

# Start Here Now: Interview with Constantin Fasolt

Interview conducted by Hansong Li and Paige Pendarvis



Courtesy of the *Chicago Journal of History*

*Constantin Fasolt is the Karl J. Weintraub Professor of History and the College at the University of Chicago. Born in Germany, he studied at Bonn and Heidelberg before moving to the United States to enroll at Columbia University. Author of *Council and Hierarchy* (Cambridge 1991), *Limits of History* (Chicago 2004) and *Past Sense* (Leiden 2014), Professor Fasolt explores the origin, development and limitations of political, social, and legal thought in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. At the University of Chicago, Professor Fasolt teaches a popular course on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. On January 27<sup>th</sup> 2016, he discussed the significance of this book, shared his thoughts on language, history and politics, and talked about his experiences both as a historian and as a teacher with the *Chicago Journal of History* editors.*

**Chicago Journal of History (CJH: HL):** In your early years in Germany as a student, how did you transition from

philosophy to history? Do you think nowadays you're making a detour back to some important philosophical questions that you might have explored had you chosen to be a philosopher in the first place?

**Constantin Fasolt (CF):** I can give you the answer to the second question right away: the answer is yes, except that it is not a detour—I'm not making a detour to those questions, for those are the questions that have preoccupied me all along.

**CJH (PP):** And here is a sub-question I would like to add: how do history and philosophy work together? Do they work together? Nowadays many people would say they should be kept separate, and I imagine you probably don't share that opinion?

**CF:** I have a very different view on that. I can tell you right away that when I started out in Germany, one of my professors, who was a very good historian and whom I respect a great deal, was invited to our house as a guest because my parents also knew him socially. He asked me what I was doing, and I told him—at the time I was at the University of Bonn—that I studied philosophy as my major, along with history and English Language and Literature as my minors, which was possible in those days. And he looked at me and said, "Well, Mr. Fasolt, you can study philosophy, and you can study history, but you can't study both. Take my word for it." So that's the classic, succinct expression that is in its own way a very admirable expression of a point of view according to which philosophy and history are concerned with fundamentally different issues and subjects.

I started out with the question: what can philosophy and history do in order to answer the question I was interested in? And the question I was interested in came directly from the conditions in post-WWII Germany and my social position, because, believe me, you don't have to be a historian to know this: in West Germany after WWII—I was born in 1951 when there were still ruins standing around, with pockmarks and bullets and guns—there were questions: what happened? How was this possible? And it was just in the air, some people talked about it explicitly, some people didn't. In my family, they certainly did not talk about it explicitly, because it was too hard. My father didn't know how to deal with it. I think for both my parents, they belonged to the generation for whom 1945 was a real turning point for their lives, the biggest turning point ever since. They always referred back to that moment, to that time in 1945, in pretty much every conversation that came up—

just always back to it as the point of reference for where we are now. But my parents were not victims, and they were no perpetrators either. My father was a soldier, and my mother basically acted as my grandparents' maid. She was divorced and they were supporting her, so they expected her to work at home, which she did. She had a son, my older and half-brother. My father was badly injured, he almost died. He was injured when he was 22 and not yet 23. Then my parents made it to the end of the war, got married at the end of the war, and I was their oldest child. So they didn't talk about the war. The only thing I've ever heard of the past that I still remember distinctly, from when I was very young, about three or four: my mother said that there had been "a very bad king" in Germany. It was interesting that she said "king".

So I grew up, and for whatever reason, I felt that there was something going on around here, but what it is ain't exactly clear. You know that song? Buffalo Springfield, you should listen to it: "There's something happening here / what it is ain't exactly clear." It's a great piece from the late 1960s. So my memory is that it was like a moral fog, and I didn't know which way to turn and what was going on. But I knew something smells and something is not right. I just knew that. What I didn't know was what it was that went wrong, and what to do with it.

I knew from a very early age that religion wouldn't be of too much use to me. Because I'm baptized Russian orthodox—I had a Russian grandmother who made sure that my sister and I were baptized; I was raised in the catholic Rhineland, with a lot of Carnivals and Mardi Gras. And I was taught Lutheranism at school, because, that anecdote I love: the bureaucrat who registered me when my parents first brought me to school, said, "We only have Lutheran and Catholic, we don't have anything else. You've got to choose, because you have to take instruction." My father was kind of baffled, "Well, he is neither Catholic nor Protestant. He's Orthodox, Russian Orthodox!" And the bureaucrat said, "Well, you Russian Orthodox guys don't like the Pope, do you?" My father responded, "Hmmm, maybe." "Well I guessed so. Then he is Protestant." In this way I experienced all three when I was growing up. Right there I knew that this isn't going to help a whole lot. This is just as confusing as the whole rest of it.

I was pretty good at school. And I couldn't ask my parents. Being a nicely brought up German kid in a humanistic Gymnasium, with very traditional nine years of Latin and five years of Greek, I thought that philosophy was the ticket, because philosophy was about the truth and wisdom, and what's right and what's wrong. So when I was done with school and two years of military service, which was half a year longer than I had to do, but in that way I could earn some money, and I was going to make sure that I wasn't going to be called into service later on, since there was still a general draft at that time—I wanted to avoid that happening after my studies. I studied philosophy and it didn't take me very long to realize that what they taught was interest-

ing, but not about truth or about wisdom. It had nothing to do with those at all. Instead, it had to do with all kinds of complicated and interesting theories, some of which I was already familiar with from school, but not what I was interested in, which was the question: How am I supposed to orient myself? I find myself having landed in this place, at this time, and there is something strange going on. How am I supposed to know which way to go?

