

How Philosophers Appeal to Priority to Effect Revolution

Micah D. Tillman

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Abstract

The present paper argues that philosophers tend to employ a particular method in constructing their theories and critiquing their opponents. To substantiate this claim, the paper examines the work of Nietzsche, Locke, the Empiricists and Rationalists, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Russell, and Wittgenstein, showing how each relies on a method the paper labels “revolution-through-return.” The method consists in identifying the authority behind your opponent’s theory, then appealing to something “prior to” that authority, from which you then proceed to derive your own theory. The paper distinguishes between several senses of priority (temporal, ontological, axiological, etc.), argues that modern philosophers tend to rely on temporal priority, and discusses the questions in priority theory that need to be addressed in order evaluate and construct revolution-through-return arguments.

Keywords

Method, Priority, Return, Revolution

1

“It is notoriously difficult,” Robert Sokolowski writes, “for philosophers to explain, to people unfamiliar with their discipline, what it is that they do” (Sokolowski 1998, 515).

Worse still is our inability to explain to each other what we are doing. Etymologically, philosophers are supposed to be loving wisdom, but can we convince even ourselves—much less anyone else—that this is what we are about?

Sokolowski helps us work toward clarity with his claim that the “method of philosophy” is “making distinctions” (ibid.). His analysis gives us reason to hope that a common thread may still run through the labyrinth of philosophical history. With this hope in hand, I too will argue that philosophers tend to employ a particular method. The one I describe below, however, may be more worthy of the revolutionary than the contemplative. It is a method philosophers use not only to elucidate their own theories, but to eliminate their rivals’. I will call this method a “revolution-through-return.”

In political revolutions, one governmental authority replaces another in a transition that is disjointed and often violent (see, e.g., Locke 1980, ch. 19). Scientific revolutions are similarly-disjointed on Kuhn’s (1996) account, but require no violence. What, then, of philosophical revolutions? To answer this question I will not attempt a sociological analysis. Instead of asking how a thinker, book, theory, fact, or practice comes to function as a new authority for most philosophers in a particular area, I will focus on the way philosophers employ various senses of priority both to make the case that such a change is required and to construct their theories.

In making my argument, I will show how Nietzsche and Locke; the Empiricists and Rationalists; Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida; and Russell and Wittgenstein, all rely on the method of revolution-through-return. I have chosen these philosophers because they are representative of schools of philosophy that have had difficulty understanding each other. I have chosen them, furthermore, because demonstrating that such divergent thinkers all rely on the same method will bolster my larger claim that the revolution-through-return is central to philosophy in general—perhaps even as central as distinction-drawing.

2

In his *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (“*History*”), Nietzsche writes:

[O]nly so far as I am the nursling of more ancient times, especially the Greek, could I come to have such untimely experiences about myself as a child of the present age.

That much I must be allowed to grant myself on the grounds of my profession as a classical philologist. For I do not know what meaning classical philology would have for our age if not to have an untimely effect within it, that is, to act against the age and so have an effect on the age to the advantage, it is to be hoped, of a coming age.

(1980, 8)

Here we have a succinct indication of the structure of philosophical revolutions. The revolution envisioned has three aspects. First, there is a return (thanks to philology) to the inspiration of the ancient Greeks, whom Nietzsche calls the “best turned out, most beautiful, most envied type of humanity to date, those most apt to seduce us to life” (Nietzsche 1967, 17). Second, there is an undercutting, or counteracting, of what we might briefly call “modernity”—an “age” that Nietzsche describes as ill (Nietzsche 1980, 8). Third, there is the anticipation of a better future to be produced by the proposed, modernity-undercutting return to the Greeks.

The structure of the revolution described above can be visualized as follows:

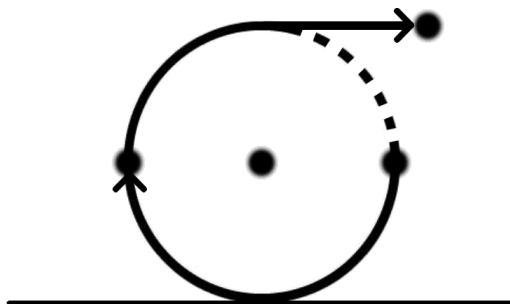


Figure 1

I will call Figure 1 the “wheel of revolution-through-return.” Its center dot represents the present authority against which the philosopher is revolting. The dot to the right (on the rim of the wheel) represents the philosopher him- or herself, while the dot to the left (also on the rim of the wheel) represents the prior authority to which the philosopher “returns” (or “appeals”). The arrow forming the lower rim of the wheel represents the philosopher’s return to the prior authority, which “undercuts” the current authority. The upper right dot in the image represents the new good for which the philosopher is trying to clear the way, and the arrow pointing to it represents the philosopher’s belief that we can achieve that new good if begin from the prior authority.

