Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c1640-1700

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While the title of this book might give the impression that it is a 700-page tome on a peripheral genre of late 17th-century English literature, the non-specialist readership of Reviews in History ought not to be misled. By ‘histories of philosophy’ Dmitri Levitin actually means neither simply writings titled as such, nor even simply writings whose content is dominated by such a narrative. His remit, really, is learned propositions made ‘virtually everywhere’ (p. 30) by the English in the 1640–1700 period about ancient philosophy. And what counts as ‘philosophy’ here? Apparently any set of universalist statements made by non-Christians in antiquity – ‘Zoroastrian theology’ (p. 33) and Greek medicine, for example. Many readers will wonder whether these specifications result from an attempt strictly to ‘examine seventeenth-century histories on their own terms’ (p. 8), but they do allow Levitin to capture a wide and important slice of an indubitably central but usually sidelined realm of ideational and scholarly innovation in the later 17th century: the study of the past.

Levitin’s contribution is to provide an array of subtly analyzed, elaborately contextualized, extensively detailed, and often narratively interrelated examples of the procedures and frameworks that characterized late humanist historical inquiry. He shows that English scholars used these procedures and frameworks to furnish novel accounts of the history of ancient philosophy in a wide variety of settings, from histories of philosophy proper to biblical criticism, apologetics, accounts of early Christianity, and debates on scientific method and theory. These distinctive visions of the past, he argues, were then marshalled in the service of important interventions in other arenas of learning. By making these connections Levitin hopes to recall for us one of the mundane realities of ‘intellectual culture’ (p. 3) in the early Enlightenment: that ‘to be able to speak of the philosophical past was a cultural expectation’ (p. 30). Drawing upon language skills that are unfortunately rare these days, he exhibits a very good command of the early modern primary sources, the ancient sources used by the early moderns under study, and the relevant secondary literature. Even experts in specific areas will learn from many of his footnotes. Particularly valuable is his ability to link and move between territories usually covered only in isolation by historians of science and historians of humanistic scholarship, and thereby add to a longstanding and growing literature that promises to one day bring us beyond an improperly dichotomized and ahistorically ‘disciplined’ understanding of early modern...
intellectual history.

When struggling with such a dense and intricate mass of material, readers will no doubt wish that there had been a clearer rationale to the order and internal organization of the book’s chapters. The basic subjects of the chapters, though, are clear enough. Chapters two and three, which follow the introduction, collect evidence on historical accounts of ‘eastern’ ancient philosophy (first ‘near-eastern’ and then Egyptian and Jewish) that originated in all the genres and agendas noted earlier. Levitin argues here that before 1680 and the supposed beginning of the early Enlightenment or crise de la conscience européenne, the English had departed from the pagan-Christian syncretism of the Renaissance, primarily by historicizing the worlds of wisdom in the ancient Near East, and thus throwing doubt upon the crude connections their predecessors had drawn between pagan and sacred traditions, and the mistaken claims they had made about Judaic primacy in philosophy. Chapters four and five hone in on natural philosophy in particular, dealing first with disputes about method (in particular, experimental method) and second with arguments over matter theory and animating principles. These chapters provide interrelated examples of how on these crucial terrains of debate, the so-called ‘new philosophy’ of nature was in large part constructed on the basis of historical reflection about and re-interpretation of the ‘old’, thus producing much new evidence for the primacy of historical inquiry (as opposed to philosophy) in driving intellectual innovation in this period. Chapter six turns from science to debates about the early Christian past. It shows that the English had grappled very seriously with the problematic relationship between pagan philosophy and primitive and patristic Christianity before the final decades of the 17th century, and that the supposedly revolutionary scholarship of Jean Le Clerc was a continuation of earlier work and debate. All these lines of inquiry are necessary building blocks for a much larger project that is long overdue, but also long underway: the construction of a revised picture of the relationships among the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment.

