

interpretation

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The Denial of Perennial Problems: The Negative Side of Quentin Skinner's Theory

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The methodological writings of Quentin Skinner have, in recent years, generated a great deal of controversy. His severe attacks upon the prevalent methods commonly employed by historians of political thought have provoked an equally forceful response. This response tends to focus upon his positive prescriptions for recovering the intentions of the authors of literary and discursive texts.¹ There is nothing new about stressing the need to retrieve authorial intentions. Leo Strauss, for example, advances the view in order to counter historicist tendencies in the study of the history of political philosophy. Skinner, however, derives much of his inspiration from some of the historicist sources that Strauss had strongly opposed.² Strauss is a firm believer in the existence of perennial problems in the history of political philosophy,³ whereas Skinner combines the thoughts of Croce, Collingwood, and J. L. Austin into an intentionalist theory which he uses to deny the permanence of any problems.

There are two distinguishable aspects to Skinner's theoretical writings, both of which arise from his conclusion that understanding a text necessarily entails recovering the meaning the author intended to convey. First, there is the positive aspect of his theory, which prescribes the general procedure a historian must adopt for the recovery of intentions. This involves the construction of contexts of conventions which circumscribe the limits to what an author was able to do with the vocabulary available to him.⁴ The second aspect of the theory pertains to the

I would like to thank the anonymous reader who made such helpful suggestions for the improvement of this paper. I am also indebted to Dr. Joseph Femia for his general encouragement, and for his incisive comments on the penultimate draft.

1. Reference to the most important criticisms of Skinner will be found in his "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action," *Political Theory*, 2 (1974), 277-303. The most perceptive appraisals and critiques published after 1974 include Lotte Mulligan, Judith Richards and John Graham, "Intentions and Conventions: A Critique of Quentin Skinner's Method for the study of the History of Ideas," *Political Studies*, XXVIII (1979), 141-48; Michael Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), chap. 1; Joseph V. Femia, "An Historicist Critique of 'Revisionists' Methods for Studying the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, XX (1981), 112-34; Keith Graham, "How do Illocutionary Descriptions Explain?" *Ratio*, XXII (1981), 124-35; Deborah Baungold, "Political Commentary on the History of Political Theory," *American Political Science Review*, 75 (1981), 928-40; John Gunnell, "Interpretation and the History of Political Theory: Apology and Epistemology," *The American Political Science Review*, 76 (1982), 317-27.

2. See, for example, Leo Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *The Review of Metaphysics*, V (1952), 559-86.

3. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), p. 14.

4. See, for example, Q. Skinner, "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts," *Philo-*

generation of a variety of historical mythologies by those who subscribe to the belief that great texts embody timeless elements which contribute to the resolution of the perennial problems. This is the negative side of Skinner's doctrine, and from it arises prescriptions concerning what the historian ought not to do.

It is the negative aspect of Skinner's doctrine that provides the focus for this study. The first part of this paper deals with the argument against the existence of perennial problems, and with Skinner's criticisms of the methods employed by historians of political thought. In the second section I will offer a critique of Skinner's negative views and suggest that his own historical practice fails to avoid many of the mythologies he castigates other historians for perpetuating. My concluding remarks are presented in the third section.

I

Both Croce and Collingwood formulate an argument which affirms the historicity of every utterance. Every statement is, for them, given in answer to a question, or is intended to solve a problem: "Not only does the answer presuppose the question, but every answer implies a certain question."⁵ Collingwood goes a step further than this and maintains that no statement can be understood in isolation from the question it was meant to answer. If we do not get the question right, then we are bound to misunderstand the answer. In this respect the questions to which a text of political philosophy may have been addressed will not be self-evident. Questions are often supposed by authors to be in the minds of their audiences. As times change, these questions may lose their significance and no longer appear in the mind of the reader. Consequently, the question asked by the author can only be historically reconstructed.⁶ Each question, for Croce, although it may appear to be the same as others, will always be different, "because the words, even when they seem to be materially the same, are in effect different, according to the spiritual differences of those who pronounce them."⁷ Collingwood expands upon this and argues that the questions that we identify past philosophers answering are not unchanging entities: they belong to different question and answer complexes. Thus he denies that there are any perennial problems in history.⁸

The work of J. L. Austin enables Skinner to suggest that people do more things with words than answer questions. The idea of an illocutionary force is

sophical Quarterly, 20 (1970), 121–38; Q. Skinner, "The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon," *Essays in Criticism*, XXIX (1979), 209–11.