In *History*, Nietzsche is the “philosopher” on the right side of his wheel of revolution-through-return. The present authority at the center of the wheel is the modern age (or, more specifically, the scientific approach to history which dominates it [Nietzsche 1980, 23]). The prior authority on the left side of the wheel is the Ancient Greeks (or, more specifically, the affirmation of life which Nietzsche found so attractive in their culture).¹ The new good toward which Nietzsche wishes to “roll” is the age to come (or, more specifically, the healthy culture he hopes will dominate it).

To fully understand Nietzsche’s revolution as expressed above, however, we must distinguish three types of priority. The most obvious type in the quotation is temporal: Greek culture, with its healthy nature, is temporally prior to modern culture and its obsession with scientific history. However, life itself is ontologically prior to historical knowledge.

Nietzsche writes:

Now, is life to rule over knowledge, over science, or is knowledge to rule over life?

Which of these two authorities is the higher and decisive one? No one will doubt: life

¹ One does not find the phrase “affirmation of life” in Nietzsche (1980), but it has become so ubiquitous in discussions of Nietzsche’s work (see, e.g., Reginster [2006] and Kirkland [2009]) that it is hard to avoid when discussing the view of the Greeks that Nietzsche expresses in Nietzsche (1980; see pp. 24, 46, 64; cf. 23).

is the higher, the ruling authority, for any knowledge which destroys life would also have destroyed itself. Knowledge presupposes life and so has the same interest in the preservation of life which every being has in its own continuing existence. (Nietzsche 1980, 62)²

A recognition of the priority of life, then, would undercut the authority of scientific history, and a proper understanding of Greek culture—which is life-centered—would undercut the authority of modern culture—which is science- and history-centered. Furthermore, because life is ontologically prior to historical knowledge, life is to be valued over history. That is, life has *axiological* priority over history, and, consequently, life-centric Greek culture is axiologically prior to history-centric modern culture.

The revolution-through-return which we find in Nietzsche's *History*, therefore, is an attempt to clear the way for a new and better culture by returning to the value system of Greek culture—a system that is not only temporally-prior to that which dominates current culture, but which also involves a proper recognition of the ontological priority of life over history. A return to this (Greek) recognition of the ontological priority of life over history will produce, Nietzsche hopes, a recognition of the axiological priority of life over history, and of cultures that are animated by this recognition over cultures that deny it. And this recognition (he hopes, once again) will produce the new and better culture for which he works.

3

The revolution-through-return is not a technique that originated with Nietzsche, however. Take, for example, Locke's *Second Treatise* (1980), in which we are also dealing with a distinction between (1) a present, misguided time, (2) a past, more authentic time, and (3) a future time for which we are meant to hope. Rather than revolting against an age of

² Nietzsche treats "history," "knowledge" and "science" as basically interchangeable terms in Nietzsche (1980; see pp. 7, 14, 23).

scientific history, however, Locke's revolt is against an age of illegitimate governmental theory and practice; rather than returning to ancient Greece, Locke returns to the state of nature; and rather than hoping for a new age characterized by a better culture, Locke hopes for new age characterized by better governance.³ Nevertheless, just as with Nietzsche, we find in Locke's philosophical revolution an interplay of temporal priority with both ontological priority and axiological priority.

To obtain a proper understanding of civil society, Locke says we must ask what type of government would be adopted by people leaving a state of nature (Locke 1980, §4). This is a temporal process—both for groups who have no common political authority (§§55, 59, 62, 95, 113–18), and for individuals who have just come into their majority (§19 and ch. 19, esp. §243)—since being in a state of nature is prior in time to forming or joining a civil society.⁴ What matters most for Locke, however, is that the state of nature is *ontologically* prior to civil society. The nature and purpose of civil society depends upon what the state of nature is like (e.g., what rights people have and what problems they face in it) (§§7–11, 87, and 99; and ch. 9, §§123–31). Locke, in other words, is engaged in a kind of Nietzschean genealogical analysis (Nietzsche 1989 and 2008), which exposes civil society as derivative of—and, indeed, a reaction to—something more original or basic. Alternatively, we might say that Locke's theory is a quasi-Husserlian genetic analysis (Husserl 1970a and 2001), which reveals civil society to have the “sedimented sense” (Husserl 1970b) of arising out of the state of nature (as a remedy to its deficiencies, employing the powers available within it in a new way). However we express it, because of the ontological dependence of civil society on the state of nature, the state of nature also has an axiological priority over civil society. It

³ Locke began the book before the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (Laslett 1988, §3).