Even specialists will often find Levitin’s 100-page chapters and indulgent footnotes to be digressive and disorienting. The uninitiated may find the chapters unreadable. But it is crucial to appreciate the fact that the peculiarities of this book are mostly self-aware and deliberate, and they do have a considerable payoff. Levitin makes his viewpoint clear enough by expressing outright derision for ‘what Anglophone historiography so loves: an overarching “argument”’ (p. 546). Whatever its drawbacks, this position deserves our respect. Levitin’s embrace of particular continental European norms (or, one might add, the norms of long United States dissertations, which the form, content, and organization of the book also strikingly resemble) and a principled antiquarianism (one that often harks back to the virtues and the vices of some of the early modern texts he has studied) helps to maximize the book’s potential as a storehouse of erudition. It will undoubtedly be mined by later historians of scholarship, and one can only hope that intellectual and religious historians will make use of it as well. The book’s core value results precisely from Levitin’s utter refusal ’to subordinate the task of gathering and presenting evidence to that of producing an all-consuming argument’ (p. 21) and his focus on ‘singularity of experience and scholarly endeavour’ (p. 546). Levitin is rightly proud of the amount of work he has done, regularly alarmed at the deficiencies of scholars who have gone before him, and reluctant to leave much of either sentiment off of the printed page. However much some readers will grumble at this, as Levitin himself recognizes, ‘in an age when specialised research in the humanities is increasingly threatened’ (p. vii), we probably need more books like this one than we have.

Levitin thus goes to great lengths to position himself as an enemy of ‘labels’ (p. 4), ‘model building’ (p. 545), and generalizations. This splitter revisionism is captured by many of the chapters’ section titles – for instance, ‘Henry More and the non-existence of “Cambridge Platonism”’ (p. 128) – and their ending sentences, such as ‘Cambridge “Platonism” this was not’ (p. 368). The results of this study will prove immensely useful once they are incorporated more fully into positive insights. In fact, they fit rather seamlessly into general frameworks already abumbrated in recent years that Levitin does not address. By examining the often subtle differences between the views of individual thinkers on ancient intellectual history, Levitin continues on a number of fronts a long line of work that has exploded the tendency of early modern intellectual historians to understand the use of ancient texts in early modern Europe in terms of ‘isms’ when these texts were in fact marshalled to manifold purposes in the period, and studied in radically
different humanist modes over the course of time. Levitin’s array of targets includes ‘Aristotelianism’, ‘Epicureanism’, ‘Hermeticism’, ‘Platonism’ (in particular, ‘Cambridge Platonism’ and its cousin notion, ‘latitudinarianism’), ‘rationalism’, and ‘empiricism’. Of course, while strictly speaking, ‘there was no such thing as “Epicureanism” in seventeenth-century England, only attitudes to Epicurus’ (p. 4), careful scholars often use such terms as shorthand for dominant readings of a corpus, as Levitin himself does at points.

Nevertheless there is a crucial and simple point here that, usually left unheeded, cannot be repeated enough, because it has bedeviled generations of intellectual historiography in multiple fields: since texts have no single meaning or use, there are countless stories yet to be told about competing practices and the extent to which they constituted the intellectual history of the early modern and other periods.

Given Levitin’s attitude to the material and the historiography, it should come as no surprise that the book’s most original, cogent, illuminating, and occasionally devastating arguments are made on a very fine level of detail, to the point that they are nearly impossible to summarize with brevity. Bit by bit these arguments go a long way towards fortifying the familiar claim that late humanist traditions (and in particular, historical inquiry) were perpetuated by theologians, natural philosophers, and many other scholarly practitioners, in the process of intellectual innovation in these areas and others. In other words, while Levitin’s book certainly makes significant additions to our understanding of early modern scholarship, that is not its primary intended contribution. A bit like his avowed methodological model, Jean-Louis Quantin, Levitin has moved beyond some of the usual conventions in the historiography of scholarship in hopes of better enabling it to have a clearer impact on the mainstream concerns of intellectual historians, an impact that might arguably be far more profound than it has been. He wants to contribute to accounts of general intellectual shifts by tracing them to specific scholarly practices employed in specific contexts by specific individuals over time, but thinks this is best accomplished by moving beyond the tendency of Anthony Grafton and other exemplary historians of scholarship to focus on one scholar at a time. In this sense the book, which strings together elaborate commentaries on individual and often non-canonical writers instead of writing a separate article about each, is somewhat experimental, and its results are doubly instructive: they expose both the potential benefits and the considerable difficulties involved in bridging the gap between the history of scholarly practices and intellectual history proper.