5. Benedetto Croce, *Logic as the Science of the Pure Concept*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (London: Macmillan, 1917), p. 208.

6. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), Chap. V.

7. Croce, *Logic*, 209.

8. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, pp. 67–68; R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 72.

crucial here. Austin argued that people perform acts when they use words. Exactly the same word sequence can be employed to perform a variety of acts. For example, the word sequence "clean the floor with a toothbrush" can be an order, a plea, an exhortation, or perhaps even a joke. The speech act performed depends upon the context in which the words are uttered, and upon the conventions invoked in performing actions of that kind. A condition of the successful performance of speech acts is that conventions exist which regulate their use, and that the audience to whom they are addressed have an awareness of their existence.⁹ The illocutionary force of an utterance is the act which a speaker intends to perform in using words. Thus, in saying "I will meet you tomorrow morning," the speaker performs the illocutionary act of promising without having avowed the performative verb.

Extending Croce's and Collingwood's theory of question and answer by grafting on to it Austin's idea of an illocutionary force, Skinner maintains that every statement embodies a particular intention unique to a particular occasion and directed to solving a specific problem. Consequently, there can be no perennial problems in philosophy: "there are only individual answers to individual questions," therefore, it must always be futile to "attempt to learn directly from the classic authors."¹⁰

The negative aspect of Skinner's doctrine is best characterized as a theory about misunderstanding. The most comprehensive statement of this negative theory appears in "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," but the basic ideas are presupposed, and never repudiated, in all his theoretical writings. The fundamental premise of his argument is that there are two orthodox methods being employed in the history of ideas, both of which, he suggests, are theoretically defective, and inimical to good historical practice. The first method he calls "textualism." Those who practice it, Skinner suggests, maintain that the text itself provides the "sole" and "self-sufficient" object of enquiry. Reading the texts carefully, over and over again, will prove sufficient for revealing their meaning. The second method he calls "contextualism." Exponents of this approach are said to hold the view that the total context is the precipitate of the appearance of a text, and the determinant of its meaning ("Meaning," pp. 3, 4 and 39). This antithetical opposition between "textualism" and "contextualism" is presupposed throughout the whole range of Skinner's subsequent writings.¹¹

The idea that the text provides the "self-sufficient" object of inquiry, Skinner

9. J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 6, 8–9, 25, 63, 99, 103, 120–21.

10. Q. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, VIII (1969), 50. Subsequent references to this article appear in parentheses in the text.

11. See Q. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts," *New Literary History*, 3 (1971–72), 393–408; Q. Skinner, "Hermeneutics and the Role of History," *New Literary History*, 7 (1975–76), 209–32; Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), Vol. 1, p. xiii. Subsequent references to the *Foundations* appear in parentheses in the text.

asserts, "continues to govern the largest number of studies" ("Meaning," p. 4). He, therefore, devotes a considerable amount of time to examining and criticizing the assumptions of this approach. Essentially, the "mythologies" he associates with textualism have a common source in the belief that the great works in philosophy, or any branch of literature, contain timeless and eternal elements. The "whole point" of studying these works, for the textualist, is to recover answers to the perennial questions of our civilization ("Meaning," pp. 4–5). From the theoretical standpoint of his denial of perennial problems Skinner systematically convicts all the prevalent methods associated with textualism, of embodying philosophical errors. Practitioners of these methods are, in consequence, accused of writing, not histories, but mythologies.