Philosophy didn't seem to be of any use to that. So I decided in the span of a couple of years that history would be better. The historians don't make the same big claims as the theorists. They didn't require the same mastery of the big theories. They asked a very simple question, which was: What happened? That may sound old-fashioned, but that's what it was. I thought that makes sense. If I can't get a grand big answer about what is wisdom, at least let's try to figure out what happened. That's what motivated my switch. What also motivated my switch was that I found historians generally to be more approachable people.

**CJH (PP):** I found the same thing.

**CF:** You know, you can talk with them. Philosophers are very difficult. You can't talk to them. So I decided to go on with history, but which field? I had to study ancient, medieval and modern in high school. We had done a lot of ancient, classical, and a lot of modern, although for some strange reason we always ran out of time just when we got to 1933—three or four times, always ran out of time, end of school year—just couldn't get there. The Middle Ages I couldn't understand at all. They seemed bizarre to me. I couldn't figure out what was this world in which people believed in saints and miracles? I couldn't believe they were fools, because the Middle Ages belonged to a lot of people for a long time, and you can fool some of the people all the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all the time. There must have been something that made sense. What was it? I was curious. So I was going to study medieval history. I wasn't going to jump into the Third Reich. Because I was conscious that would be raising the bar too high, that would mean jumping right into it without having developed any kind of tools. That would be trying to tame the tiger without having any experiences in dealing with tigers.

I wanted to avoid that. So at the time I was still at the University of Bonn, I decided to go to Heidelberg, for I had already decided to go to the United States for graduate school, because I had relatives in New York and because I was very dissatisfied with German universities. They were overcrowded and totally undemanding. It was easy to get a faculty member's attention, but you would be constantly surrounded by a sea of students who were discouraging you from working hard. Everybody was supposed to be more or less equal, so if you competed and showed yourself to be good at what you did, you were resented a little bit. Also, people asked the wrong questions—to my mind. Whenever

they asked me what I studied, and I said medieval history, their reaction would be: “why?”, so I had to *justify* it. How am I going to justify that? I just wanted to study medieval history! I had some reasons for it but basically that’s what it was. Whereas in the United States, as I found out later, the reaction is: “Oh how interesting, and what in particular do you want to study?”—it always moves forward. That was one of the reasons I wanted to come to the States.

But I also wanted to spend a year in Heidelberg before I departed for the U.S. because that was supposed to be the best place for philosophy in Germany. There was a great Kantian there, Dieter Henrich; there was still Gadamer there, I took a course with Gadamer since he was still teaching. There was Theunissen still there, as well as Ernst Tugendhat, whom I mentioned in class the other day. I took a seminar with him—he was just wonderful, and it was really worth it. And there, *that* was a philosopher—if I had met him as my first teacher, I could have stayed in philosophy, probably, and not gone to the United States.

But by that time the die was cast and I came to the United States—and that’s how I came to history! And once you’re in it, you’re in academia, and you want to become a professor because you want to have security. You go on to this very, very long professional project, which is a train you can’t get off easily. Once you’re on it, you stay on it. Because first you have to write a dissertation—that was a long dark tunnel, and coming out seven years later, you got a Ph.D., and you’re in the wilderness to look for a job, but at that time there were no jobs...

**CJH (PP):** It sounds like today.

**CF:** Yes, literally for the whole country there were three positions in medieval history in the first year I applied. I was lucky to get a fellowship which started me over. After two years I did get a job—here, but that was early modern history. The department did not want me to do medieval history—and whether it was political or maybe it had to do with relations between faculties here—I did not know why. But it meant that I needed to learn the literature of a new field and be trained in it. Once I was appointed, I was an assistant professor, so that was the next tunnel: now you have to get books published, and you make it to tenure. And that took me up to 1990-1991. So I started my graduate school in 1976, when I was 25, and then in 1991 when I was 40, I got tenure. By that time you have been on this train for so long, and you’re a little exhausted, and you have projects that you’ve started and that you have to finish. It takes some time to slow down, which it did.

But I think about 5 years after that, in my mid 40s or so, I remembered, as it were—I didn’t need to remember since this was still on my mind—why I had got into history in the first place. The reason it was still on my mind is that I was teaching undergraduates. That’s a great thing about teaching undergraduates. When you’re teaching graduate students, you’re dealing with professional issues, whereas

when you teach undergraduates, you’re dealing with really big questions. In Columbia it’s called CC (Contemporary Civilization in the West), here the same course is not Western Civ or European Civ, but Classics of Social and Political Thought—they are basically the same course. You’re dealing with: “What is justice?” “How is a polity to be constructed?” “Is there such a thing as natural slavery?” “What’s the relationship between men and women?” “Should there be communism in property?” “Is private property good or bad?” “Is equality a value?” These are all hot-button questions. You have 25 students in class, they are all smart, and they are all looking at you. And you can really mix it up!—about real questions—if you’re honest, and if you want to stand behind it. As a teacher I didn’t respect those teachers who refuse to tell you what they thought on the ground that they are supposed to be objective: *I’m not going to give you my opinion, but I will only stick to what I can document, and what is objective*—which is crock, you know that right? You can see through it that it was crock. The only effect that had was to make it a little harder to figure out what he is really saying or what she really thinks, because they’re not being clear and honest about it. But they are saying it anyway—in some other kind of way.