Whatever the overall success of this experiment, its combination with Levitin’s broadly antiquarian commitments does come at a cost. Levitin does, after all, explicitly position his book against a series of ‘overarching’ and ‘all-consuming’ arguments that have been made in the past by Jonathan Israel, J. G. A. Pocock, and many others about late 17th- and early 18th-century intellectual history. And he partly justifies the book’s length and style by relating it to perhaps the most important question today in Enlightenment studies: what happened in the late 17th century, an account of which is the cornerstone of the interpretations of Israel, Pocock, and so many others? Did innovative European thinkers jettison their institutional and intellectual inheritance? Or did they actually perpetuate a long Renaissance and Reformation? Or, contrary to nearly all existing historiography of religion and intellectual life, did they do neither of these things, and is it necessary to adopt less binary ways of thinking in order to capture this moment of undeniable intellectual turbulence?

Levitin’s principles and motivating energies are such that he addresses these arguments and produces counter-arguments in a largely revisionist or deconstructive mode, and rather half-heartedly at that. His own general arguments, for instance, come immediately after he has derided the convention of providing them. These arguments are valuable, albeit also rather familiar and not fully substantiated within the book itself. He rightly recognizes ‘the continuing vitality in England of a European-wide humanist scholarly culture among not just scholars but the whole intellectual community’ (p. 546) and claims that ‘the greatest transformation of seventeenth-century intellectual culture was not the replacement of one philosophy with another, but rather the death of the ideal of the philosopher-theologian, an intellectual persona encapsulated in the person of the metaphysician’ (p. 546) – by which he appears to mean that the ‘Reformed scholastic’ (pp. 546–7) theologian lost prominence in English intellectual life in the later 17th century. Finally, and relatedly, he registers support for the position that the experimental variant of philosophy came to hold sway over other variants in this period, and helps us understand how this happened. He argues that the generally
tough lot of philosophy in our period’ (i.e., non-experimental natural philosophy) was the result of a process of historical contextualization in which this philosophy came to be understood as ‘a dangerous and even anachronistic throwback to paganism itself’ (p. 547). The evidence he assembles on this front certainly furthers the ongoing dismantling of a standard Enlightenment narrative, which ‘tends to favour the victory of “philosophy” over both theology and humanism’ (p. 547).

Similarly, when Levitin directly addresses the theses of his historiographical opponents, he does not muster the same analytical clarity and precision that often shine in his fine-grained case studies. He rightly assails histories of early modern classical scholarship written by classicists themselves for their ‘ahistorical value judgments and insensitivity to context’, urges us to ‘place scholarship within institutional and disciplinary contexts’, and even places the term ‘scholarship’ in scare quotes (p. 3). To be sure, his book does partly move beyond ‘the world of “scholarship” narrowly conceived’ (pp. 11, 30) and it does far better than many of its predecessors in developing an historically appropriate standard for good scholarship and admitting the considerable overlap among what would today be understood as separate disciplines. But Levitin does not fully historicize or even define the category of scholarship itself, or those to which it is opposed, which for him include the work of ‘theologians and biblical critics’ (p. 114). On this front his remit often appears very narrow indeed. He is willing, for instance, to call ‘historical apologetics’ a ‘popular genre’ (p. 346) and to dub William Warburton’s Divine Legation of Moses (1737–41) – which runs to 2,500 pages in its 19th-century edition and features a considerable scholarly apparatus – a ‘populist’ work (p. 229). Finally, since the book is essentially composed of a set of readings of individual texts composed by individuals, we do not quite get an analysis solidly founded upon an ‘institutionalized conception of early modern philosophy’ (p. 11). Some readers will worry that one set of ahistoricisms has too often been replaced by another.