Skinner labels the first type, "the mythology of doctrines" ("Meaning," p. 7). This is typified by the view that each classic writer will have espoused a doctrine relating to each of the important issues which dominate within the confines of a given subject matter. This attitude, Skinner maintains, often results in a predisposition to convert scattered statements into theories. Thus, meanings that were simply not available to authors are frequently attributed to them. In the history of ideas this is illustrated by the tendency to articulate the salient characteristics of a modern doctrine, which is then used as an ideal type against which to compare the doctrines of the classic writers. The great danger here lies in the propensity of the historian to talk of the fully developed doctrine as being immanent in a succession of great thinkers. In tracing the development of doctrines, textualists too readily fall into the type of language which would be more applicable to describing the growth of a natural organism. Thus, Skinner castigates those historians who talk of ideas in terms of their "birth," "evolution," and the transcendence of "obstacles" in a teleological process. The search for approximations to ideal types too readily tempts the historian into accrediting earlier thinkers with having accomplished the remarkable feat of having anticipated later doctrines. Further, this kind of activity tends to generate debates about whether a given doctrine "really emerged" in the work of a particular writer ("Meaning," pp. 10–12). An alternative form of the mythology of doctrines is generated by the preconceived expectations that historians have about what issues a classic theorist will address. When there is clearly no doctrine relating to these issues, the authors of the texts are criticized for having failed to contribute to the resolution of the significant problems in their area of study. In Skinner's view, this is a fallacious form of argument because it hardly seems proper to criticize an author for failing to do something that he did not, or could not, have intended to do ("Meaning," pp. 12–15).

The second type of mythology Skinner names the "mythology of coherence." Historians who subscribe to this myth assume that an author of a classic text must have a coherent and consistent theory on every theme he addresses. In this respect it is "dangerously easy" for the historian to indulge in the common practice

of supplying the underlying coherence that an author may not immediately appear to have. Historians who fall under the spell of the mythology of coherence ignore the fact that classic theorists may never have attained, or may never have intended to attain, a systematic theoretical statement. A study motivated by the search for coherence “becomes a history not of ideas at all, but of abstractions: a history of thoughts which no one ever actually succeeded in thinking, at levels of coherence which no one ever actually attained” (“Meaning,” p. 18).

A third form of mythology in the history of ideas Skinner labels “the mythology of prolepsis” (“Meaning,” p. 22). This is the tendency to concentrate upon the significance of a work, at the expense of trying to analyze what the author was doing and saying within the limitations of the historical circumstances in which the text was composed. The preoccupation with significance leads to the attribution of praise and blame, depending upon whether an author is considered to be instrumental in the development of a good, or bad doctrine. A less insidious version of the mythology, although equally misconceived in its aims, is the search for characteristically modern elements in a text: “the danger” here is that such forms of interpretation will “part company” with what “political writings were meant to achieve” or “were intended to mean” (“Meaning,” p. 24). The form of explanation generated by the mythology of prolepsis is teleological in character, and implicitly postulates the absurd notion that a text must await the future for the revelation of its true meaning.

A further absurdity prevalent in the history of ideas is the “mythology of parochialism” (“Meaning,” p. 24). A historian, from the vantage point of the present, may ascribe an incorrect reference to a text. He may, for example, in reading one text, be reminded of another, and mistakenly believe that the later author intended to refer to the previous work. Here the historian indiscriminately attributes influences on the basis of random similarities. Another form of parochialism is evident in the incorrect description of the *sense* of a work. Because an author may seem to be articulating ideas that are familiar to us today, there is a tendency to expect him to be employing a similar meaning to our own.

All these mythologies, Skinner maintains, are a direct consequence of taking the text as the “sole” determinant of its meaning. However, to shift one’s focus of attention to the circumstances which surround the appearance of a text does not solve the problem of methodological confusion. The contextualist approach to the study of past thought postulates that texts are responses to the immediate circumstances which surround them. Thus, it must always be appropriate to focus upon the context in order to explain a text. Skinner maintains that the textualists have “consciously resisted” this contention because it seriously undermines their belief in the transhistorical timeless wisdom that texts contain. The contextualists assume that a text is ineluctably related to its context. The fundamental proposition implicit in this approach is that texts are the results, or products of “antecedent causal conditions” (“Meaning,” pp. 39–40). It suffices to say here

that intentions, or illocutionary forces, are an integral aspect of the text itself, and not antecedent to its production. Illocutionary forces and causal conditions are, for Skinner, categorically distinct.¹²

Skinner's own positive recommendations attempt to synthesize the antithetical methodologies of textualism and contextualism. The positive injunctions are: first, to focus upon the prevailing social and linguistic conventions; second, to identify the empirical beliefs of certain authors in order to restrict or "close" the context; and, third, to enable the historian to infer the intentions a writer had *in* writing what he wrote.¹³ The negative aspect of his theory has much more content in terms of advice to historians than the positive aspect. Skinner's negative prescriptions amount to an exhortation to avoid all the mythologies generated by the erroneous idea that there are perennial problems in philosophy.

