trail so far, that this is a really good map (i.e. it has a high level of both credibility and promise), we may put our journey on pause or redirect our journey to gather the required tools to understand the map. We should recall though that the traveller has both limited time and patience (depending on their disposition) and may be taking on a major risk when they pause or go in a different direction in order to not even reach their destination but read a map that may or may not live up to expectations. Consequently, from the perspective of the traveller just starting out, all else being equal (i.e. equal credibility, promise, and feasibility), the more intelligible the map, and therefore path, the better, since this avoids a major risk from the beginning.

This brings us to our first interesting conclusion about political philosophy: clarity matters, not absolutely, but necessarily. Not absolutely because it is possible the correct path could only be communicated through a map that is unintelligible to the traveller starting out, making the risk involved in stopping or changing directions ultimately worthwhile (or at least unavoidable). It does necessarily matter because intelligibility must be the first criteria for the traveller’s consideration. It should be noted that where a work is particularly complex there are usually companion guides, these may mitigate but never eliminate the additional risk brought on by a less intelligible work (and may even compound the risk), since it now increases the degrees of removal from the final destination by one more, and increases the necessity of trust, a matter to which we now turn.
Secondly, the path must be credible. The distinction between credibility and accuracy is an important one. The traveller when setting out, as previously explained, emerging as they are from their state of categorical intellectual dependence, is not particularly well-placed to assess the accuracy of a map, although they may be inclined to think they are if they have a great deal of conviction in all they have been taught. The reader will recall however, that we are conducting this investigation from the perspective of an unusually self-aware person, therefore they should see their limits in this area. Where the traveller may be able to assess a map according to its accuracy, is where that map includes somewhere the traveller has spent much time, for instance the traveller’s own hometown. To put this in concrete terms, if a Jew reads the work of an anti-semitic political philosopher, and the political philosopher says that all Jews have horns on their head, the Jew will likely throw that map away. It should be noted though that even in this case where the traveller can reasonably assess accuracy, what is really being tested is credibility, since it is logically possible that the anti-semit is wrong with regard to those matters concerning Jews, but largely right concerning all other matters. What has happened is not that the traveller has assessed full accuracy, but lost trust in the author’s ability to avoid error. Correlatively, a map builds credibility precisely by describing what we already “know to be true” accurately. This is particularly true if these trustworthy premises occupy an important place in the map. Again though, this is a matter of trust and not truly accuracy, since the reader may find on later philosophical reflection that these premises are misapplied or coupled with less certain premises.

There are also a number of wholly contingent and social ways credibility is built. For instance, if the teachers of the hometown revered an author, or fellow travellers far ahead seem to have made use of the map, that may build the credibility of the map (though not necessarily the accuracy). Indeed, there may well be institutions in place, such as universities, academic publishers, and journals, meant to vet maps to ensure they are safe for travellers, which can also build credibility (though not necessarily

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14 Though this would seem to run contrary to the act of setting out in the first place, I am committed to the fact that not all people come to the question of political philosophy from the position of a philosophical liberation from prejudice. Some are forced to ask the question merely formally, for example, by being required to take a political philosophy class to obtain a degree.
accuracy). What should be noted of course is how dependent all this is on where and when one is born and who happens to be around at the time, and the institutions in place (which are formalized relationships that have centralized trust).

Here we find a second important lesson for the practice of choosing among methods of political philosophy: trust, being highly contingent, is no guarantee of knowledge, and yet, insofar as we are emerging out of categorical dependence with tools taken on faith, it is necessary. The epistemological implications of this point alone could fill volumes, but I can only make a very brief defence of it here. Firstly, the question of credibility is built into the very act of turning to a map, since one could travel without one, but the idea of consulting a map is to have the benefit of the insights of others. If one cannot verify that insight before embarking on its advice, one should not be surprised (that is in part precisely what makes a map useful).

What this discussion reveals is that even once we have set out on some philosophical path, we are incrementally moving away from, not breaking with, our pre-philosophical intellectual dependence. Much work has been done to cast dispersions on these relationships of trust. What can be said of these works is that they are paths already trodden that, in order to take, depend on some of that trust. More difficult to account for are those who have experienced abuse at the hands of their pre-philosophical teachers, who therefore need no works to tell them to mistrust. They may be far more inclined to set out on their own without consulting a map. The question of how to choose a path is a very different one for such a person, and while I cannot address it here, for lack of space, I would suggest that trust, in oneself and therefore the tools one has been given (however soiled those tools might be), is still required.

If a path is both intelligible and credible it must next be promising. That is, there may be a clear and trustworthy path to get to somewhere you more or less want to or (more importantly) need to go (return) and this path is always accompanied by a cost as well as likelihood of success (risk). The higher the return and the lower the cost and risk, the more promising the path. To determine cost, (and indeed all four criteria) I will reiterate that one does not assess the path in an absolute sense, but relative to the other available paths, setting out on one’s own, or simply staying home. The time and resources a particular
path takes away from other pursuits at home, as well as other paths, is the baseline cost of every path selected (opportunity cost). There may well be other costs, such as emotional costs, drains on resources (both monetary and social), which a path’s promise must also account for. Some concrete examples of this would be the person who gives up a much higher paying job to spend their time practicing one or more methods of political philosophy, or the young person from a religious community who decides to pursue secular studies. Finally, before one has seen the terrain they are to travel, particularly as one is setting out for the first time, there is always a question whether the path can be safely travelled. That is, even if the path was travelled correctly, what possibilities would there be that the traveller still would not reach their destination (we can imagine a theoretical sinkhole, of questions tangled like vines so thickly together they cannot be traversed).

This offers us yet a third insight into the conduct of political philosophy. Questions that are seemingly extraneous or personal, when we understand political philosophy in the context of a person’s life, actually play quite an essential role in reasonable methodological choices. Furthermore, just as the same path will be differently intelligible to different travellers and carry different levels of credibility, the promise each holds also importantly depends on who the traveller is and where they are coming from.