⁴ However, Locke points out that the State of Nature and civil society can also be contemporaneous in certain respects. The leaders of different countries are in a State of Nature relative to each other (1980, §14), as are normal citizens of different countries, since they share no common authority (1980, §9). Therefore, Locke's temporal story is not simplistic.

provides a standard of judgment for evaluating the civil societies we encounter (Locke 1980, chs. 11 and 19).

Locke's revolt against his age of erroneous politics, then, consists in a return (or appeal) to a way of being that is temporally, and hence both ontologically and axiologically, prior. "But surely," one might object, "we could say the same of Aristotle's distinctly *non-Lockean Politics*." There, we find the following: "He who considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them" (Aristotle 1984, 1252a24–25, p. 1986) On Aristotle's account, the state is born of the male–female and master–slave relations, which join together "those who cannot exist without each other" (1252a26–31, p. 1986). "Out of these two relationships . . . the first thing to arise is the family," whose function is to "supply . . . men's everyday wants" (1252b10, b14, p. 1987). Then, from the union of "several families" comes "the village," which "aims at something more than the supply of daily needs" (1252b16–17, p. 1987). The state, finally, is a union of villages "in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, . . . originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life" (1252b27–30, p. 1987).

Like Locke, therefore, Aristotle gives something akin to a "genealogical" or "genetic" account of civil society. However, he does not join Locke in concluding that civil society is derivative and that temporally-prior ways of being have ontological and axiological priority. Why? Our answer can be found in the following.

[I]f the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best. (Aristotle 1984, 1252b30–1253a1, p. 1987)

For Aristotle, the temporally-prior types of relational human existence are inchoate versions of the state, while the state is the most mature, fully-realized expression of the essence that is common to them all. Central to this common essence is the function of supporting life. While we can expect no more than mere “preservation” from its early stages, a society achieves “self-sufficiency” upon reaching complete maturity; it then not only enables its members to “have life,” but to “have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, KJV). The state makes *eudemonia* possible.

The temporal priority of other forms of relationship to civil society, therefore, does not mean in Aristotle that those earlier forms have ontological and axiological priority. A single “nature” or essence is common to all, and while this essence is only completely manifested in the state, it is that which the previous forms always already were. They simply succeeded in actualizing their common essence to a more limited extent. For Locke, in contrast, there is no community of essence between the family and civil society. Civil society is defined by the functioning of political power, which is of a fundamentally different type from that exercised by parents over children (and even of masters over slaves) (Locke 1980, ch. 7). The move from family life to civic life is not one in which a common essence is realized more fully, but one in which a fundamentally different way of being is introduced.

“Yet surely,” one might say, “the relationship between the state of nature and civil society is much closer than that between the family and civil society. After all, civil society is created to fill the need for safety and freedom which the state of nature only partially satisfies.” Nevertheless, the move from a state of nature into a civil society is a break. It involves a deliberate decision to renounce one’s rights to do what one likes with one’s property and to punish those who violate one’s property (Locke 1980, §§87–89, 128–30). It involves a deliberate decision to join in the generation of a new entity, the body politic, and to submit to the decisions of the majority within that body (§§95–99). Civil society is an

artifice, created by a prudential act from within the state of nature, not the natural coming-to-full-maturity of what the state of nature always already was. It is not part of the sense of a state of nature that it grows into a civil society as it approaches the full realization of its telos. A state of nature which fully actualized its telos would still be a state of nature; it would simply be one in which peace and reason fully reigned (§§4–7). The creation of civil society, then, is a concession to the ontological accident that people at least occasionally violate the law of nature in ways that are difficult to remedy from within a state of nature (§§123–27). This contingency can function as a rational motivation for abandoning the state of nature for another way of life, but it need not.