So I didn’t mind talking about it. And in that regard I never forgot those kinds of questions which I had been interested in: “How do we orientate ourselves?” “Does history help?” “How does history help?” So I got back to philosophy. I looked around a lot. I read Kant and I went back a little bit to Aristotle. I didn’t go back to Plato. I read a lot more in contemporary philosophy. I started reading Foucault and did read a little bit of Derrida, and I went back to read more of Nietzsche, and some literary criticism such as Roland Barthes, and all those things—I was scrounging around and was disappointed. There didn’t seem to be anything new there. I read Heidegger very seriously for a while, and I got disappointed by him too. Heidegger was quite different. Nietzsche seemed to me to be going in the most promising direction, the clearest case of somebody actually doing something different from the great tradition, and Heidegger, too—but Heidegger was so deeply problematic, not just because he was associated with the Third Reich, unfortunately, but because of his thinking, what he really gives you.

And then I remembered Wittgenstein. I remembered I read this book, but it didn’t mean anything to me. I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. And it was stuck in my memory—precisely because I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Because I knew this must be important and I couldn’t figure out why, so I decided I was going to try that. And I was really lucky that James Conant was here, and he pointed me in the right direction. I worked really hard—I mean not “hard” because I really loved doing it—for 15 years, really got into the text, and began to see a relationship between history and philosophy that I hadn’t seen before. Because Wittgenstein is a profoundly historical thinker: he doesn’t study history as a professional, and he certainly doesn’t

think of history as an object in the past. But he *does* think of human beings as historical creatures of language, time and space, and he opens one's eyes to the fact that you cannot understand anything you say without knowing its history in some sense, if only by having been trained in certain customs, if only that way. So philosophy in his mind is essentially about winning clarity about the custom you practice, okay? So, that's history! But it's not history, because it doesn't work with documents. It's not about documenting something, but it's the other side of documents: how you deal with it—how you get at the meanings of the documents, and it opens up a whole new field of thought and research, you might say, because how you get at the meaning of historical documents is itself a historical process that changes, and that is not properly captured by talking about cultural history. Cultural history does not capture what is at issue in the changing customs and issues Wittgenstein has in mind when he talks about “our shared form of life”—they are conceptually and basically different.

The historians who have gotten the closest to it, to my mind, are those of the Annales School—the old ones, especially Lucien Febvre. He came closest to it, and there are many lines in his work where he expresses something similar, but he didn't have the language for it: his term was *mentalités*. If you understand it correctly and sympathetically you can see how similar it is to what Wittgenstein has to say. But that's also easy to turn this into an object of study, an object out there in the past, without preserving the philosophical significance or preserving the fact that we are engaged, ourselves, we are challenged by this history.

Since I mentioned it here, I'll draw your attention to a quote, where he says, on page 2 of *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*:

History is the daughter of time. I say this not, surely, to disparage her. Philosophy is the daughter of time. Even physics is the daughter of her own time; the physics of Langevin was not that of Galileo, and Galileo's was no longer that of Aristotle. Was there progress from one to the other? I hope so. But, as historians, let's speak of adaptations to the times. Every period mentally constructs its own universe. It constructs it not only out of all the materials at its disposal, all its facts (true or false) that it has inherited or acquired, but out of its own gifts, its particular cleverness, its qualities, its talents, and its interests—everything that distinguishes itself from the preceding period. Similarly, every period mentally constructs its own image of the historical past...<sup>1</sup>

You can see how similar that is to Wittgenstein's thinking. And you can also see how easy it is to misread it in a

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1 *The problem of unbelief in the sixteenth century, the religion of Rabelais*, by Lucien Febvre, translated by Beatrice Gottlieb, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

positivist kind of sense. In the sense that, okay, now we have a document, this “mentality”, and let's study how this mentality happened; rather than recognizing how important the point is that we as historians, right now, in writing our history, are presenting our own time. It is precisely by writing history that we are representing, not the past, but our own time. That's what I got from doing philosophy again. And since then I have written a few articles about Wittgenstein and how historians might benefit from reading Wittgenstein. And since I'm going to retire next year, I can say this is a very good time for me to retire. Essentially I've found out and answered the question I wanted to answer. The question was: can history help us orient ourselves in our own time? And the answer is: yes, if you know where you are. So it can and it can't, right? It can help you but you've got to know how to go about doing it. That means, you've got to start here now. And if you try to understand the past, you could learn a lot where you are at, but you've got to start with what you're thinking now, what you've been taught, with what you've been told, what you believe is true, and what you believe is false. And being here and now includes having a past, which we are studying. So it's where it all comes together again. So problem solved, now I have to move on to something else.