Finally, we come to the question of feasibility. Even if one believes one understands, trusts, and believes a path will lead where one wants to go with a reasonable chance of success, one then has to ask “can I make the journey?”. Every bit as necessary and every bit as personal as the other questions, because we must all live in the meantime\(^\text{15}\) (i.e. before we attain any destination), we must ask very practical questions like will there be enough to eat (literally), will the homesickness overcome me, do I have the skill to scale the mountains on the way? Additionally, travellers are seldom alone in the world without obligation to anyone else, such that they can be free to travel as their personal desire and ability dictate. Part of feasibility is considering whether a family back home approves, can be supported, what friends might think, etc. In concrete terms, this manifests in questions such as “can I afford to go to

\(^{15}\) I consciously use this term to refer both to one’s tentative answers to the questions of political philosophy, as well as one’s actual activities and their accompanying needs. Indeed, I see the two as fundamentally intertwined. However, going forward I may use this term to refer to one or the other aspect.
University?" “Will a PhD get me an adequately paying job to take care of my children?” Far from extraneous, these questions are every bit as necessarily rooted as the other questions are in the theorist’s life.

This yields the important insight that a method of political philosophy must be livable. A path fails to get you to your destination if you die along the way. It should also be pointed out that one has to be able to survive not only long enough to get there, but also to either stay there, come back or set out for whatever next destination one might have. Consequently, one may also consider whether the destination itself is livable. Although, this is a very risky process that falls back essentially on trust, since if a traveller is poorly placed to assess the accuracy of a path, how much worse off are they in their evaluation of the destination!

With all the above in mind, we have grounded our four considerations in the facts that would be available to anyone who may not know philosophy but knows the circumstances of their own life well.

**Part 2B: Reading Method**

The reader may have noticed a certain ambiguity in what has been said thus far. Namely, is what’s been said descriptive or prescriptive? If on the one hand I am claiming the necessity of my premises, then surely what follows is that intelligibility, credibility, promise, and feasibility already inform those who engage in political philosophy. The answer is yes and no. That is, these factors play a part, for instance each time an author notes that a particular question cannot be addressed in the space of their paper or acknowledges the limits of not having access to certain manuscripts or lost works. However, what necessarily operates can be handled better or worse. Far from making any radically new recommendations, I am hoping that being explicit about these criteria will make plain certain strategies to better direct and organize our activities in political philosophy, particularly when we are just starting out, such as choosing between methods.

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16 Bear in mind that promise in a prior concern, meaning if that there is a very livable but clearly manipulative method, this approach in no way justifies its selection.
What this means in practice is taking the position of a naive reader who is particularly self-aware (i.e. regarding the facts of life, and these criteria that I have argued follow from them). This posture accomplishes two things: it isolates the impact these questions have on us as readers, by seeing how it interacts with the one perspective all of us must have had at one time or another (the naive position); it attempts to emulate what it might actually be like for someone who has some degree of intelligence but no content knowledge beyond the texts at hand so as to see what attention to these criteria might contribute to “best-case-scenario” early investigations.

I will therefore ask the following questions as I read Strauss and Rawls:

1. **intelligibility**: Do I understand the method being proposed?

2. **Credibility**: Does the text accurately or mistakenly describe what I know best, i.e. in the case of this demonstrative investigation, the facts of life, or, in the case of a lived investigation, the facts of *my* life?

3. **Promise**: What results does it offer if I practice the method correctly? If this method was put in place correctly, how likely is it that it would succeed?

4. **Feasibility**: Could I put this method in place?

As mentioned previously, I will ask these questions as an attentive reader acutely aware of the facts of life and their implications. A point of clarification is therefore first necessary. It is the contention of this paper that in a lived investigation, i.e. someone actually encountering these texts and trying to determine whether the method is right for them, the credibility, promise, and feasibility of the text would go up and down in the reader’s eyes as it succeeded or failed to describe something that that particular person was very familiar with (e.g. the facts of *their* life). In the case of this investigation, where I am not trying to figure out for myself whether the method presented is right for me, but trying to show the implications of the facts of life for reading a text, I will not measure credibility, promise, and feasibility against whether they capture the facts of my life in particular, but the facts of life in general (specifically those facts set out above). This way of proceeding will double as a cursory exploration of whether and how the texts have incorporated the facts of life into their own methods. It should be noted that while the
personal evaluation is personally valuable, this general evaluation can both form part of those personal investigations and be done on any text for the sake of others as well as oneself.

This way of reading may or may not yield new insights into the authors, but that is not its primary purpose. Rather, it should help to highlight parts of a text that are relevant to our reflections on whether or not the method is appropriate for our use. Consequently, it may at times seem like this approach to reading is just a round-a-bout way of talking about insights that have already been made. It may, but only so as to bring to stark relief the significance of these insights for our practice of political philosophy as an activity of life.

Part 2C: Reading Strauss

Intelligibility

Let us begin then with inquiring into Strauss’ intelligibility. I will do this by setting out his method as it seems to me from a careful reading of some of his introductory texts, “What is Political Philosophy?”, “What is Liberal Education?”, and “Persecution and the Art of Writing”. It will become clear over the course of the exposition how these three complete each other.

As Strauss’ method is a method of political philosophy, we may begin by inquiring into the goal of political philosophy. All political action has implicit in it a direction towards the good (since actions either change or preserve the worse or better) (2 Strauss, 1989: 3). Consequently, all political action depends on some notion of the good. Political philosophy is the explicit attempt to move from our (received) questionable views of the nature of the good (as it pertains to the judgement of all other political things) to views that are no longer questionable, in a way that ultimately serves political life (2 Strauss, 1989: 3-5). Said differently, political knowledge is not cognitively different from other kinds of knowledge (e.g. cooking, shepherding, etc.) except that not only the means but the ends are unclear, and this is essentially what has to be clarified (2 Strauss, 1989: 11).
The first thing to note about this path is that it begins wherever we are, i.e. what questionable opinions we happen to have. Consequently, and in contrast to political science\(^{17}\), it takes our prescientific knowledge very seriously (2 Strauss, 1989: 21). On the other hand, it is an essentially philosophical path, and therefore a ceaseless quest for the truth, i.e. knowledge of the whole (2 Strauss, 1989: 5). But how does one get from one’s starting point to this impressive destination? Before we can know that, we must know that we are not the first to undertake such a journey.