For Aristotle, therefore, civil society realizes the common essence that earlier forms of society only partially expressed, and so the temporal priority of “non-civil” societies is of no ontological or axiological significance. For Locke, in contrast, the essence of a state of nature is not brought to full expression in civil society; rather, the contingent deficiencies of that state of nature define the purpose of civil society and motivate the search for artificial remedies. The temporal priority of the state of nature over civil society, then, is evidence of the derivative nature of civil society and of the ontological and axiological priority of the state of nature.⁵

Despite initial similarities, in other words, Locke’s and Aristotle’s philosophies end up being radically different. Of the two, furthermore, it is Locke’s modern theory, rather than Aristotle’s classical analysis, that most closely foreshadows Nietzsche’s philosophical revolution, sharing with Nietzsche the move from temporal, to ontological, to axiological priority. Both Locke and Nietzsche, moreover, intend to connect their philosophical revolutions to broader social revolutions, but only Locke (to date) has been successful in this regard (see Wishy 1958, 415; Preece 1980, 17, 31; Levin 2001, 142; Davenport 2004, 190;

⁵ Axiological, because the state of nature gives civil society its purpose and defines the moral constraints on political power within it.

Jelen 2005, 319). The value system that animates Western culture may be closer than before to acknowledging the ontological priority of life over knowledge; today's teachers, for example, cannot succeed without convincing students that their lessons are relevant to, or will be useful in, "real life." Nevertheless, ours is still an age in which knowledge dominates life. The real difference between our time and Nietzsche's is that the form of this knowledge (information about current goings-on, the world over, rather than information about the past) and the means of access to it (entertainment and social media sites on smartphones and computers, rather than libraries, laboratories, and lecture halls) have changed.

4

A philosophical revolution is always meant to displace a present authority—clearing the way for some new good—by producing a prior authority. Appealing to the prior authority casts the present authority as something less than it claimed (as somehow secondary or derivative) and shakes any system or practice that had taken it to be fundamental. The philosopher-in-revolt is then free to build anew, starting from the authority she or he claims as prior.

The senses in which one authority might be prior to another, however, can vary, as we have seen. Nietzsche and Locke employ three senses in particular: temporal, ontological, and axiological. Each has strengths and weaknesses as a tool, and thus different philosophers may choose to foreground different senses of priority in different situations. And yet it is with temporal priority specifically that Nietzsche and Locke—like many others—begin their arguments. Why is this?

I suspect that among the various orders (of time, of being, of value, of knowledge, etc.) the details of temporal order are often the easiest to determine, and thus provide a kind of foothold from which philosophers can proceed to argue for the involvement of other types

of priority. However, it is often unnecessary for philosophers to do more once the temporal point has been made. An appeal to a temporally-prior authority shows up the present authority as being conditioned, rather than necessary. When speaking of something social (like a shared belief system or cultural practice) such an appeal reveals that there were times during which the present authority was not recognized—during which people thought or acted in other ways. Realizing that the present authority was preceded by another, we start to see it as contingent or arbitrary. As something that began to be, it is something for which we might legitimately demand a sufficient reason. The present authority, therefore, is put into question.

Much of Foucault's work (e.g., on madness [1972], prisons [1975], and sexuality [1976]) employs this sort of temporally-based revolution-through-return. However, we can also see a less historical, more personal type of temporally-based revolution in the debates between Rationalists and Empiricists. The Empiricists argued that all ideas grow out of temporally-prior sensory givens, and thus there are no innate ideas from which to begin our quest for knowledge (Locke 1979, bk. 1, ch. 2, and bk. 2, chs. 1 and 9; Hume 1977, §2). We must at least start, therefore, with the sense-based, experimental approach to obtaining knowledge, even if we also employ the theoretical, idea-based approach as a kind of auxiliary. The fact that sensation is prior to ideation in the order of time, in other words, means that empiricism is prior to rationalism in the order of knowledge.

However, even a Rationalist could appeal to the temporal priority of an absence of ideas to support his system. We see this in Descartes' presentation of the innocence of childhood as (1) evidence of the derivative or secondary nature of prejudice, and (2) motivation for eliminating all opinions that lack a rational foundation. On Descartes's view (1998, 8), we all begin life unprejudiced and should return to that state—through the application of what we now call his “radical doubt”—and then rebuild our system of opinions

on a rational basis. In this argument, as in the Empiricist argument for the primacy of sensory givens, the temporal priority in question is personal, rather than historical.