**CJH (PP):** That was an incredible answer.

**CF:** That was a long answer.

**CJH (PP):** Yes but it was great.

**CF:** Well you can see how I thought about it, in a spiel.

**CJH (PP):** So, we're interested in the story behind the Wittgenstein class—why you decided to teach it, when, and why in the way you do, with undergraduates, and how is it different to teach a class on Wittgenstein versus teaching a course on Civilizations and the Classics, or a class on the Protestant Reformation?

**CF:** Well, it's different because it's not so much teaching a subject, for instead of a subject I'm teaching a book. And I'm a member of the Fundamentals faculty, and it has always been my alibi, because as a member of Fundamentals I'm supposed to teach great books. That's what they want people to do. And Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is a great book and is being taught in the philosophy department. But I'm not teaching it as a professional philosopher, but at a much more rudimentary level, deliberately trying to do no more, as I say in the syllabus, than to make the book accessible so you can get across the first big hurdle. So you don't have to wait for thirty years, like I did, before you can get across that hurdle. And that's why I teach it, for I think it's extremely valuable. I think it's a book that can really change people's attitude toward a lot of things. It can be very encouraging—I find it an extremely encouraging and

positive book, although that's certainly not necessarily the case, for I can also imagine people getting quite depressed by it—he certainly himself wasn't particularly cheerful about contemporary conditions.

So once I had read it, I had begun to understand it for real, I thought this was important, because what you can learn from this book goes beyond what you learn in the discipline, you learn to think in a certain kind of way, to look at the world in a certain kind of way, to think differently about your responsibilities and your places in society—and all of that changes, which is how it should be, right? It is exactly what the book is about. If you take it seriously, it changes you. That makes it a great book, if it changes you. That's what brought me to teach it to undergraduates. Because with graduate students I can only teach it as a professional subject. That's interesting in its own right. And it's certainly valuable for graduate students to learn about Wittgenstein in a professional sense. But if you're a graduate student, you're mainly focused on a subject matter on which you are going to write your dissertation, then you can't be distracted. Wittgenstein would create a distraction, unless you're studying Wittgenstein as a historian, which would be quite different from what happens in this course. You could do that too, it's an interesting subject, and that's one way you could keep in touch with his book, while writing a dissertation on history. But it would be very different.

So those are the reasons why I start teaching it, and as for when I started teaching it, let me look (checking records)—that was a reading course in 2007, with a small group of three undergraduate students, that was when I was master of Social Sciences Collegiate Division. Then my official teaching load was a little bit reduced, so I could do something on the side. There were other reading courses in spring of 2008, and then in spring 2009 I taught the *Philosophical Investigations* for the first time, so that was seven years ago. And again in 2011, 2013, and I taught it to graduate students in fall 2012. Since 2013 I haven't taught it.

**CJH (HL):** For a long time the password to *Chicago Journal of History* editorial board's email account was "Wittgenstein".

**CF:** Ah really? That's cute.

**CJH (HL):** You opened the article "History, Law, and Justice: Empirical Method and Conceptual Confusion in the History of Law" with a reference to "Wittgenstein's lifelong attempt to banish meaninglessness from thought and speech."<sup>2</sup> To what extent would the 'banishment of

meaninglessness' lead to some kind of 'pointlessness' in discussing things such as religious debates? Do you think that some historians, theologians or students who study the history of religion, would be discontent with the notion that religious debates, such as the one between Catholics and Protestants, are mere talking-past each other, rather than something more essential to their understanding?

**CF:** Well, these debates *are* essentially meaningful, and there's no doubt about that. The question is: what is the meaning? What Wittgenstein teaches you is that you will never get at the meaning of the conflict, if you ask, "What's the difference between Protestantism and Catholicism?" It's not going to work because you're talking at too abstract a level. Forget about this abstraction, get down to the nitty-gritty, get down to a particular thing that is being debated, something that is particular, where people disagree with one another, on the grounds that one is Catholic and the other is Protestant, and ask yourself: what are they disagreeing about? What do they mean, really? Be serious about that, dig as hard as you can, and don't take any short cuts—which means essentially: be a good historian. Do what you have to do as a historian. Once you've done your work, once you've gone through this whole area and examined all these particulars, then you can say what I believe Catholicism means in this time and in this place is x, on the basis of what I've looked at in particular. But don't start with it in the abstract, but rather with particular knowledge of particular things that are different from each other, specifics that are irreducibly different. That's what historians study and should study. So that's one way Wittgenstein can help historians, simply by freeing that up for them to do what they are supposed to do in the first place—studying particulars.

Another way is by freeing them up to spend less time on questions about the possibility of knowing the past and the like. Historical theory is its own area of investigation, and that's fine, and there's a history of historical theory, as well as lots of specifics there that one might want to study. But it's important to recognize that whatever you learn from historical theory is not going to be of much use in historical practice. Somebody for whom I have great respect, a Catholic Church historian, Hubert Jedin, great historian who wrote the *History of the Council of Trent*. I knew him because he was a professor in Bonn. I think I may have mentioned this to you before: he taught me a few things in private conversation, after he had retired, when he realized that I was going into history. One of the things he said was, "You have to understand that there is no such thing as a historical method. There're only historical questions, and every question requires its own method. Whatever it is that you need to do to answer the question, that's the method and it differs from question to question. You've got to do different kinds of things for different questions." So