According to Strauss, whereas political thought is as old as the human race, “political philosophy appeared at a knowable time in the recorded past” (2 Strauss, 1989: 7). The time to which he is referring is that of Plato and Aristotle, who lived at a moment when the foundations of politics were being shaken, but without any tradition of political philosophy to turn to (2 Strauss, 1989: 24). Consequently, Plato and Aristotle had to address questions for which their teachers did not prepare them. In so doing, they became teachers, who, at least in this respect, were not pupils (1 Strauss, 1989: 311). Because these thinkers had no tradition, no specialized tools to use, so to speak, they used the language of the marketplace, and did political philosophy in a way that was closest to political life (2 Strauss 1989: 24-25). Since then, because political philosophers have had the tradition they provided, political philosophy has always been more distant from political life than the original works of Plato and Aristotle (2 Strauss, 1989: 24). Since political philosophy is the branch of philosophy meant to be closest to political life (2 Strauss, 1989: 4), political philosophy since these pioneers has been, at least in this respect, always inferior.

This last observation would seem to suggest that Strauss may tell us that we should set out on our own so as to be as close as possible to our own political lives, and yet he advises the exact opposite.\(^{18}\) We must cultivate our minds, through education, which must eventually trace its roots back to teachers who

\(^{17}\) It is important to observe that Strauss takes a considerable amount of time to compare and contrast political philosophy’s goals and means with its seemingly close alternatives, including: political thought, theory, science, and theology, as well as, social philosophy (2 Strauss, 1989: 6, 10-11). This is particularly helpful when we recall that no assessment of a path is absolute, but always relative to the other available paths.

\(^{18}\) The paradox involved in this recommended relationship to the tradition of political philosophy seems to form precisely the crux of his lecture “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization”, unfortunately we do not have the space here to explore this text.
were not themselves pupils (such as Plato and Aristotle in our case), which is liberal education (1 Strauss, 1989: 311). These teachers are the greatest minds (1 Strauss, 1989: 311), to whom we only have access through books, and life is too short to spend time with any but their books (1 Strauss, 1989: 315).

Our task, then, can be simply stated if not easily executed: we must understand the works of the greatest minds and judge among them. The first step is complicated by the fact that, out of fear of persecution, many of these authors did not state what they thought to be the truth explicitly (Strauss, 1973: 26), and so no method, not even Strauss’, has been able to guarantee agreement on what exactly they meant (Strauss, 1973: 30). The latter step is necessitated by the fact that the greatest minds do not all agree with respect to the most important themes (1 Strauss, 1989: 312). In the works studied here, Strauss offers us a set of techniques to approach the problem of understanding, but not the problem of judgement (Strauss, 1973: 30; 1 Strauss, 1989: 318). This is all the more disturbing given that Strauss tells us that we are not competent judges (1 Strauss, 1989: 318). I will, however, suggest in the concluding remarks of this paper that there is hope for us. For now, I will turn to the question of how to understand the works of the great minds.

Firstly, it is important to recognize that the pedagogical and philosophical question of understanding the text seem to be one and the same. In both cases, Strauss’ advice for understanding the works of the greatest minds is: to read them with care (1 Strauss, 1989: 311-312; Strauss, 1973: 32). What’s more, Strauss explicitly writes that the work of uncovering the hidden treasures of these texts was called, by the philosophers, education (Strauss, 1973: 37). Strauss also points out that Plato says the highest sense of education is philosophy (1 Strauss, 1989: 316). Consequently, one must be careful not to separate his suggested reading techniques from the broader framework of liberal education. In particular, these techniques are used within the context of more experienced pupils helping the less experienced pupils (1 Strauss, 1989: 311-312).

To understand why Strauss’ techniques are necessary according to him, one must know that because freedom of thought has often been restricted, thoughtful and cautious men have had to come up with writing techniques that allow them to communicate one heterodox message to a minority of
thoughtful readers and another more palatable message to the masses so as to avoid persecution (from social ostracization to capital punishment) (Strauss, 1973: 25). We can call the method of reading suitable to uncovering this hidden message “reading between the lines” or “reading with care” (Strauss, 1973: 30). Strauss provides a succinct list of techniques, which taken together amount to revealing a text’s possible hidden meaning by strictly studying, and understanding the explicit meaning, including its structure and arrangement, without assuming that the most frequently or attractively presented view(s) is/are really the author’s, and taking basic mistakes, contradictions, and counterpoints to orthodoxy as doorways into deeper meaning (Strauss, 1973: 30).

Credibility

Strauss engages with the facts of life frequently, often in ways that build his credibility, and sometimes in ways that decrease it. Let us examine these engagements in terms of their relative centrality to the overall method. Firstly, Strauss’ method, being also a pedagogy, fundamentally relies on the student-teacher relationship; with the more experienced pupils assisting the less experienced pupils, while admitting that every teacher also relies on a teacher (1 Strauss, 1989: 311-12). This amounts to a recognition of what we derived from the fact of original intellectual dependence, and so goes some way to strengthening the credibility of the text in that, if one has thought through the facts of life, one recognizes this centrality.