Levitin’s main historiographical target, though, is not previous work on early modern scholarship but rather the broader notion of an ‘early Enlightenment’. The reader gets no clear or consistent sense of what understanding of ‘early Enlightenment’ Levitin is attacking, so it is necessary to piece it together. Levitin states out the outset (and confirms with a series of remarks in the main text – e.g. p. 95) that ‘it is a central claim of this book that the category [of early enlightenment] obscures more than it reveals about seventeenth-century scholarship’ (p. 8). It is hard to know what to do with such a claim, since it is unclear what historiographical tradition regards ‘enlightenment’ to be a purely or even primarily scholarly phenomenon, or, in any case, a phenomenon whose meaning could be understood within a context as specific as the historiography of philosophy. If anything, claims about an ‘early enlightenment’ and Enlightenment more generally have been about a retreat from scholarship as the preoccupation of educated Europeans and as a site of intellectual vitality (a claim Pocock has done much to dismantle). The arguments of Pocock and Israel with regard to the Enlightenment – Levitin’s main targets here – are not primarily arguments about the chronology of scholarly innovation. They are arguments about an emergent connection between critical scholarship and specific ideological positions. Enlightenment historians will be similarly confused by the charge that they have traditionally disconnected their ‘story of “enlightenment”’ from ‘institutional and cultural context’ (p. 164), since such connections have long been a core concern of practitioners in this field.

It may therefore be more useful to consider the book’s interface with big arguments on a slightly more detailed level. Here again, though, Levitin does not deal with the interconnections among religion, politics, and scholarship as subtly as some might desire. At points he appears to equate the category of ‘early enlightenment’ with the claim that many historians of philosophy in particular and scholars in general working after 1680 were ‘critical’ in a manner that their predecessors in the 1640–80 period were not, or that the post-1680 generation made some sort of clean break from previous scholarship by rejecting it. He places the term ‘critical’ in scare quotes when he refers to its use by historians who argue for radical discontinuity, and sometimes even when he is using it himself. At other points, he is willing to employ the standard of ‘critical acumen (judged by contemporary standards)’ (p. 40). But he neither tells us what he thinks it means to refer to ‘criticism’ in an historically specific manner nor identifies the ahistorical understanding of the term from which he dissents. In fact Levitin appears to associate ‘critical acumen’ not with a procedure or general attitude, but with some specific propositions: ‘the rejection of Jewish and Christian narratives of pagan-Christian syncretism, and new attitudes to the relationship between ancient and modern natural
philosophy’ (p. 8). These propositions were certainly present earlier in the 17th century than historians of later periods have acknowledged, and here Levitin makes a very useful intervention. But such an understanding of ‘criticism’ cannot, of course, be extended beyond this particular context. Readers are left wondering, for instance, what ‘critical philology’ (pp. 53, 54) was.

What we do get in the absence of a broader re-interpretation of the history of criticism is a number of valuable case studies showing that many supposedly Enlightened figures, such as Jean Le Clerc, believed that their work was a continuation of pre-1680 lines of scholarly inquiry. Here again, though, the contribution is usually unclear, because of the way Levitin treats existing work in the field. This can again be seen most vividly in his criticisms of Pocock and Israel. In Levitin’s final chapter on histories of early Christianity, for instance, he rails against Pocock’s definition of ‘what we call the early Enlightenment – meaning the period during which Christian scholarship came to be dominated by critical method, in the formation of which Jean Le Clerc played a leading part’, and Pocock’s description of Protestant Enlightenment as the replacement of theology by its history. Pocock does not actually specify a chronology for these specific developments, and yet chronology is central to Levitin’s entire critique. Levitin might have dealt more fairly with Pocock by pointing out that just before the above quote from Barbarism and Religion, which Levitin cites, Pocock recognizes that his protagonist, Edward Gibbon, venerated and made use not only of post-1680 scholarship like that of Le Clerc, Beausobre, and Mosheim, but also the Jesuit Denis Petau’s Theologica Dogmatica (1644–50) – the very text that is fundamental to Levitin’s entire account of the emergence of critical perspectives on the early church in the English context.(1) Levitin deals similarly with Israel, his ultimate bête noire. Just a page before the passage in Israel’s Enlightenment Contested that Levitin repeatedly cites as the locus classicus for the historiographical tradition against which Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science is written, Israel concedes the following: ‘No doubt Enlightenment historians of philosophy were overly scornful of the humanists, insufficiently appreciating such bold critical spirits of their time as Scaliger and Casaubon’ – the very scholars whom Levitin credits with providing the dominant model of 17th-century humanist historiography.(2) This again isolates how Levitin misses the mark in his criticism. Israel’s and Pocock’s positions depend in large part upon an ideological bias; they do not primarily rest upon a precise chronology of scholarly rigor. Indeed what Israel seems to mean by ‘criticism’ for the most part is impious criticism. It is in the end unclear that Levitin has actually addressed Israel’s thesis head-on. After all, Levitin’s own book is rife with examples of how the theological commitments of his protagonists limited their critical acumen. While there are indeed serious problems with both Pocock’s and Israel’s accounts, this is not the best way to demonstrate it.