There are occasions, however, when a philosopher will need both senses of temporal priority. Consider, for example, Heidegger's argument for the priority of readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) over presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) and his argument for the priority of truth *qua* disclosure over truth *qua* correspondence. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger says that traditional ontology assumed all beings to have presence-at-hand (Heidegger 1962, 47–48, 67, 70–71, 75, 228). He argues, in contrast, that there are *three* types of being. When we investigate objects in a detached, “objective” manner (e.g., through science or traditional ontology), we find them to be present-at-hand as substances with certain essential and accidental attributes (68, 70–71, 101–104, 122). However, when we encounter things (e.g., tools) as being meaningful within a system of activities, means, and ends, we find them to have readiness-to-hand (100–105, 120–22). Finally, humans—for whom not only the being of other things, but also their own being, is “an issue”—are *Dasein*, and have existence (*Existenz*) (32–33, 67–68).

Our experience of presence-at-hand, Heidegger argues, arises out of our experience of readiness-to-hand in the process of finding something to be no longer useful (or meaningful). This is a temporal process through which each person must muddle for her- or himself (Heidegger 1962, 102–5). That is, readiness-to-hand is temporally prior for each person to presence-at-hand, and this is enough to put all of traditional ontology—which assumed the priority of presence-at-hand—into question. Add to this the fact that human existence is ontologically prior both to readiness-at- and presence-to-hand (since nothing could have either without some *Dasein* for whom they could be ready-to- or present-at-hand) (255) and Heidegger believes the illegitimacy of traditional ontology is put beyond question.

In contrast with that argument, which involves temporal priority on the personal level, Heidegger's case for understanding truth in terms of uncovering involves a historical claim: the understanding of truth as "uncovering" was the original, Greek understanding.

"Being-true" ("truth") means Being-uncovering. But is not this a highly arbitrary way to define "truth"? [. . . W]hile our definition is seemingly *arbitrary*, it contains only the *necessary* Interpretation of what was primordially surmised in the *oldest* tradition of ancient philosophy and even understood in a pre-phenomenological manner. (Heidegger 1962, 262)⁶

Heidegger has already made his case for the ontological priority of disclosure over "agreement" (*Übereinstimmung*) (257) when he turns to this temporal argument. However, he is still concerned that we will not be convinced that we are justified in defining truth as uncovering. To settle the issue, he appeals to temporal priority in the historical sense. If the ontological argument was not decisive for us, the fact that the Ancient Greeks understood truth as disclosure—and that we trace our philosophical heritage back to them—will be.

5

Another example of a philosopher appealing to temporal priority as part of his revolution-through-return—but this time against Heidegger—can be found in Levinas's, *Totality and Infinity* (1969, 45–48). Levinas holds that Heidegger's ontology gives philosophical support to attempts in the political realm to bring everything and everyone under a single totalitarian system (46–47). That is, Levinas argues that Heidegger privileges the self and the same over the other and the different (45–46). But Levinas does not simply say that the immoral consequences of privileging the same shows that the other is to be

⁶ This understanding was then covered over by later thinkers and centuries (Heidegger 1962, 257–61).

preferred. Rather, he provides an argument for us based on temporal and epistemological priority.

“Metaphysics,” Levinas argues, is prior to ontology (1969, 42–43, 48). We cannot begin to think in the ways Heidegger wants us to think without first having a metaphysical experience—an encounter with transcendence. That is, only after being challenged by others (by persons who “transcend” us, or are “beyond” us) do we come to ask ontological questions (79, 82–101). Our relating to others, therefore, precedes our cognitive, theoretical relating to Being. In Levinas’s terms, “ethics” comes first (42–48, 197–201). If we were to recognize this—that other people, the challenges they pose to us, and the claims that have upon us, have priority over our desire to comprehend everything and everyone under a single concept, or within a single system—Levinas believes the world would be a more just and peaceful place (45–48, 71–72, 203–4, 306).