Additionally, Strauss mentions almost immediately that our philosophical journey starts at home, so to speak; that is, we must begin with our opinions (2 Strauss, 1989: 3). The process, as he describes it, being one of questioning until our views are no longer questionable (if that point is ever reached) (2 Strauss, 1989: 3), also serves to demonstrate that we do not break with intellectual dependence, but work on it incrementally. That is, as I overcome one question and maintain or partially change my view, I keep the other questionable elements of the view that are inherited from my experiences and tradition(s). The reader will recall that this incremental view of intellectual movement also follows from the fact of original intellectual dependence.
Regarding Strauss’ reading techniques, he calls our attention to the possibility that what is written is not really what the author means, particularly under conditions of “persecution” (2 Strauss, 1973: 25). As has been mentioned, he defines persecution very broadly, including everything from ostracism to being put to death (Strauss, 1973: 32). The reader knowing, as I have mentioned, that there may always be a certain social cost to pursuing a particular kind of method, may therefore wonder, without knowing anything about Strauss’ life in particular, whether he has not concealed something himself. While Strauss may have offered some of the intellectual resources to address this worry, what this entails is undertaking his method in order to understand his method as fully as possible. We might call this a trial run, but where a reader wants to or must, by necessity of limited time and resources, remain “on the outside” of the methods under consideration, this is a blow to the reader’s previous confidence in the intelligibility of the text.

Strauss also relies on the facts of life in order to (depending on how centrally you take the claims) expound or argue for the scope of his data source. For instance, Strauss explicitly appeals to limited time when he says “But life is too short to live with any but the greatest books” (1 Strauss, 1989: 315). I might take this as a passing exclamation, but since I am exceptionally aware of the role limited time plays in my selection of method, this is actually quite a powerful argument for focus on a certain limited scope of texts (though this does not necessarily entail that his understanding of what makes certain books the greatest is the right one). Similarly, Strauss appeals to our limited knowledge of languages when he explains that while there may be great minds outside of the West (e.g. India and China), we cannot study them because we cannot know all languages (1 Strauss, 1989: 317). This argument is strong because it does point to a real necessity, however, it is overstated since it is conceivable that some may deem it worthwhile, have an aptitude for, or even prior knowledge of, a non-Western language and be able to contribute this to Strauss’ broader pedagogical project. Indeed, Strauss seems to suggest that it would be worthwhile to engage with those non-Western texts, so for those who are well-placed to do it, it follows from Strauss’ project that such non-Western texts should be pursued. This is an example therefore where
the author seems to misstate the implication of a fact of life, and this decreases credibility of the author, but not the method (since the fact of life and method remain compatible).

Other facts of life also play more minor roles in some of Strauss’ arguments. For instance, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, he writes “What is called freedom of thought in a large number of cases amounts to—and even for all practical purposes consists of—the ability to choose between two or more different views presented by the small minority of people who are public speakers or writers.” (Strauss, 1973: 23). He therefore demonstrates an awareness of how the fact of limited resources (such as access to books, newspapers, etc.) interacts with plurality to make the practical limits of thought a highly contingent matter.

Finally, he appeals to “living in the meantime” (the need to have tentative answers while we pursue more certain answers) to fundamentally undermine the possibility of an “ethically-neutral” social science as an alternative to political philosophy. He does this by insisting against the social scientist that to engage in his pursuit he must on some level hold that it has value, and in order to be trusted by others, he must possess a provisional ethics, including such commitments as loyalty (2 Strauss, 1989: 15). This helps to support my selection of the method if positivistic social science is one of the major alternatives against which I might have measured Strauss’ method.

**Promise**

Strauss’ conception of political philosophy and his method in particular of pursuing it holds out the promise of a number of possibly unattainable goals, and then a number of consolation prizes. I will first set out the possibly unattainable goals one at a time, explaining why they are possibly unattainable, and then explain the consolation prizes. Cost will be dealt with briefly at the end of this section. Risk is implied where a goal is possibly unattainable.

The first possibly unattainable goal is the end of philosophy and political philosophy itself. Where philosophy aims for “knowledge of the natures of all things… the whole” (2 Strauss, 1989: 4), political philosophy aims for knowledge of the nature of political things, which is the correct standard by
which to judge them (2 Strauss, 1989, 5-6). Strauss does not explain but simply states that “It may be that... philosophy will never go beyond the stage of discussion or disputation and will never reach the stage of decision” (2 Strauss, 1989: 5). The long history of philosophy and ongoing plurality as much as anything else would seem to confirm this possibility. In which case, Strauss offers two kinds of consolation prizes and I would like to suggest he implicitly offers a third.

The first consolation prize is, as Strauss puts it, that there are: “no comfort(s) other than that inherent in this activity” of philosophy (1 Strauss, 1989: 318). One should take note of how contingent such comfort is on one’s disposition. It is a very particular, and I would suggest relatively uncommon, kind of person who finds comfort in questions when they genuinely no longer have hope of any final answer, especially when there are no other comforts available.\(^\text{19}\) Strauss also suggests that even in the absence of final answers, one cannot help but gain a better understanding of some fundamental things (2 Strauss, 1989: 5; 1 Strauss, 1989: 317). This understanding, according to him, is valuable in its own right and certainly more valuable than greater understanding of less fundamental things. Finally, Strauss states that “it is essential to political philosophy to be set in motion, and be kept in motion, by the disquieting awareness of the fundamental difference between conviction, or belief, and knowledge” (2 Strauss, 1989: 6). This may be compared to an itch in the soul, the relief from which requires perpetual effort in proportion to its severity. This should not be conflated with the comfort inherent in the activity of philosophy, since it seems to me that there are some who feel this itch acutely, without feeling the comfort.\(^\text{20}\)

The second possibly unattainable goal is the promise of liberal education to achieve a democracy that is as democracy was originally meant, a universal aristocracy (1 Strauss, 1989: 314). Liberal education, as has already been explained, would require reading the great books with care. Reading the great books with care, as has been explained, would require Strauss’ reading method. However, there

\(^\text{19}\) This should not be confused with someone who possesses great patience, but essentially maintains hope in the possibility of attaining an answer, which I suspect is also uncommon, but an altogether different disposition.