At other points, though, Levitin comes much closer to the heart of Israel’s secular liberalism and Pocock’s Whig-liberal perspective, and here his criticism sits on much firmer ground (and consists with arguments already made by other scholars). This occurs when he associates typical assertions about ‘early enlightenment’ with the claim that there was ‘an intrinsic connection between “criticism” and heterodoxy’ (p. 8) and notes, for example, ‘the connection between scholarship and the politics of toleration that has defined almost all work on Le Clerc’ (p. 532). It also comes through when he rightly assails the tendency in extant discussions of late 17th-century English intellectual history to ‘forge a strong (and sometimes reductionist) connection between intellectual change and politics’ by means of a ‘totalising, progressivist narrative’ (p. 13), one guided by the assumption that ‘intellectual change must stem from “outsiders”, and that all intellectual endeavour coming from political non-“liberal” groups must have been counter-innovative’ (p. 14). This, not willful ignorance of the history of scholarship, is the central blind spot in Israel and Pocock’s work. When Levitin quips that if anyone deserves to be called the ‘Quentin Skinner of the early enlightenment’ in terms of scholarly method, it is not, pace Pocock, Le Clerc, but rather the non-juror Henry Dodwell (p. 540), he is upending traditional understandings of Enlightenment by exposing their liberal and secularist blinkers, not by exposing their chronological errors. In the end, then, Levitin’s most valuable revisionist claim is that anti-syncretist accounts of ancient philosophy long predated the 1680s, and while they were often apologetic in inflection, they ‘could hardly be described as “traditional” or reduced to the theology they subscribed to’ (p. 542).

This insight and others like it could have been taken much further in a positive and nuanced direction.
Levitin quotes approvingly Pocock’s admonition to historians, in a review of Steve Pincus’s history of the Glorious Revolution, to avoid the ‘besetting sin’ of the Anglophones: an ‘unwillingness or inability to counter higher than two’ (p. 21). Yet many readers of Pincus will undoubtedly recognize in Levitin a familiar sort of zero-sum, dichotomous argumentation, in which scholarship and ideology do battle and case by case, one is ‘subordinated’ (p. 229) to the other. When Levitin presents his own alternative to Pocock’s and Israel’s sense of an intimate connection between scholarly innovation and particular ideological commitments, he simply rejects the validity of any significant claim about such a relationship, thereby accepting his opponent’s assumption that such a relationship could have only existed in crude form. He ‘finds far fewer connections between developments in intellectual life and in politics’ and ‘accords a much more prominent role to the history of scholarship’ (p. 16). He argues that early modern scholars were primarily ‘operating in a larger context that had nothing to do with “modernity” or overt political, ecclesiological, or other ideological battles: the scholarly fascination with the history of ancient paganism that so infected the republic of letters from the late sixteenth century’. They were mostly motivated, he argues, by sheer wonder: ‘the “ideology” that was most important to the transformation of attitudes to near-eastern philosophy was not a religious heterodoxy or “liberalism” that led to a “comparativist” mentality; rather, it was a curiosity about the subject matter … grounded in the culture of late humanism that had made the subject interesting in the first place’ (pp. 111-12). Levitin repeatedly writes of a concern for ‘truth’ that early modern scholars somehow kept separate from some of their deepest truth commitments, which were of course religious and political in nature. He asserts, for instance, that ‘Henry More’s scholarly assailants ‘did not base their attacks primarily on a political agenda, for they also held a much more fundamental belief: that More was wrong’ (p. 138).