II

Skinner's attack upon historians of political thought is, at first sight, comprehensive and compelling, but on closer inspection he seems to sacrifice accuracy for effect. The danger in putting forward any new methodological perspective, is that there is always a tendency, and a temptation, to exaggerate the deficiencies in the methods already prevalent in the discipline. The arguments in a debate may be set in such terms that the participants could not accept themselves as having been parties to such a discussion. In other words, there is a tendency to build straw men comprised of abstractions from fuller and richer arguments in order to knock them down and pronounce oneself the winner. It is my contention that Skinner comes perilously close to employing this kind of device in constructing his arguments against past historians of political thought. In characterizing historians as textualists and contextualists, Skinner sets up an antithetical position which is much too contrived. The opposition, which he suggests exists in the history of histories of political thought has little basis in the evidence. In order to characterize the history in such terms, Skinner has to distort the arguments, aims and purposes of those historians whom he uses to justify and illustrate his contention. I have elsewhere suggested a more appropriate characterization of the history of histories of political thought,¹⁴ but here I want to restrict myself to Skinner's ideas on perennial questions in relation to this history.

He associates the notions of perennial questions and timelessness with the textualist approach to studying the history of political thought. But this is by no

12. Q. Skinner, "'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action," *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Fourth Series, eds. Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman and Quentin Skinner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), pp. 136–57.

13. These injunctions are presented as rules for aspiring historians in Skinner, "'Social Meaning,'" p. 154; Skinner, "Motives, Intentions," p. 406–407.

14. David Boucher, "New Histories of Political Thought for Old?" *Political Studies*, XXXI (1983), 112–21.

means a self-evident correlation. Most historians of political thought simply did not recognize Skinner's artificial division between textualism and contextualism. From the time of Robert Blakey, to the present day, historians have believed that there is some connection between political ideas and political events.¹⁵ Many even suggested that only in times of social unrest was good and outstanding political thought produced. An understanding of the nature of these contemporaneous conflicts would, it was maintained, facilitate a better understanding of the great classic theorists such as Plato, Hobbes and Rousseau. However, this did not prevent the very same historians from viewing the history of political thought in terms of a series of perennial questions. Phyllis Doyle and Sheldon Wolin are typical examples of historians who stress the historicity of a text, and at the same time acknowledge the perenniality of the issues it addresses. Doyle argues that the circumstantial conditions in which a text is produced act as the "mainspring of the theories" it contains, while Wolin contends that "most of the great statements of political philosophy have been put forward in times of crisis."¹⁶ Nevertheless, contrary to Skinner's contention, they feel able to postulate the existence of perennial problems. For Doyle, some of these issues concern "the nature of man," his "purpose in life," and his relation to the state. Wolin provides a more extreme example of the coexistence of historicity and perenniality. He suggests that persistent questions are addressed by theorists in terms of "a fairly stable vocabulary and set of categories."¹⁷

Skinner is mistaken, then, in believing that the idea of perennial questions is exclusively associated with textualism. There is no logical necessity to deny that thought has a general, or universal, aspect if one acknowledges that it also has a concrete element which pertains to specific circumstances. Some historians simply made a distinction between the historicity of a text and its logicity. Because it has a time and place, a text is an element in a historical occurrence, but it is also a set of statements which conform to the rules of logic. Thus, the historians, rightly or wrongly, believed that they could ask whether the authors were able to maintain what they asserted. In this respect, a theorist was considered to be offering a series of propositions which are right, or wrong. Sabine, for example, endorses the view that the historian should engage in the critical evaluation of theories, although he does concede that his activity is not in itself historical.¹⁸

Skinner is also mistaken about the motives that past historians had in conceiving the history of political thought in terms of the existence of perennial questions. He suggests that historians study what they believe to be perennial prob-

15. Robert Blakey, *The History of Political Literature from the Earliest Times*, Vols. I and II (London: Richard Bentley, 1855). Blakey claims in his preface that his study is the first of its kind.

16. Phyllis Doyle, *A History of Political Thought* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), p. 7; Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little Brown, 1960), p. 8.