\(^\text{20}\) For a dramatic portrayal of this, see the 1993 film *Wittgenstein*. 
seems to be a tension if not outright contradiction between the assumptions that necessitate Strauss’ reading method, an either necessary or incidental division between most people and philosophers, and the goal of creating a universal aristocracy through liberal education. I perceive at least two potential solutions to this tension: the greatest minds are simply wrong in their assumptions about human nature; or, as with the other goals of philosophy, the striving is privileged above the certainty of attaining the goal. It is this second solution which would seem to hold out the less philosophically controversial contention that a democracy, at any given moment, could be doing better or worse. Consequently, liberal education holds out the promise of partial and incremental improvement.

Finally, the practice of philosophy may educate us to perfect gentlemanship, and indeed the highest human virtues (1 Strauss, 1989: 316). Strauss concludes that as we are not capable of perfection, we must not really be capable of philosophy (notice that this is an appeal to feasibility) (1 Strauss, 1989: 316-17). The consolation prize is that “Liberal education supplies us with experience in things beautiful” (1 Strauss, 1989: 319), and reminds us of human greatness (1 Strauss, 1989: 316). By things beautiful, Strauss means, in particular, the inner meaning of the great books (Strauss, 1973: 37).

With all that promised, the cost of this method can hardly be exaggerated. In different places, Strauss tells us that political philosophy requires the philosopher to “strive with all his power...” (2 Strauss, 1989:5); make a “relentless effort” (2 Strauss, 1989: 6); and engage in “very long, never easy, but always pleasant work” (Strauss, 1973: 37). We may view these descriptions as mere hyperbole, but that would not do the task justice. Strauss regards the political goal, and thus the object of political knowledge as comprehensive, and according to him it is necessary for us to face our situation as human beings, “i.e. the whole situation” (Strauss, 1989: 11). As the goal is total so is effort to attain it.

Feasibility

We may therefore each inquire for ourselves whether it is possible for each of us to undertake such a method, as we understand it, with as much trust as it warrants, and finally with the promise it holds out. I would just direct the reader’s attention to two considerations, if they choose to undertake such an
inquiry. Firstly, one may ask oneself “does the disquieting awareness of the difference between political conviction/belief and knowledge drive me?” Strauss’ political philosophy depends crucially on the answer to this question being yes, not only at the moment, but perpetually. For such a person we may wonder at the livability of not studying philosophy (in one form or another). Secondly, we cannot be certain at the outset of our philosophical journeys whether we are one of the masses or a genuine potential political philosopher. Consequently, any method that presupposes a stark dichotomy between these two groups may turn out to be outside of our grasp. This is doubly uncertain since we cannot yet have a fully formed view of either human nature or ourselves.

Strauss also offers certain immediate comforts, perhaps necessarily so if one is to endure the potentially endless pursuit his method entails. For instance, he writes:

“Those to whom such books are truly addressed are, however, neither the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosopher as such, but the young men who might become philosophers: the potential philosophers are to be led step by step from the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth… Such features do not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can. All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies of his race…” (Strauss, 1973: 36)

In this passage, Strauss promises the reader a special kind of gratification if the reader can use his method properly. Namely, what the reader will find along the way is not just political knowledge, as perhaps the reader first set out to gain, but messages especially meant for him. At the same time, the reader is reassured that he will not be alone. He will feel the love of the mature philosopher and will gaining entry into an exclusive group. Finally, by talking of philosophers in terms of race, or in terms of a special class as is done early on this work as well (Strauss, 1973: 8), the reader’s travels are perhaps not so lonely and his homesickness perhaps mitigated. These promises are powerful in direct proportion to one’s esteem of oneself and one’s fear of being alone.
Finally, it is also worth noting that liberal education is a literate education (1 Strauss, 1989: 313), and therefore requires access to texts and writing tools. Consequently, as a method it is simply not available to everyone, or else some people are significantly hindered in their ability to undertake this method (e.g. residents of poor regions in rich countries or poor countries and the visually impaired all face serious barriers to accessing the world’s books).

**Taking Stock**

To the extent that the above is a fair rendering of Strauss’ method (at least as set out in the texts under investigation), we can attribute that to his clarity. Certainly, I as a reader feel as if I grasp some method, even if it remains filled with some paradoxes and tensions. Regarding the texts’ credibility, the texts take many steps to build it, but still cause me some doubt. Strauss’ promises are lofty and intriguing, but depend crucially on a certain disposition and unparalleled level of commitment. Finally, whether I am able to undertake such a method is unknown to me, as I cannot be certain of my ability before setting out.

**Part 2D: Reading Rawls**

**Intelligibility**

The simplest way to regard the method set out in Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, justice as fairness, is as a contract theory intended to bar all morally arbitrary factors, including both unfair (e.g. inequality) and irrelevant (i.e. undeserved attributes or social position) from playing a role in the determination of what principles should govern the basic distribution of rights and obligations in society (Rawls, 1999: 11, 102). In this way it attempts to ground theory in procedural justice (Rawls, 1999: 118). While this description would go some way to understanding the argument of the texts, and might give us a way to pursue a limited set of other questions, such as rightness as fairness (Rawls, 1999: 15), it would fail to provide us with a truly comprehensive method for the conduct of political philosophy. Rather, if we want to learn a method of political philosophy from Rawls, I will suggest that we need to situate justice as
fairness in the context of Rawls’ notion of moral theory more broadly. This will also be important for us to properly assess the promise of justice as fairness.

For Rawls, political philosophy appears to be the branch of moral philosophy that deals with questions pertaining to our political lives and associations. Consequently, Rawls’ contract theory should be understood as a particular tool in order to develop moral theory more broadly. To understand Rawls’ method, therefore, we must first understand what he believes moral theory consists in and then inquire into what his contract theory is meant to accomplish within this framework.