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2 Constantin Fasolt, "History, Law, and Justice: Empirical Method and Conceptual Confusion in the History of Law," in "Law As ..." III: *Glossolalia: Toward a Minor (Historical) Jurisprudence*, ed. Christopher L. Tomlins (Irvine, CA: University of California Irvine School of Law, 2015), p. 416.

that's the particular. Go for the particular—that I firmly believe. That's tremendously liberating for historians. I think there're far too many historians, especially younger historians, who are impeded, by a sense of obligation they feel to contribute to the study of contemporary or 17<sup>th</sup> century culture, so they start with an abstract concept rather than a concrete question. You want to have a specific question. Whatever it is, if that's what you're interested in, you can fit it into cultural history, social history, intellectual history, or whatever it is. Those are secondary. The primary is: what do you want to know? What do you mean? What do you want to talk about? That's all there is to it. That's what Wittgenstein disciplines you to do: to take seriously the question "what do you mean?" and not to gloss over it too quickly. And the particular area important to me is when we talk about the middle ages and modernity: what do you mean?

**CJH (PP):** We distinguish between two kinds of conflicts. The first is one in which we are really talking about the same things, such as justice, but have different opinions on what just actions are. The second is where we debate over different things. It might seem obvious as to how to differentiate between the two levels, but I imagine there must be many grey areas. So how is anyone, historians in particular, supposed to be able to figure out the nature of the conflict at hand?

**CJH (HL):** It's easier to say, for example, that terrorism overthrows the entire language-game, because the terrorists refuse to listen to the other side, than to draw such lines in subtler instances.

**CF:** First of all you're supposed to draw the lines with respect to the particulars, and that means making judgments, which in turn requires using the terms of a given language. And the using of a given language means a commitment to the community where that language is used. And that's politics. It's political not in the sense of Left versus Right, Party versus Party, where speaking in the same language—the terms you choose in order to speak about x y and z are the most crucial decision you'll ever make in the historical work, what terms do you choose? It's one of the basic historical questions. You cannot choose the terms of the past because those are the terms you need to understand and to explain. You've got to start with *your* terms, for you can't start with their terms. You can't start in Latin, instead you start with whatever *your* language is and then you learn Latin to figure out what *they* meant by it. You start with your terms and teach with your terms. And you cannot do that without making a political commitment—not to this party or that party, but to using this language and making these judgments.

For example, big changes that have happened: I don't think anybody nowadays could talk about slavery, meaning it in the way Aristotle is presumed to have meant it, and say it's natural. We can't talk about it that way. This is not

how we can use that term. When we call somebody a slave we are talking about a human being whose rights are being denied. That's just what we mean. And you can't take that out of the discourse. When we are talking about slaves, we are talking about human beings who do not enjoy the rights they ought to have, and when we are talking about slaves in the past, we run into a serious political disagreement with the past. Or even in the present. Because there were people who thought what we call slavery is justified, who say, no, nobody is being denied their rights here—they don't own any rights in the first place, for they aren't capable of being self-governing people, whereas we find that abhorrent, and we say this is wrong. And we wouldn't argue this as historians, but it's disingenuous to claim that the conflict between these terms is not political. Addressing the issues that we address in the way we address them implies a political commitment, not because we make explicit political judgments, or because we express politico-historical opinions, but because we make claims about the past, and we're acting as good historians. And we call it, whatever it is that we study, what we believe "It is" rather than "It was", and for that reason, we use our terms and that implies a judgment—a judgment of a very basic kind: what it was. When we talk about slavery, we ask "What was slavery?" Can we ignore our commitment to human rights? No we can't. We can't ignore it without taking a stab—you may take another stance but still you're taking a stab.

You can seek to understand. You can say: the crusaders did not want to commit acts of violent aggression against the Muslims, that's not what they meant—they meant to recover the holy land and to wipe out infidels, horror on the face of the earth—that's what they meant, or what they intended. But we cannot say that's what they did. When we write the history, we cannot say, "the Crusaders went into the Middle East to restore the holy land and wipe out infidels, and bring peace, justice and Christian rule to the world" we can say that but we can't leave it like that. Because they did more than this, and any good historian nowadays would have to say that it's not all they did, they also committed an unprovoked act of aggression against Muslims. Does that make sense?

**CJH (HL):** Yes, very much. And since we've mentioned the possibility of knowing and doing history, we will quickly make a reference to the paragraph on Moses in the *Philosophical Investigations*. That there're multiple things we could mean by the question "did Moses exist or not?"—whether we're asking about the figure's biography, a person with the name in that time and place, the happening of an event, and so on—what do you think is its implication for historians?

**CF:** I think its significance is that it removes a great deal of historical skepticism and grounds for historical skepticism. In so far as we know anything at all and it makes sense to know things—it makes sense to say that we know there

was somebody called Moses, somebody, some figure, even if that figure existed only in the mythical imagination, we don't say so, because we have some historical evidence for the existence of somebody called Moses. We might say, well we are not sure, but certainly we know what we mean. And that's arguable. But what's wrong with that? Everything is arguable. There's nothing wrong with saying: well maybe you say it's blue, but I call it violet. Okay then call it violet so long as we know what we're talking about! Don't say that, because you call it violet, I don't know what I'm talking about. Don't say, because the border between blue and violet is not precisely defined, that I don't know what I mean when I call something blue. That's not a valid criticism.