17. Doyle, *A History of Political Thought*, pp. 14-15; Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, pp. 27, 243 and 244.

18. George Sabine, "What is Political Theory," *Journal of Politics*, I (1939), 2.

lems in order to “learn directly from the answers” given to them (“Meaning,” p. 52). It would be a very naïve commentator who read the classics for the reason Skinner imputes. Those who engage in exercises similar to those described by Skinner recognize that the thought of the past needs to be mediated if it is to be applicable to the present. Even Strauss and Plamenatz, who are strongly committed to the idea of perennial issues, do not fit into Skinner’s class of historians who seek to offer solutions to today’s problems by directly appropriating answers from the past. Strauss contends, for example, that “we cannot reasonably expect that the fresh understanding of classical political philosophy will supply us with recipes for today’s use,” and Plamenatz suggests that “if we do not get from Hobbes or Locke answers to the questions we now put, we do, by examining their theories learn to put our own questions more clearly.”¹⁹

Skinner seems to be mistaken in his notion that there are no perennial problems in believing that those who discuss the past in such terms have to assume that words have an “essential” meaning, or that their meanings always “remain the same” (“Meaning,” p. 50). In order to see certain similarities in different thinkers, the interpreter does not have to postulate that they meant the same thing by using the same terms; conversely, he does not have to assume that these people could not have conveyed the same meaning as one another by using different terms. In the first instance, to say that Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau all saw a role for a civic religion which could be instrumental in securing adherence to a common morality, and in maintaining obedience to the laws, is not to say that they all meant the same thing. What it does suggest is that they believe that a dual obligation within a realm, or state, is inimical to good order. To say this is not meaningless, or senseless. It is sufficiently general for the theorist of politics to apply to his own time, and in doing so he will not be denying that the situations that Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau faced are all different from his own, and different from each other’s. Nor is it a denial of the historian’s interest in the particularity of each formulation of the general argument. It is merely a commitment to the view that some aspects of past thought, although not directly applicable to any present situation, enable the theorist to gain insight into the generalities of war, revolution, famine, or democracy, which he can apply to the particular instances that he wishes to understand. It seems a very obvious point that a modern-day theorist would not even be able to identify a present revolution, civil war, or *coup d’état* without having some idea of what these concepts were used to describe in the past.

On the level of meaning that a specific text had for a specific author on a specific occasion, there can be no doubt that it will be unique to that context. No set of circumstances and ideas could ever be reproduced in a way which could negate the uniqueness of past configurations of thought and meaning. But we do

19. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 11; John Plamenatz, *Man and Society* (London: Longmans, 1970), Vol. I, p. vi

not always remain on this level of meaning. That original meaning may have faded, leaving behind an aura which is only recoverable in the quasi-world of texts. We often talk and think in terms of generalities, and we frequently find it much easier to identify in similarities, rather than to differentiate what may seem minor differences. We like to think that civilization benefits from the experiences of the great men it has elevated above the status of lesser mortals. In this respect we sometimes identify with a beautiful poem; we may feel, rightly or wrongly, that it expresses what we ourselves are feeling far better than any of our contemporaries could express it. This appears to be the attitude that many historians of political thought, in studying the classic texts, had towards the problems of their own age. It may be that this attitude is entirely inappropriate in conducting a historical inquiry, but all the methodologist can do is to point out the level of meaning with which the historian ought to concern himself. The methodologist can argue that it is, or that it ought to be, a postulate of history that there are no perennial problems; he cannot prove that there are no perennial problems. Those who see history in terms of perennial issues elevate the thought of the past to a sufficiently high level of generality to enable them to compare past theorists in terms of the answers that they gave to enduring problems.

To deny that texts have both concrete meaning, that is, in reference to a specific this or that, and universal meaning, that is, an ability to illuminate in some way similar circumstances elsewhere, is to reject on grounds of logic something which does in fact happen. Writers have used the work of other writers in helping them to understand the predicaments they face. Because no adequate theory has yet been articulated to explain why texts have meaning both in relation to the particular and in general, that does not necessarily mean that they do not. Political theorists did not only live in a particular time and place, they also read books and assimilated arguments and distinctions written in other times and places. The intentions of the authors of these tracts were not of importance. What was important was the meaning of these works as interpreted in the light of circumstances similar to, or even different from, those in which the theories were formulated. Livy certainly enabled Machiavelli to ask questions about Italian city politics, and about politics in general. Why can't we do the same with Machiavelli? I can understand why a historian might be precluded from this sort of activity on the grounds of anachronism, but I fail to see why Skinner should object to the political theorist indulging in such activities.