Rawls very tentatively sets out the purpose of moral theory as the attempt to describe our moral capacity, which most people above a certain age, intelligence, and under normal circumstance have; a theory of justice, therefore, describes our sense of justice, which is a special part of this broader moral sensibility (Rawls, 1999: 41; Rawls, 2004: 29). This description is articulated in the form of a set of principles that, when coupled with situational beliefs and circumstances, would lead us to make the judgements we do in fact make (Rawls, 1999: 41). This might indicate that we should work backwards from our actual everyday judgements to determine the principles common to them (an empirical study with a sort of “line of best fit” for principles), but this will not be effective, because some of those situational circumstances distort our sense of justice (Rawls, 1999: 42).

We may therefore ask: what circumstances are favourable to the exercise of our sense of justice? Because our sense of justice is just another of our intellectual capacities, the answer is “conditions favorable for deliberation and judgement in general” (Rawls, 1999: 42). Consequently, biasing temptations and coercion must be removed, and the requisite information must be available (Rawls, 2004: 29). The results of us exercising our sense of justice under these favourable conditions are called considered judgements (Rawls, 1999: 42). This might lead us to believe that the principles underlying these considered judgements are the true reflection of our sense of justice, but favourable conditions do not completely eliminate “irregularities” in these judgements (Rawls, 1999: 42).

Consequently, if we undertake some moral theorizing and get surprising results we check those results against our own considered convictions (our deepest rooted considered judgements) and account
for discrepancies (Rawls, 1999: 18). This is necessary because we have no other moral facts to turn to (Rawls, 1999: 44). If we can identify the cause of the discrepancy as an error or defective conditions under which we formed the conviction, we are likely to discard it; however, if a discrepancy cannot be accounted for, then the search for a better theory continues by adding more widely acceptable premises (Rawls, 1999: 18).

Once one has reached a point where there are no longer any apparent discrepancies, however tentatively, this is called reflective equilibrium (Rawls, 1999: 18). The agreement reached between one’s judgements and theoretically derived principles after consideration of all possible theories and relevant arguments, though unachievable, would be identical to our sense of justice in the most absolute sense (Rawls, 1999: 43).

The method Rawls uses in *A Theory of Justice*, justice as fairness (consisting of the original position and veil of ignorance), as has been mentioned is a way of determining principles of justice by setting up an optimal situation for considered judgements, based on, as he sees it, widely acceptable premises, and assigning the task of selecting principles of justice (Rawls, 1999: 10, 102,104). There are at least three important ambiguities. Justice as fairness is not simply a set of optimal conditions for judgement, it is also a theory in its own right. This is what allows Rawls to say that justice as fairness is a competitor with utilitarianism, in addition to utilitarian principles competing within the terms set out by justice as fairness (Rawls, 1999: 45). In this way, justice as fairness is both a referee and a competitor. Secondly, it is on the one hand a result of reflective equilibrium (Rawls, 1999: 104), it is also a way of hypothetically bringing about reflective equilibrium between people (Rawls, 2004: 30). Consequently, not only is it an object of reflective equilibrium but an (albeit imagined) context for it. Thirdly, whereas a conception of justice is usually the set of underlying principles for a person’s behaviour, in justice as fairness it is the object of a selection process. Consequently, what the original position and veil of ignorance need to do is structure our choice in such a way that we will desire justice. We may now explore exactly how the original position and veil of ignorance do that.
The intuitive idea of justice as fairness is to think of the principles of justice as those which rational persons concerned to advance their interests would accept in a position that embodies both fairness (e.g., freedom and equality), and the restrictions we want to place on the conception of justice (Rawls, 1999: 102; Rawls, 2004: 80). These constraints are that principles of justice must be: general, universal, public, order conflicting claims, and be final (Rawls, 1999: 117; Rawls, 2004: 86). In order to keep people from selecting principles that favour their particular case, they are not allowed to know any of the contingencies about themselves that put men at odds, including the following, their: place in society, class, social status, natural assets or abilities, conception of the good, specific features of his psychology, the economic or political circumstances of their society, level of civilization or culture (Rawls, 1999: 118-19). They are however allowed to know general facts (Rawls, 1999: 120). The correct principles have to be shown to be the solution to the choice presented under these circumstances, that is they have to be strictly deduced from the actors’ knowledge, beliefs, and the facts of the situation (Rawls, 1999: 102, 104). This deduction is impossible to do at this point, however, and so at the heart of political philosophy is an appeal to intuition (Rawls, 1999: 108).

Credibility

Rawls is very transparent with the facts of life some ways and then completely silent on them in others. Both these moments of transparency and silence, I believe, are crucial for the reader’s trust in Rawls.

I will begin with considerations of plurality. Rawls acknowledges that there is a large amount of “reasonable pluralism”. He even recognizes this as a fact of life. He believes political philosophy is fundamentally concerned with helping us live with this plurality without having to first settle the questions under dispute. He is, therefore, and we will revisit this shortly, very fundamentally a theorist of life in the meantime. All of this works to build trust. At same time, his theory depends on there being widespread agreement on crucial premises like conditions of fairness, the meaning of rationality (Rawls, 1999: 12, 16, 123). It is difficult to know for sure if there really is widespread agreement on these points.
For instance, the economic definition of rationality does not strike me as intuitive. The question cannot be settled short of a mass survey, but while this paper has contended that, if we are to proceed, we are always to some degree in a position of trust relative to the text, this relationship of trust is most obvious at such moments. Rawls has obviously taken pains to be transparent about these moments.