There're a lot of things about the past that we know. The same goes for plenty of things in the present. And this skepticism—this sterile questioning of the possibility of knowing the past just doesn't get anywhere. It doesn't yield any kind of fruit. And there's a great piece by Diamond called "Dante's Skies and Our Skies", where she points out that, yes, there're a lot of changes, but there're also a lot of things that stay the same. People cried a thousand years ago but they still cry—it hasn't changed. There was a sky a thousand years ago. And people were talking about the sky in the same way we're talking about it. Never mind that astronomy has changed. We're talking about the same earth. Never mind we don't mean by earth the exact same thing they meant at that time, that we have different ideas about what the earth is, we can be damn sure that whatever they talked about the "earth"—it is this one! To doubt that is absurd.

**CJH (PP):** I feel that you've already provided an answer to the next question, but I'm going to ask it anyway in case you have something to add: is human nature historical?

**CF:** Yes, in terms of Wittgenstein I firmly believe it. Exactly, it is historical. I believe that one of the fundamental lessons one can draw from Wittgenstein is that a very serious intellectual problem is created at the moment you oppose nature to history, or culture. The ancient Greek sophists who drew for the first time a categorical distinction between nature and culture created that problem, because these are abstract concepts. And the moment you create that opposition, you have to ask yourself, how is nature related to culture? What comes first? And this question is a metaphysical question. It's not the right way to go about it, because you don't know what you mean and you don't know what you're talking about. And this is what you can learn from Wittgenstein. You can't separate these things that way. And the great thing about the Greek word for nature is that the word actually embodies this idea, for the word φύσις means growth, the process or the result of growth—so there's something growing that happens in time. So history in the sense of development that occurs over time, is embedded in the Greek word for nature, and also embedded in the word is that history is not merely cultural. In Aristotle, humans are by nature speaking animals. We have

the ability to speak by nature. Whether we develop it or not is a different matter. That depends on training. That's culture—being surrounded by different circumstances and having different kinds of teachers. I'd be happy to call that culture, but it works with nature and directly on nature, for it is grounded in nature. It's not grounded in our biological nature because this very concept of biology presupposes a radical distinction between what you might call dead matter, and spirit. In this way, biology is just about the physics of the body, it's not about the mind—well, there's something wrong about that concept.

**CJH (HL):** As you've said, Dante's sky stays the same. But is there another dimension in which some significant change in our "form of life" leads to a new language, and in this way, misleads us?

**CF:** That's a really important question on which I changed my mind over time. I began with the very common use of the term "form of life" as a kind of equivalent to "culture". And to say that the medieval people had a different form of life from ours, and in this first article you'll read this weekend, Barry Stroud's "Wittgenstein and Logical Necessity", he makes a strong case that this is a mistake. There is only one human form of life that all human beings share. Because any human being can understand in principle the language and culture of any other human being, there's no mutual exclusivity. It's possible that there's nothing that anybody can say that nobody can possibly understand. There's nothing that anybody can do that nobody else could possibly not understand. There may be a whole lot of things that people *do* that nobody else *does* understand. That may happen. But that's a different issue. It *could* be understood. And in that sense, we all share the same form of life. That notwithstanding, we are deeply divided by our commitment to different terms, and that division is political. We exist only in political communities. And there are many of them and they are different from each other. There is no single human *polis*. This idea of a *cosmopolis* doesn't exist, because everybody speaks *a* language and there's no such thing as *the* language of human beings. There are only many languages, but that doesn't mean you can't translate one into the other. Every community has its own standards of right and wrong, which doesn't mean that you can't learn to understand the standards of the other communities. And if you refuse to learn them because you think they are abhorrent, and you can't come to agreement at all because you really disagree at a profound level, well, then you're fighting with each other. That's all it is. You are fighting. You're fighting over who uses the right term—not over who is right. And that's all you can say about it. Wittgenstein says, at that point, there would be all kinds of slogans, but that is just the reality. Either you are fighting or you are trying to persuade like missionaries.

But no matter how much you try to persuade—maybe you won't persuade them, maybe they would just say "no,

go away”. And that’s human reality. But just because there is no such thing as *the* human language does not mean that we do not share the same form of life. In the same sense, even though human beings are divided deeply into communities with very different *standards of right and wrong*, that does not mean that these political differences prevent human beings from understanding the *difference between right and wrong*. All human beings can understand that, which is why human beings can learn to understand the standards of another community—and may disagree with them! But it’s not beyond their judgment. They can judge it. They must judge it. And they do judge it in whichever community they stay with—where they go, where they stay, what terms they use. That’s how they make a judgment. Just as you don’t need a universal language in order to explain how individual humans speak, you don’t need a universal code of ethics, which I think was Wittgenstein’s point. Wittgenstein says you can’t talk about ethics, for there are only specific bodies of ethics, not absolute ones—it doesn’t make any sense to talk about that.

**CJH (PP):** Moving away from some of these philosophical questions, in your experiences, what is unique about being a historian at University of Chicago? That is by contrast to your experiences at other institutions. You’ve been here pretty much for your entire career?