If we accept Skinner's contention that there are no perennial problems, then we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that we will have ready-made answers to a number of historical questions, which, of course, is a well-worn criticism of Marx's historical method. These answers will be derived, not from historical research, but from methodological theory. We would have to say, for example, without even looking at the evidence, that Machiavelli was mistaken in believing that Livy could supply him with useful parallels to sixteenth century Italy. Likewise, Dante's intention to convey truths to posterity would have to be pro-

nounced a misplaced endeavour. From a theoretical argument formulated in the twentieth century and based upon the theories of Croce, Collingwood, and Austin, we would be employing the unsubstantiated presupposition that our methods are retrospectively perennial insofar as they apply to the known past, but the thoughts of the past have nothing whatsoever to say to us. This would seem to be, to paraphrase Vico, an extreme case of the conceit of scholars.

Even if the negative aspect of Skinner's theory is based upon a faulty characterization of past histories of political thought, we may still want to ask how successful he is himself in avoiding the mythologies that he says are generated by the belief in the idea of perennial problems. Skinner's historical writings demonstrate, however, that he is prepared to ignore many of his negative conclusions in order to facilitate historical practice. He tells us, for example, that Machiavelli's arguments are not merely of "parochial relevance."²⁰ But, more than this, Skinner frequently portrays authors as addressing themselves to questions which appear to be recurrent over long periods of time. Indeed, Skinner suggests that Machiavelli devoted himself "to exactly the same range of themes" as certain writers who lived two and a half centuries before him (*Foundations*, 1, p. 48). Moreover, Machiavelli addresses himself to a "key question" which has an even longer lineage, that is, the problem which the "Roman moralists had originally posed: how can we hope to forge an alliance with fortune?" Not only is the question of such long standing, but the answer Machiavelli gives is "in precisely the terms that they (the Roman moralists) had already used."²¹ Similarly, the questions and answers which the radical Calvinists formulated reappear over a century later in John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (*Foundations*, 2, p. 239). In addition, we have more explicit recognitions of the existence of perennial problems. The humanists of the early *quattrocento* often raised the "same" issues as their predecessors, but gave a distinctive answer to the "perennial question" regarding the appropriate teaching a man must have before he can consider himself to be well educated (*Foundations*, 1, pp. 73, 90). In the "main tradition of Italian political theory" we encounter two "perennial issues," namely, "the need to preserve political liberty and the dangers to liberty represented by the prevalence of standing mercenary armies" (*Foundations*, 1, p. 200). If questions only have full meaning when they are seen in relation to the immediate circumstances which surround them, I fail to see how Skinner can view these questions and issues, which are said to reappear over periods ranging from one to fifteen centuries, as perennial; and if they are, as he suggests, then he is wrong when he says that there are no perennial problems in the history of ideas.

Having conceded, in his historical work, that there are perennial issues and timeless elements in the great texts, we would justifiably expect Skinner to take extra precautions against relapsing into the employment of the various mytholo-

20. Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 24.

21. *ibid.*, p. 28.

gies which are generated by such a belief. However, in many instances he fails to avoid the very infelicities he criticizes others for committing. Take, for example, the category of the mythology of doctrines. Under this category we are exhorted to avoid, among other things, seeing the writings of one person as an anticipation of those of another; engaging in futile discussion about whether a doctrine really emerged at a particular time; and, talking in terms of biological metaphors.

Skinner has a number of ideal types, or models, of doctrines toward which the authors in his stories progress. John Locke's *Two Treatises* are taken to be the paradigm articulation of the theories of modern constitutionalism, the modern conception of the state, and the idea of modern secularized revolution. Skinner frequently looks for signs in earlier works of these later doctrines. Instead of using the language of "anticipations" he favours that of "hints." When he talks about the idea of the popular right to resist a ruler, we are told that "hints" of the argument are to be found in Mair's *History*. In addition, certain passages of *The Prince* are said to be "suggestive" of the modern conception of the state. In the process of looking for origins, we are sometimes asked to "glance forward more than a century" in order to take stock of how closely certain writers have managed to anticipate Locke's doctrines (*Foundations*, 2, pp. 343, 353–54. Also see pp. 156, 165, 227, 231, 338 and 353).