Later, Derrida would make a similar move in his critique of Husserl and his analysis of signs. At the heart of the same, he argues, there is always an other (Derrida 1973, 66, 85–86; 1997, 35, 215). Nothing is truly self-contained because presence is only possible through signification, mediation, detour, or supplementation (1973a, 15, 51, 58, 61, 64–66, 85–86, 88). And, like Levinas, Derrida is fundamentally concerned with a revolution against ontology. Expressed epistemologically, his conclusions sound tentative:

[W]e no longer know whether what was always presented as a derived and modified re-presentation of simple presentation, as “supplement,” “sign,” “writing,” or “trace,” “is” not, in a necessarily, but newly, ahistorical sense, “older” [*plus “vieux”*] than presence and the system of truth, older [*plus “vieux”*] than “history.” . . . We no longer know whether . . . what we call with the old names of force and *différance* is not more “ancient” than what is “primordial” [*plus “ancien” que l’“originaire”*]. (103)

But Derrida is being modest. We do know, on his view. *Différance*, after all, “(is) “older” [plus “vieille”] than the ontological difference or the truth of Being” (1973b, 154); it is “[o]lder’ [Plus “vielle”] than Being itself” (159). For Derrida, the principle of *différance* takes priority over that of identity (1973a, 52, 66, 85; 1997, 61, 215), and his philosophy—which recognizes the priority of *différance*—has priority over those that rely on epistemologies and ontologies of identity and truth.

The language of age in the quotations above may lead us to believe that Derrida, like Levinas, is relying on temporal priority in his revolt against ontology. *Différance*, he says, is “older” than “being.” And yet, Derrida also says that *différance* “is to be conceived prior [avant] to the separation between deferring as delay and differing as the active work of difference” (1973a, 88). By positioning *différance* as prior to both ontological priority and temporal priority, Derrida reduces the orders of being and time to the same derivative status and tries to inoculate himself against the types of revolution that have been standard in modern philosophy. Inspired by Heidegger and Levinas, he nevertheless attempts to escape the game they play.

6

We find revolutions-through-return in Nietzsche, in Locke, in the Empiricist–Rationalist debate, and in what we now call “Continental” philosophy. But we also find them in the philosophies of “Analytic” Cambridge. Take, for example, chapter five of Russell’s *My Philosophical Development*, which is entitled, “Revolt into Pluralism.”

It was towards the end of 1898 that Moore and I rebelled against both Kant and Hegel. . . . Although we were in agreement, I think that we differed as to what most interested us in our new philosophy. I think that Moore was most concerned with the rejection of idealism, while I was most interested in the rejection of

monism. The two were, however, closely connected . . . through the doctrine as to relations, which Bradley had distilled out of the philosophy of Hegel. I called this “the doctrine of internal relations,” and I called my view “the doctrine of external relations.” (Russell 1997, 42)

We see here a revolt similar to that undertaken in America around the same time by William James (1977). Both Russell and James rebelled against idealist monism in favor of empiricist pluralism. Both, likewise, insisted on the primacy of relations. “The doctrine of internal relations” claims that all relations can be reduced to properties of the objects related. Russell, however, argued that at least asymmetric relations—relations without which mathematics would be meaningless—could not be reduced to properties of the things related. Any attempt to carry out such a reduction would presuppose the very relations it was trying to explain away (Russell 1903, §§212–16).

Russell’s revolution-through-return, therefore, amounted to undercutting monistic idealism by appealing to the irreducible relations found in mathematics. But he did not stop with mathematics in his search for priority, since math, he argued, is reducible to logic. Though he was not the first to assert this priority, he believed his particular approach enabled him to complete Frege’s inchoate revolution in the philosophy of mathematics (Russell 1997, 53).

In contrast with Russell—who wished primarily to leave monistic idealism behind—Wittgenstein revolted against the entire philosophical tradition. Both the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (2001) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (2009) are attempts at this revolution.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein tells us the “the problems of philosophy” have been “posed” because “the logic of our language is misunderstood” (2001, 3). Likewise, “Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers” are “nonsensical” because they “arise from

our failure to understand [this] logic.” Indeed, “the deepest problems” of philosophy “are in fact *not* problems at all” (23).

Wittgenstein, therefore, attempts to reveal for us the ideal, logical nature of language. In a language that realized its logical essence, everything that was syntactically correct would also have sense (Russell 2001, x). The language used by philosophers, however, fails to achieve this ideal. In it, we can formulate syntactically-correct questions and propositions that are nevertheless senseless. If we were to replace our current philosophical language with a logically-perfect language—or at least attempt to approximate that language—the philosophical problems we face would disappear. That is, a recognition of the logical (even ontological) priority of a logically perfect language over that which currently dominates philosophical discussion would result in a world without, or at least with many fewer, philosophical problems.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, the present authority against which Wittgenstein is revolting, and the new good for which he is hoping, remain the same. He still finds the language and problems of philosophy to be senseless (2009, §§109–133), and his “aim” is still “[t]o show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (§309, p. 110). What has changed, however, is the prior authority to which he returns. No longer does he hope to correct the errors of philosophy by appealing to the priority of a logically-perfect language. Instead, he now appeals to the priority of ordinary language and its “games” (§116). If we follow his example, we will see our philosophical problems to be senseless and open the way for thinking that is freed of philosophical error.