Many readers will undoubtedly conclude from passages like this one that Levitin has simply discarded an ahistorical adoration of early Enlightenment radicals and polite Whig clerics for an equally ahistorical adoration of late Renaissance humanists. At the very least, Levitin seems to equate arguments for the influence of political and religious commitments on scholarship with the straw man that when such influence existed, one’s choice of procedures or one’s preference for rigor or laxity would be completely determined by those commitments. Such a position does not register the sophistication of available scholarship on this thorny problem, and it only makes sense if grounded in an exclusive and ahistorical understanding of truth. Readers will wonder whether Levitin’s own position is in fact rooted in both an over-identification with a subset of historical actors and a set of ahistorical commitments and categories, albeit an assemblage of sympathies, commitments, and concepts rather different from those adopted by Pocock and Israel. Indeed it is hard to avoid the impression that Levitin’s tendency to depoliticize, dehistoricize, essentialize, and causally prioritize scholarship and criticism in early modern Europe is related to the attitudes volunteered in the book’s opening pages. Here Levitin describes Trinity College, Cambridge, as a haven from the contemporary onslaught on serious humanistic scholarship, a process which of course has ideological roots, as do the responses to it. And he dedicates the book, which he describes as a ‘small attempt at serious historical science’, to four scholars who ‘lived most of their lives in a criminal state [the Soviet Union] that tried to deprive them of historical truth’ (pp. vii-viii).

There are, however, other episodes in Levitin’s own discussion that reveal his own discomfort with such a perspective and a partial awareness of how complex the relationship between early modern scholarly practices and political and religious commitments really was. He writes, for instance, that ‘it was precisely the tensions between’ the church’s investment in continental scholarship ‘and the demands of religious and theological apologetics that stimulated many of the most important developments in English attitudes to ancient pagan philosophy and its relationship to Judaeo-Christian ideas’ (p. 19). Relatedly, he argues that English nonconformists ‘struggled to amalgamate new continental scholarship with their theology’, and thus proceeded to ignore or condemn it along with its Anglican descendants (p. 153). ‘The reason for [Theophilus] Gale’s scholarly backwardness’ for instance, was that his ‘whole historical picture was subservient to theological ends that were becoming outdated in the Restoration’ (p. 150). And in general, he is aware that ‘apologetic works were still taken seriously not only as apologetics but also as scholarship’, and that ‘knowledge was a key step on the early part of a clerical career’ (p. 86). He also proposes that if
there is a useful, consistent distinction to be made between scholarship and apologetics in such a world, it would have something to do with the ‘main purpose’ (p. 109) of a given work.

It is at these moments that we can see most clearly how the mass of evidence and fine-grained insights Levitin has assembled in this book can be fit into an alternative series of narrative and explanatory generalizations about late 17th-century intellectual history recently offered by scholars who have a keen interest in making such generalizations. In particular, Levitin’s findings comport well with a new historiography of the early Enlightenment and the ‘religious Enlightenment’ as a whole, not to mention a mostly older literature on authoritarian forms of Enlightenment. These attempts at big argument, which are distinct from the descriptions of ‘early enlightenment’ that Levitin attacks, take on board the pious erudition and political imperatives of the later seventeenth century. They demonstrate that humanism and theology had not been subordinated to philosophy, and many of them highlight the importance of England in the early Enlightenment. A happy future awaits the field as the fruits of Levitin’s formidable efforts are integrated into this existing body of work.

Notes


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