Regarding the fact of limited capacity, Rawls is also very transparent, as will be discussed below, he sets up an ideal multiple times (absolute reflective equilibrium, moral geometry, etc.) which he consciously acknowledges he cannot achieve. This impossibility is due both to our limited capacity and theoretical tools. For example, he says, “Now admittedly this is an unsatisfactory way to proceed...Eventually one may be able to do this [reach the ideal of moral reasoning, i.e. moral geometry] For the time being, however, I do not see how to avoid rough and ready methods” (Rawls, 1999: 106). This admission again shows a commitment to theorizing in the meantime, and reflects the necessity of incremental progress, if any progress is possible.

Finally, there is the question of original dependence. Rawls is clearly aware of the intellectual tradition of which he is apart. It sets the priorities for his theorizing as it informs which theories are looked at in the original position and which alternative justice as fairness must be better than (i.e. utilitarianism, perfectionism, etc.). On the other hand, the role of original intellectual dependence, i.e. the impact our particular origins have on our capacity to reason, is totally ignored. That is, and this will be examined as we consider feasibility, Rawls seems to presume that this origin is on the one hand an obstacle to the proper exercise of the sense of justice (seeing as how it must be excluded by the veil of ignorance) and that it is possible to reason without it. It may prove on philosophical reflection that both these points are true, but his level of engagement with these questions do not inspire confidence in this point that is far from obvious.

Promise

The promise of Rawls’ method can be divided into two basic types of returns, political and philosophical. What we will see is that the scope and certainty of the promises radically change
depending on whether we just look at justice as fairness or embed it within Rawls’ broader conception of how moral theory should be done.

Rawls sets out the political problem as follows: “A set of principles is required for choosing among the various social arrangements which determine this division of advantages and for underwriting an agreement on the proper distributive shares” (emphasis added) (Rawls, 1999: 4), because if we do not have and act on such principles “presumably inevitable” inequalities caused by morally arbitrary (i.e. unearned) differences from birth (such as sex, race, natural advantages) will divide advantages for us (Rawls, 1999: 7). His promise therefore appeals to a more or less immediate need. Justice as fairness is said to offer us a standard, by which we can measure the extent that inequalities are being determined by principles of justice or these morally arbitrary factors (Rawls, 1999: 12). Practically speaking, if we implement it, the return on our theorizing should be no less than a society that as closely approximates a voluntary society as possible (Rawls, 1999: 12).

Yet the facts of life give us serious reason to doubt that such a result could be achieved by his method in any absolute and “once and for all” sense, although this is exactly what the members of the original position are asked to decide (Rawls, 1999: 11). Firstly, the members of the original position choose the principles they do from a small set of alternatives. There may be other better alternatives unknown to the author by reason of language, familiarity, etc. Secondly, it remains unclear from the plurality around us whether Rawls’ “widely accepted” premises are really so widely accepted. It may be the case, but it does not seem appropriate to take this for granted as Rawls has.

Rawls accounts for both these worries by clarifying that truly and absolutely capture our sense of justice we would need to consider all possible sets of principles and their philosophically relevant arguments, and yet Rawls, recognizing our limited time and capacity states that all we can do is consider of the few most promising alternatives available to us (Rawls, 1999: 43, 106). The goal, then, remains reaching one final and complete conception of justice, but doing so by determining tentatively acceptable conceptions, laying the groundwork for others to go ahead of him. Not only is this compatible with the
aforementioned facts of life, something like it seems to be necessitated by the need to live in the meantime.

With that being said, we may still worry that Rawls’ theory takes his own deeply held beliefs too much for granted, such that even if we put it in place all we would really have is a theory of Rawls’ (or our own) personal ideas. To this Rawls responds that moral theory is so much in its infancy that even if all he managed to capture in justice as fairness was his own reflective equilibrium, that would be a valuable first step in the right direction (Rawls, 1999: 44). On the one hand this would seem to seriously lower the political return, on the other hand, it seriously lowers the risk of failure, and reinforces that even the much more personal reflection would still be valuable philosophically. Rawls states early on that a conception of justice for the basic structure of society is worth having for its own sake (Rawls, 1999: 8).

Of course, this also presumes that one person’s conception will be more or less identical to others’ such that it will serve society, as a whole, well (Rawls, 1999: 44), since otherwise this first personal step may never arrive at its final destination. While it may turn out to be true, this is a difficult thing to simply presume. It should be noted, however, that if all his method in political philosophy can do is produce tentative, personal answers (that only approximate our sense of justice in a rudimentary way (Rawls, 1999: 44)), even this is politically valuable. Rawls explains that political philosophy has four uses, none of which are dependent on being absolutely or permanently true, and are, in fact, meant to respond to the plurality and limitations that make such finality implausible on the face of it. The four purposes are: firstly, to look at divisive views and see if some common ground cannot be found, and if it cannot to look for a way to live together in spite of the difference; secondly, principles helps us direct and orient our ideas as members of society towards more than personal ends by articulating possible goals and showing their coherence; by showing how the institutions of society, especially when we are frustrated, have some underlying reason to them; finally, to imagine the limits of political possibility (Rawls, 2004: 2-4). All of these goals seem in principle quite attainable, if difficult, and are directly relevant to our other activities of life.
The cost of engaging in this method seems simply to be the time, energy and resources required to read and listen to different views while attempting to put aside one’s own “biases” or at least find common grounds with others, and perhaps to put one’s thoughts on paper.

Feasibility

Asking the question of whether I could undertake Rawls’ method happens on two levels. Firstly, am I capable of reflective equilibrium. Secondly, am I capable of entering the original position. As we shall see, the answer to the first seems to be dependent on the answer to the second.

If this method was theoretically possible, it would be available to anyone (of age and with reason) willing to dedicate any amount of time to the genuine consideration of various theories. They would only need access to those theories, likely, but not necessarily, in the form of texts, and the proper amount of self-awareness and freedom of mind to exercise judgement without the distorting influences of duress, hunger, bias, etc (Rawls, 2004: 29). These ideal conditions would constitute something like the original position, and indeed, for Rawls’ method to work we need to be able to enter the original position at any time (Rawls, 1999: 120).