**CF:** Almost for my entire professional life. I received my Ph.D. from Columbia and continued at Columbia for a couple of years. I’ve been here since then. I did teach for one year at the University of Virginia as a visiting professor. I’ve taught at Notre Dame University, also as a visiting professor, but for a semester only. Obviously as a student I saw different universities in Germany. This university and this department, as a representative of this university, is great in that the bottom line is intellectual quality. That’s what counts. That’s the bottom line. Every place has its politics, every institution is politics, but I don’t know of any other institution of higher learning in which the reason for which we have universities is the maintenance of intellectual standards, and where production of knowledge is treated with the respect that it is treated here.

And that may be changing, and may be moving in a wrong direction, I don’t know that. But I consider myself to be very lucky to be here for that reason, because that’s a *shared agreement!* That’s a shared commitment, which does make this university different from other universities. What often makes a big difference is that everybody has to teach in the Core Curriculum. Everybody has to teach in the College. And I appreciate that greatly. I’m a firm believer in the general education courses and the Core Curriculum. I think it plays an invaluable role. Not everybody agrees with that. And the other unique thing is that we have a lot of freedom to teach what we want to teach. So long as we teach one CORE course each year. That is the requirement, but other than that, we have a lot more freedom than

faculties in other universities, including the freedom to co-teach with other faculty members and to cross disciplinary boundaries. If I want to do something with people in the Humanities Division or the Divinity School, I can. It’s easy. It’s encouraged. Interdisciplinary venues are encouraged so long as they make some kind of intellectual sense. At other universities, when I was in Virginia, I knew a faculty couple very well, where the wife was a sociologist. And she was deeply frustrated because she couldn’t get a foothold in the anthropology department. Because they are different departments and different disciplines! And given that the questions were both sociological and anthropological, with regard to the methods, it didn’t make sense to divide it that way. But the institution wouldn’t allow it.

**CJH (HL):** Do you have any plans for the future after retirement?

**CF:** Yes I do. First of all I’m going to breathe, inhale and exhale. I’ve been doing that a little already. Since I signed on the dotted line, which is a little over a year ago, I’ve already felt that I’m committed, and it’s just a matter of time now. For as a faculty member I made a contract with the university. We have this very formal and beneficial program. That’s one of the reasons it’s great to be here. The university treats the faculty extremely well compared to many other places. And we have great students here too, not to forget that! The students in the College are fantastic. It’s just a privilege to be teaching at this college. So I signed this deal at the University office, faculty committed to retire a year ago, and I’ve been in a kind of retirement mode since then—or preparatory retirement mode.

When the retirement actually comes I will be leaving this office. I will be leaving and staying instead on the North Side with my wife. And I have my faculty study so I may come here now and then. And once I’ve inhaled and exhaled, what my wife and I both want to do is to write and to travel when we are not writing, and maybe sometimes travel and write at the same time, while we are still ambulatory. We hope that’s going to be another 15-20 years or so. But you never know, because it gets hard to move around. It’s already hard with jetlag. I’m only in my mid-60s but jetlag makes so much difference that I would much rather fly to somewhere south of here than somewhere far to the west or to the east. As for writing what, I have a few scholarly commitments that I have had for a long time that I need to work on my desk, and I will at some point. And I do want to write a book about what I’ve learnt about European history from studying the history and from studying Wittgenstein. That has been hanging over my head for a little more than ten years. I have found in my mind the right way to write it. But as you can learn from Wittgenstein, to think you have performed an experiment—the result of an experiment you have imagined—is not the same as the result of an experiment you have performed. I think I got it, but when I start to write, it becomes very difficult. So difficult



that I couldn't do it while I'm teaching, and too difficult for me to do on the couple of leaves I have had since I conceptualized this book. I made a lot of headway every time, but I haven't gotten far enough. So that's the big thing I want to do next and I don't know when I'm going to finish that.

**CJH (PP):** You've talked about how much you admire the Core Curriculum here. So if you were an undergraduate student—we planned to ask you what Civilizations sequence you would take, but let us open it up to the entire CORE—what Core Curriculum classes would you like to take?

**CF:** I don't know what you would want to take as a student because students come to the university for very different reasons. What you should take as a student I can tell you, because I have a perspective on that.

**CJH (PP):** Sure!

**CF:** I think you should take European Civ. Because I think it's the course that exemplifies best what you could learn from reading primary sources. Although increasingly, that characteristic of European civilization is losing its significance. The course is looking more and more like other courses, in which the reading may be very highly stressed, but still they essentially serve as a kind of illustration, rather than the basis on which you actually learn. Still, I believe that.

Ideally you would take another Civ. You should take two Civs: European Civ and another one. We used to have that requirement until the 80s. I think you should take SOSC Core in one of the great SOSC Core classes: Self, Torture and Anxiety ("Self, Culture and Society"), or Power ("Power, Identity, and Resistance"), or "Classics of Social and Political Thought". One of those three—those are the great ones. You should take that because the Social Sciences Core still has a real coherence. In the Humanities Core you are going to get great teachers and you will read great texts—and maybe "Human Being and Citizen" still has some coherence, I don't want to speak of that and I don't know, and maybe the new Linguistics sequence has a certain kind of coherence, but they are always changing—but broadly speaking, the humanists are more deeply divided than the historians and the social scientists—we are deeply divided enough. The Social Sciences Core still has a coherence that allows you to fulfil the purpose of an undergraduate general education program. I don't know about Math but I think it's probably the same there, thanks to the great work that Paul Sally, in particular, did. And I don't know about the sciences. The Sciences have always been a problem, because there is just so much technical stuff that you have to learn before you can go into the lab. In principle being in the lab is the same thing as reading the primary sources and the great books. But before you go into the lab there is something else that has to happen.