It is Skinner's desire to search for the origins of "recognizably modern"²² theories that forces him to employ the same historical devices he once deplored. Indeed, in searching for origins the historian is bound to engage in discussions about when a rudimentary form of a later doctrine can really be said to have emerged. This is adequately demonstrated in Skinner's attempt to search for the origins of the modern conception of the state. Initially Skinner argues that the historian who has a fixed doctrine, or idea, in mind and goes to the evidence in search of it, readily falls into the trap of speaking as if its full-fledged form was always in some sense immanent in history. But, in his historical work he takes fully articulated doctrines as his reference point for identifying the emergence of important ideas. We are informed, for instance, that by the end of the *quattrocento* the modern conception of the state is beginning to emerge. During this period we

begin to see signs of the crucial transition from the idea of the ruler 'maintaining his state' to the more abstract idea that there is an independent political apparatus, that of the state, which the ruler may be said to have a duty to maintain the work which contains the strongest hints of this transition is of course Machiavelli's *The Prince* (*Foundations*, 2, p. 353).

A more blatant example of the transgression of his negative methodological principles occurs in Skinner's search for the origins of the Calvinist theory of revolu-

22. Q. Skinner, "The Origins of the Calvinist Theory of Revolution," *After the Reformation: Essays in Honour of J. H. Hexter*, ed. Barbara C. Malament (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 309.

tion. His statement of intent suffices to show that he is prepared to select salient characteristics as definitive of a particular doctrine, and then go to the past in order to discover when they first emerged. He says,

The classic formulation of a fully secularized and popularist theory of revolution in early modern Europe occurs in John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. It may be most convenient therefore to begin by surveying the leading elements in Locke's account as a prelude to asking when and where this canonical version of the argument in favour of active political resistance was first unequivocally stated in early modern political thought.²³

The search for origins also predisposes Skinner to slip into the language of biological metaphor. Doctrines evolve toward their definitive versions, encountering numerous obstacles upon the way, which often serve to hinder the "process" of their mature formulation. For example, the spread of the political theory of Lutheranism is described in neo-Darwinian terms. Like an organism, the political theory goes through a series of "formative" stages (*Foundations*, 2, pp. 65 and 81), culminating in its "most decisive stage" of "evolution" when the secular authorities became involved with the heresies that Lutheranism preached (*Foundations*, 2, p. 89). In addition, early modern constitutionalism had a particularly difficult evolutionary growth. We can see it "beginning in Ockham" and "evolving in the conciliarist theories of d'Ailly and Gerson" (*Foundations*, 2, p. 65), but Ponet, Goodman and Knox, writing in the 1550s, had still not quite formulated the doctrine which Locke wrote over a century later: "there is still one point at which a wide conceptual gulf continues to separate" them "from this classic 'liberal' theory of popular revolution" (*Foundations*, 2, p. 239). These Calvinists regarded popular resistance to a ruler who acted *ultra vires*, as a religious duty based on a promise to uphold the laws of God, whereas Locke conceives it to be a moral right. Later, in the same volume, we are informed that the major Huguenot treatises of the 1570s managed to pass across this "crucial conceptual divide," but "in spite of these developments" they still differed at "two important points from the classic version of early modern constitutionalism" (*Foundations*, 2, p. 338).

I have shown how Skinner's predilection for searching for origins disposes him to employ many of the historical devices associated with the mythology of doctrines, but the same preoccupation also has a tendency to generate the mythology of prolepsis. Here the danger is seeing too readily the modern "elements which the commentator has thus programmed himself to find" ("Meaning," p. 24). In abstracting these elements, on the basis of a conception of the later fully articulated doctrine, the historian is implicitly suggesting that the full meaning of certain "anticipations" has to await the future, when the mature theory casts a retrospective significance upon the prior rudimentary attempts at its formulation. There is no need to demonstrate here that this is exactly what the search for ori-

23. *ibid.*, 310.

gins entails. It is, as those opponents of “whig” history never tire of telling us, to look at the past through the wrong end of the telescope. Aspects of the past are selected because of their importance, not for the author himself, or for the times in which he lived, but for a later time when someone uses his theory, or articulates it more fully.