What, then, has happened between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*? In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein sees the various instantiations of language (common language, philosophical language, logically-perfect language) as different attempts at realizing a common, logical essence. This view has much the same structure as Aristotle’s theory of

social life. In both, the particular that most fully expresses an essence has ontological and axiological priority—even if it *lacks* temporal priority—over whatever expresses the same essence less fully.

In the *Investigations*, however, Wittgenstein does not see philosophical discussion as a flawed attempt to realize an essence shared with common language (and logically-perfect language). Rather, he sees philosophers as functioning under the erroneous impression that pieces can be removed from the games of common language—in which they originally obtained their function—and employed meaningfully in the new, unrelated game of philosophical discussion (2009, §§116–17, p. 53, §514, p. 149 [cf., §11, p. 12; §38, p. 23; §43, p. 25; §109, p. 52; §124, p. 55; §194, p. 85]). This view is closer in structure to Locke’s understanding of social life. In both, that which is later is not only of a different type from, but also derives its being and sense from, that which is earlier. Wittgenstein sees philosophy in much the same way that Locke sees politics: if we understand where their pieces come from, we will have to significantly reform both their theory and their practice.

Wittgenstein’s move from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*, therefore, amounts to a rejection of teleological priority in favor of genetic or genealogical priority. That is, he has abandoned (a) the ontological priority of the mature realization of an essence for (b) the temporal and ontological priority of what is original. He has, it would seem, shifted from a way of thinking more characteristic of classical philosophy, to a way of thinking more characteristic of modern philosophy.

7

My argument in this essay has been that philosophers tend to employ a particular method that allows them to combine clearing the field of their opponents’ theories with establishing their own. The method in question involves undercutting a current authority by

returning to a prior authority in order to prepare the way for some new good. We have seen such revolutions-through-return in the work of some of the greatest European philosophers of modernity—in addition to America’s William James—but many others also come to mind. There is the Protestant Reformers’ return to scripture and Augustine (revolting against the Church and Aquinas), the Renaissance humanists’ “*Ad fontes!*” (revolting against Scholasticism), the later Scholastics’ return to Aristotle (revolting against Augustinian Neoplatonism), Aristotle’s return to the *endoxa* (Pritzl 1994; Owen 1986)—including those of the Pre-Socratics—(revolting against Plato), Plato’s return to the Forms (revolting against mere opinion and becoming), etc. I would predict, therefore, that we will find one or more revolutions-through-return at the heart of every major Western philosopher’s thought, no matter the era in which she or he worked.

If correct, this prediction would have three practical consequences when coupled with the argument above. First, it would provide us with an interpretive or “hermeneutical” schema. In each new philosopher we encounter, it would direct us to identify the present authority against which he or she is revolting, the prior authority to which he or she is returning, and the new good for which he or she is working. This would give us a way to understand not only the philosopher in question, but also the unity and progression of the ongoing philosophical conversation in which the philosopher participates.

As we noted at the beginning of the essay and have seen along the way, authorities come in many forms for philosophers. In some cases, our authorities are persons we seek to follow (e.g., Aristotle for Aquinas, Plato for Plotinus). In others, they are methods we seek to employ (e.g., empirical investigation for Bacon, Euclidian chains of reasoning for Spinoza). In still others they are facts to which we feel called to be true (e.g., otherness at the heart of all for Derrida, the ultimate value of life for Nietzsche). It may often be the case, therefore, that we can identify the relevant authorities in a philosopher’s work only by first locating and

analyzing his or her arguments for the priority of one person, method, fact, text, etc. over another.

Second, the argument and prediction would, if true, provide us with an evaluative tool. Once we have identified the points on a philosopher's wheel of revolution-through-return, we could more easily tell how seriously to take her or his philosophy. Is the philosopher successful in establishing the priority of the authority to which she or he appeals? Would "returning" to that authority really produce the new good the philosopher projects? Is that new good really worth seeking? How well-connected are the various senses of priority employed? For example, does the temporal priority in question really establish the ontological priority the philosopher claims? Does the ontological priority in question really establish the axiological priority the philosopher claims? Etc.