Rawls states multiple times that I could enter the original position by reasoning with the restrictions it specifies, that is by not advancing any argument that, in order to be rational, depends on my knowledge of my particularites (Rawls, 1999: 17, 104, 119). This is where the ambiguity in Rawls’ theory is crucial. If the original position is meant to simulate favorable conditions for considered judgement, the requirement is not only that self-knowledge cannot be a reason, but that they cannot distort our judgement. If we were capable of moral geometry, as Rawls says, this would not be a problem because only the definitions and premises would play a role in the conclusion, so restricting what counts as a reason would be enough. But, according to Rawls, we are not capable of this geometry (Rawls, 1999: 105; Rawls, 2004: 82), and so the source and impact of our intuitions (at the heart of political philosophy) matter.
The original position therefore asks us to do precisely what I have argued we cannot do, i.e. break away as opposed to incrementally move away from our particular origins. The capacity of reason may open the possibility of a more critical orientation towards those tools and teachers, but it certainly does not do so to the degree the veil of ignorance would seem to imply is necessary for truly favourable conditions of reasoning. If we cannot come to considered judgements, then, ultimately, we cannot engage in reflective equilibrium.

Reliability in judgement however is a spectrum not a binary, and a less certain version of his method may indeed be quite feasible. One way to do this might be to admit the facts of life into the original position, since they do seem like they could qualify to be put behind the veil of ignorance. While I do not have the space to explore this possibility here, Rawls’ has consciously built his method in a way that if we find something objectionable in it we are invited to add to it. This seems to me to be a feature of incomparable value.

Taking Stock

In sum, Rawls’ contract theory, even with its ambiguities is clear enough. His approach to writing inspires trust, but his tendency to presume certain controversial premises without argument does not inspire confidence. The promised returns are both immediately practical and modest enough so as to appear attainable. There does however appear to be a crucial problem in the requirements of considered judgements. Interestingly enough, it may be possible to overcome this initial problem by admitting the facts of life into Rawls’ theory, something he seems to allow.

Part 3: Humble Rationalism and its Pedagogical Implications

Before concluding, it is worthwhile noting that there is a certain paradox in all of this. As has already been mentioned, one is poorly placed to assess the accuracy of a method, but one is equally poorly placed in assessing whether one truly understands (intelligibility), whether one truly knows what the costs and risks mean (promise), and whether one will truly be able to bear those costs, or conversely if
one can overcome one’s apparent limits (feasibility). It is perhaps a tragic irony that for precisely the same reasons that these questions are necessary (the facts of life), we are poorly placed to answer them. This is all the more troubling when one considers that these facts of life hold not only for the choice to do political philosophy, but the choice not to do it, as well as undertaking any other course of action besides.

Conveniently, this problem effectively mirrors Strauss’ problem of judgement, i.e. that we are not competent to judge and yet we must judge (in his case the great minds). It is telling that Strauss attributes this problem to the fact that we have lost all authoritative traditions; because our teachers and their teachers believed in a simple rational society, each of us has to find his bearings by his own powers however defective they may be (1 Strauss, 1989: 318).\(^2\) This is just another way of saying that at the heart of impossible problem is an individualistic rationalism. Or, to return to the map metaphor, if I have to see a place to know that there is that place, and in turn have to know that place to really understand geography, and I have to really understand geography to understand the ground on which I stand (a standard which in different ways both Strauss and Rawls articulated as being the philosophical ideal and likely impossible), not only will I not be able to get a clear sense of how to get anywhere, but I will not understand the ground beneath my feet.

Yet if we hold the same ideal but allow that it is necessary and therefore reasonable to first humble ourselves and secondly trust what at least some reliable others have told us about the places they have been, then at least two things become clear. Firstly, the qualities of humility and trustworthiness, intellectual and ethical virtues of both people and relationships, are of paramount importance and need to be explicitly cultivated in the educational process. Of course, this is already done in part as students are taught not to, for example, plagiarize, but can we honestly say the importance of the underlying lesson (of the importance of trust) is done justice?

Secondly, the intellectual task of each is neither absolute. It is not for each of us to travel the entire world (indeed the entire universe), but instead to go where we are most needed and most able to explore. Indeed, it is my experience that this is what already happens to some extent more or less

\(^2\) It should not be lost on the reader that one such teacher was Descartes.
implicitly. For instance, people select a field of study based on their interests, past academic success, and job prospects. But because our rationalistic tradition regards this fact as a necessary evil, or, said differently, a personal/institutional as opposed to truly philosophical concern, the tools required to make these choices effectively are not treated as subjects of philosophical interest in their own right and are almost totally absent in the early stages of philosophical learning and only secondary in the advanced stages. I believe this has resulted in less than optimal results and is a situation that can be improved. The reading tool I have attempted to illustrate here is one that could be provided at a relatively early stage of study that would go some way to improve this situation, although I acknowledge the central question of need has not been handled.

Concluding Remarks

Besides highlighting a number of specific theoretical and intellectual project which I hope are pursued, I believe what I have argued here shows that all our pursuits of knowledge are best served when we are humble in our self-assessment, and modest in what we think our own pursuits will yield. But I do not believe that this insight is radically new and in fact recognize that it has always, and necessarily, played a role in how people have pursued knowledge. The central importance of the mundane observation that political philosophy is an activity of life and so subject to all its demands; however, has hardly been accorded its proper respect within the rationalist tradition, and as a result, quite understandably, rationalism has run into some serious problems and doubts. According these facts of life their proper respect is crucial intellectually, and I believe, though have not argued, possible without abandoning a commitment to reason as such. Finally, part of respecting these facts means recognizing the people behind these facts. As travellers setting out on wide and storied adventures, we would all do best to remember those who have provided the homes in which we were raised and to which most of us, after all our travels, will ultimately return.

22 “He used to say: you are not required to complete the task yet you are not free to withdraw from it.” Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers) 2:21
Sources