The search for origins also leads Skinner to transgress his initial precepts on the mythology of parochialism. He saw very little point in the historian using the influence model for historical explanation because “it can very rarely be made to work, and when it can be, there is scarcely any point in doing so” (“Meaning,” p. 25). However, in order to make connections between one thinker and another, Skinner is not averse to using the concept quite liberally. Consequently he uses such phrases as “new and influential departure”; “immensely influential argument”; “deep influence”; and “immense historical influence” (*Foundations*, 1, pp. 34, 91, 231; and 2, p. 19 respectively. Also see 1, pp. 49 and 242; 2, pp. 22, 24, 26, 214, 337).

In demonstrating that Skinner himself tends to subscribe to the mythologies of doctrines, prolepsis, and parochialism, I have not been concerned to detract from the quality of his contribution to the history of political thought. I have merely been at pains to emphasize that his historical work is much closer to the type of history we have been used to, and different from that implied in his negative criticisms of past historians of political thought. Indeed, had Skinner followed his own prescriptions his historical work would have had to have taken a very different form. The differences that I have detected between theory and practice suggest that *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, for instance, does not “superbly” exemplify what Skinner has “recommended in his theoretical articles”; and if it is a “wonderful book,”²⁴ which is the opinion of most reviewers, then it is, to a large extent in spite of, and not because of his criticisms of past historians.

III

In summary, then, Skinner’s characterization of the history of histories of political thought is defective because he associates the belief in the existence of perennial problems with the textualist approach to interpretation. It was suggested that most historians of political thought did not distinguish between textual and contextual study. The two approaches complemented each other and neither prevented the historian from viewing the history of political thought in terms of perennial problems. Moreover, Skinner misunderstood the reasons why the historians viewed their subject matter in terms of persistent issues. They did not believe

24. Julian H. Franklin and Judith Shklar’s reviews of Skinner, *The Foundations, Political Theory*, 7 (1979), 554 and 599 respectively.

that the answers given to them in the past could be directly appropriated for solving the problems of the present. Instead, they generally maintained that the classic texts could help us understand present problems more clearly, and perhaps even stimulate us to give our own answers. In addition, it was maintained that the recognition of the specific meaning a text has within an historical context, does not prevent the elevation of that thought to a higher level of generality, which can then be used in coming to terms with similar situations far removed in time and space. However, by implication, Skinner himself seems to have acknowledged the untenability of his negative theory because he ignores many of its conclusions in his historical practice. The aspiring historian of political thought, then, should approach Skinner's negative theory with due circumspection, bearing in mind that even its author is unable to subscribe to its precepts.

It remains to ask why this discrepancy between the negative theory and historical practice occurs in the work of Skinner. I think the answer is quite clear. In any established activity, modes of procedure will arise which facilitate the practice of that activity. These procedures will have arisen not fortuitously, but in response to the problems encountered by the various practitioners. In the history of histories of political thought various methodological devices were used in order to establish relations between the evidence, and in order to form that evidence into a continuous and coherent story. Although the devices may not stand up to philosophical examination, they nevertheless embodied much that gave character to the activity. It is easy for the rationalist to come along and dismantle the very foundations upon which an activity rests, and to put in their place new procedures which promise to produce better results. This is exactly what Skinner attempted to do, but like all rationalists he was eventually forced to acknowledge the practical difficulties of attaining the theoretical ideals. He found to his chagrin, I suggest, that in order to practice the activity of being an historian of political thought, it was impractical to reject everything that had hitherto gone under that name. In order to produce anything that was recognizably related to the tradition he wished to revolutionize, he had to invoke many of the devices that had traditionally been employed. It is impossible to start afresh; you can alter the tradition, but you can never totally ignore it. There is reason in a tradition, even if it is often hard to find. Austin, I think, is making a similar point when he suggests that the philosopher of language should not reject out of hand the distinctions which have stood the test of time in the realm of ordinary language. He says, "These concepts will have evolved over a long time, that is, they will have faced the test of practical use, of continual hard cases better than their vanished rivals."²⁵

25. J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 74.