**CJH (HL):** Have you observed any major changes that have happened to the field of historical scholarship?

**CJH (PP):** Another way to put this question is: in what ways have you seen the historical profession changed since you first entered it decades ago?

**CF:** I've seen changes in a lot of ways. First of all when I entered it, gender history was still very much in its beginnings. And history of women, this was late 70s and early 80s. And now it's a very established field to the degree that everybody recognizes that gender is a crucial aspect of any kind of history you are going to teach, because it's all gender in some one way or another. And that is a very big change. At the time when I started, the division was really between political and diplomatic historians, economic historians, historians of society, and intellectual historians. And then of course there were national historians. Cultural history really took off then, and that's now become a really big field. All kinds of transnational history are now there that didn't exist before, as well as environmental history.

So there's been growth of whole fields of study, and what I would say overall is that when I started, the basic question about the relationship between mind and matter still structured the historical discourse in some way. There were sort of materialists, and there were clearly idealists—it didn't really go away. But that issue has now lost its valence, partly thanks to the rise of cultural history, because culture is neither material nor intellectual—it's both, or it tries to be both, say history of material culture—you have it in the concept. Microhistory was one way of responding to the theoretical impasse that people had encountered in trying to solve the problem "is it matter or is it mind" and recognize that it doesn't really work. So people went into microhistory. The serious Marxist history of class analysis was still very vibrant when I first started. And that really is no longer the case. There's much less of that. You know, E. P. Thompson had tremendous influence at that time. I know he is still a great classic, his work is a classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*, but class history from a Marxist point of view has been tamed in a way. Whereas back then it got the blood boiling, today it's much less passionate and maybe less interesting. Also there has been a real development of theory of history and a lot of postmodern soul-searching. Can we know the past? And now we've entered a new phase. And it's very clear that now people are in a mode of forgetting about all that stuff. Instead, they say: let's go back to brass tacks and study things. And there is a proliferation of new subjects and we are studying them specifically. People are trying to get out of the old national boxes and disciplinary boxes.

That's very healthy. But I would say something else. Take the big picture: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century history and politics were intertwined. The state, and the historians, they were parallels. The historians were either for the state or they over-

turned the state. To overturn the state that took a while to happen because historians were so firmly associated with the state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that anti-state historians had a hard time establishing themselves in the profession, although eventually they did. That situation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is no longer the case. That's over and done with. History no longer has that kind of prestige in the contemporary world, and all that kind of significance. I don't know what took its place. Something is supposed to have taken its place, and maybe something could take its place. But I do believe that from that point of view a lot of air has gone out of the historical enterprise. The tire is not yet quite flat, but it is no longer as well-pumped up. It's not rolling so well.

**CJH (HL):** Do you have any advice for history students?

**CJH (PP):** For those who would like to become historians, the new generation of scholars.

**CF:** Advice? If you want to study history, my advice would be to go out and study history! The key to being satisfied with what you are doing is to find something you really want to deal with. You have to find a question that really motivates you and really try to answer it the best way you can. Do what you need to do and follow the advice of the faculty who will point you toward the right direction that you need to go in order to find the best available answers. And that means going from reading only primary sources to reading the professional historical scholarship. You have to read the professional historical scholarship. The textbooks won't do much good to you, and only reading primary sources won't do you much good either. The analogy I always like to use is that, undergraduates who say, I don't believe in the secondary scholarship, I only want to learn from the primary sources, because all of these narrow-minded professional stuff is...you know, reading Descartes, that's what is great. Anybody who says that is like somebody who says, I want to study nature, so I'm going to do what Newton did. I'm going to go out and look at the apples falling from the tree and come up with a theory. It doesn't work that way. There's a lot of disciplinary scaffolding that you have to master before you can get to where it makes sense. So that's my advice. Why did you laugh?

**CJH (HL):** Because it is true that in this intellectual atmosphere, in particular, we tend to appreciate the authenticity of primary sources as the *true* documents. So I find what you said a very accurate portrayal of students' mentality.

**CF:** Right.

**CJH (PP):** That's not why I laughed.

**CF:** Why did you laugh?

**CJH (PP):** Because I was in the midst of doing my own history for the first time. I've never lost sight of the secondary sources. They haunt me day and night.

**CF:** That's good, they should.

**CJH (PP):** And sometimes I almost think that I get a little too caught up in what others say, so I forget that I can say something about them.

**CF:** Not only can you, you must.

**CJH (HL):** Do you think it's the same for other fields, for example, philosophy?

**CF:** Yes, and that is my experience, right? When you are young and naïve you go into philosophy and you think you are going to study Kant and Plato. But when you are actually in the field you realize that you will be studying what X, Y and Z have written about Kant and Plato's theory of so and so. It's taken for granted that you've read Kant and Plato. So yes, I think it's very similar.

**CJH:** Thank you very much!



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