Third, if the argument and prediction are true, they offer us a better understanding of a particularly useful argumentative technique. Philosophers' pervasive use of revolution-through-return arguments would show that establishing the rights of one's own philosophy may not require one to refute one's rival, point by point. Rather, it may be enough to appeal to some prior authority, and thereby undercut the authority on which the rival philosophy is based.⁷ Likewise, establishing one's own philosophy may not turn out to require a complete rejection of one's rival. The fact that an authority does not have *ultimate* priority may simply mean it has a limited or qualified authority, and thus that the theories, methods, or practices derived from it are valid, though in a limited or qualified way.⁸

But even these suggestions leave many questions unanswered. Am I right to suggest that the priority of temporal priority is typical of modern philosophers' revolutions? If so, why, and what senses of priority did previous thinkers favor? Aristotle, as we saw, seemed to

⁷ Cf. Descartes's approach to eliminating his prejudices by attacking the senses (1998, 59–60).

⁸ Consider, for example, Heidegger's (re)evaluation of *Being and Time* in Heidegger (1999).

prefer ontological priority to temporal priority. Nietzsche's Greeks, the Babylonians, and even the Norse, furthermore, were evidently untroubled by the fact that some beings had *both* temporal *and* ontological priority over their favored divinities. Perhaps a god's position in the theogonic order was simply irrelevant for them in comparison with priority in the order of power or victory.⁹ (Contrast these beliefs with the theologies of the Abrahamic religions, or with the theogonies of the Gnostics.)

What, furthermore, is the relation between the various senses of priority? Augustine (1993, 1.7, 1.10–11, and 2.5–6) and Boethius (2001, 3.10 and 4.2–3) held the orders of being, power, and goodness to be different aspects of the same hierarchy, but we may no longer take this for granted. How then do the orders of time and being, of being and value, of time and knowledge, of knowledge and value, of all these and power, etc., relate? Is it possible, for instance, to move immediately from temporal priority to axiological priority in one's argument, or must one always go by way of ontological or epistemological priority? Does might ever make right? That is, can one ever derive axiological priority from dynamic priority? And is it always necessary for a revolution-through-return to end up making a claim about axiological priority? Do all revolutions-through-return ultimately amount to arguments about what is to be valued over what? And is there some single sense of priority that lies behind (is "prior to") all the senses discussed above?

These are all questions for the underdeveloped field of priority theory. The collapse of belief in the "hierarchy of being"—including God—amongst modern philosophers has yet to be replaced by a general understanding of the relationships between the different types of priority. Take the rise of modern physics, of modern genetics, and of modern politics. Each currently functions with a set of assumptions about priority which is rarely, if ever, examined, clarified, or questioned. One refers to subatomic particles as "fundamental," for example; it is

⁹ We might call it "dynamic" priority, in that it seems to depend on priority in power. My thanks to Ruth Kitchin Tillman for helping to clarify for me the sense of priority at work here.

in quantum mechanics that we reach bedrock reality. This might lead us to think that parts are prior to wholes. And yet physicists rely on a different set of laws for dealing with macroscopic objects and systems, ignoring their subatomic constituents. This might lead us to think that wholes are prior to parts.

Similarly, one is at least tempted to think of genes as prior to animals; we speak of genes as giving rise to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the animals who “carry” them. But to say an animal “carries” or “has” genes, is to speak of the animal as if it were prior and the genes were secondary. Which way is correct? The way we answer that question has a significant impact on how we think about serious moral and legal issues regarding the origin of morality, the existence of responsibility, and the possibility of freedom.

Finally, both totalitarianism and democracy force us to ask about the relationship between citizens and the *polis*. Are persons prior to groups, or the other way around (and in what sense)? If individuals are prior to groups ontologically, we might be tempted to say the group should serve the individual. But if the group is prior to the individual, we might be tempted in the opposite direction.

A comprehensive priority theory would seek to show how ontological and axiological priority, temporal and ontological priority, genetic and temporal priority, dynamic and genetic priority, and so forth, are related or correlated, and would make a case for the existence or nonexistence of a unifying type of priority that unites or generates all the others. We are in need of such a theory if the argument of this paper is correct. If all philosophers do tend to rely on appeals to priority not only to undercut their opponents’ theories but to establish their own, we need to have a clear understanding of what priority is and how it works (or, of what priorities are, and how they work).

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