

interpretation

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Volume 13 number 3

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Appropriation and Understanding in the History of Political Philosophy: On Quentin Skinner's Method

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History of political philosophy has generally been practiced as a “present-minded” activity, aiming to fructify thought and action in our political present through a grasp of the writings of the great political thinkers of the past (Wolin, 1960: v; Gunnell, 1979: 13–14). A most insistent current of thought within the field presently, however, denies the validity of the enterprise as thus pursued. The loose movement sometimes called “the new history of political thought” (although to be called here “Cambridge historiographism” for reasons to be given anon) insists on a strict distinction between the “history” part of our activity and the “political philosophy” part. (As one of the leading proponents of this point of view puts it, if we wish to engage in political philosophy, “we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves” [Skinner, 1968: 52; cf. Dunn, 1972: 158–59].) History of political thought remains a form of *history*, and must be pursued accordingly—entirely in its own terms. The Cambridge historiographers press the need to sever entirely our study of the history of thought from our own political life or action (Pocock, 1981a: 13). What our political life loses, however, the political life which provided the context for the thought in question gains, for the historiographers insist on a very snug fit between political thought and its own political life. These scholars find historical political thought almost or entirely alien from the historians’ present, but almost or entirely at home in its own present.

History, or even historiography holds the primary allegiance of the group of thinkers with whom we are concerned here. “The transformation we can claim to be living through is nothing more or less than the emergence of a truly autonomous method, one which offers a means of treating the phenomena of political thought strictly as historical phenomena” (Pocock, 1971: 11). Both in calling attention to the major role historiographical reflections play in the thought of those seeking to bring about this transformation, and in identifying them with Cambridge I am following the suggestion of one of the leading historiographers himself, J. G. A. Pocock, who pointed out that most of the men associated with this movement—John Dunn, Quentin Skinner, Pocock himself, Peter Laslett, Duncan Forbes, John Wallace—“emerge from Cambridge” (Pocock 1981a: 7). While they share a great deal with positions we might call historicist, they differ from the latter on one principle that plays a prominent part in most mature historicist discussion of the understanding of past thought: in Pocock’s words, the historiographers’ “position is Rankean in the sense that they aim to depict political theory ‘as it actually happened,’” a goal which most mature historicists de-

clare impossible of attainment (Pocock, 1962: 188; Pocock, 1981a: 7; cf. Gadamer, 1975: 235–74, 482–91). They are interested in adumbrating an historical method “to discover what a theorist was *eigentlich* doing” rather than in a theory of historical being as such (Pocock, 1981: 10; but cf. Skinner, 1968: 50–53).

They take their point of departure from the observation that methodological reflection is especially necessary for studies in history of political philosophy for the texts with which the historian is concerned always require some sort of explanation or interpretation, but the historian is constantly tempted, by the nature of the material, to interpret it in an incorrect, that is, an unhistorical, manner. Pocock speaks of the tendency of the historian to take his cues from the thinker he studies, but to misapply them to his own activity: “the men whose thought he studies had all, in varying degrees, a tendency to become philosophers—that is, to organize their thought towards higher states of rational coherence.” The historian’s proper task “plainly” is to determine “on what levels of abstraction thought did take place,” but instead of that he often or usually attempts to “assist” the thinker in his movement “towards higher states of rational coherence.” The historian ends up not so much doing history as engaging “in a kind of philosophical reconstruction—he seeks to understand past political thought by raising it to ever higher levels of generality and abstraction” (Pocock, 1962: 186–87). When he finishes, however, the question remains whether he has reconstructed his subject’s thought, or constructed something of his own. In either case, this procedure makes for serious problems of verification (Pocock, 1962: 188). According to Pocock,

the philosophic explanation of how the ideas in a system are related to one another is generically different from and only contingently coincident with, the historical explanation of what the author meant to say, let alone of why he wanted to say it or chose to say it in that way; the two are arrived at by different procedures and answer different questions (Pocock, 1971: 9).

Pocock in his later work, and Quentin Skinner in a series of theoretical articles attempt to specify more completely the theoretical basis and methodological implications of the historiographer position. The single most important such piece is Skinner’s influential “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” a 1969 essay which might be taken as the manifesto of Cambridge historiographism. Not only does it develop the theoretical and methodological sides of the argument, but it also presents a trenchant polemic against the interpretive practice of other students of history of political philosophy.

Leo Strauss, Ernst Cassirer, F. R. Leavis, Edward S. Corwin, Arthur O. Lovejoy, and a myriad of other interpreters of the thought of the past in one genre or another come under attack in Skinner’s “Meaning and Understanding.” He finds the practice of those preceding him so defective that he feels compelled to “demand . . . a wholly different approach to studying the history of ideas” (Skinner, 1968: 30). The issue between Skinner and the others does not focus,

however, simply on the historiographer's aspiration for the historically *eigentlich*, as, for example, the polemic against Leo Strauss indicates with perfect clarity. Strauss also explicitly strives for what the philosophers actually thought, or as he puts it, for "understanding them as they understood themselves" (Strauss, 1959: 67–68; contra Gunnell, 1979: 73). Nonetheless, Skinner finds Strauss and others guilty of following a philosophically confused and empirically inadequate way of interpreting the texts of the past.

Skinner locates his own approach between two extreme views which, he thinks, have dominated history of ideas heretofore. The one approach we might call textism, the other social contextism. He tries to show that each, especially the first, tends to fall into certain characteristic errors of interpretation, which he calls "mythologies"; even when they guard themselves against these typical errors, they are so beset with fundamental philosophical confusion as to be untenable as methods of study in the history of ideas. His most important contribution, however, is the philosophic analysis he provides of the basis and method of "understanding" historical texts. In what follows I shall first question Skinner's critique of his predecessors with the goal of showing that it is, at best, quite inconclusive. I then propose to raise some doubts about Skinner's philosophical argument itself.

I. THE MYTHOLOGY OF MYTHOLOGIES — SKINNER'S CRITIQUE OF THE HISTORIANS

Skinner's two forms of failed interpretation both fail because they misunderstand the proper relationship between text and context. Textism "insists on the autonomy of the *text* itself as the sole necessary key to its own meaning," while social contextism "insists that it is the context . . . which determines the meaning of any given text." It overly reduces the text to its context (Skinner, 1969: 3). While there is something aesthetically pleasing to Skinner's typology, we wonder whether he has accurately portrayed the vast majority of his predecessors by fitting them into such a neat schema (cf. Tarvoc, 1982: 698). How many of Skinner's textists, except perhaps some of the more extreme of the "new critics" have even called for, much less practiced a methodology of interpretation "dictated by the claim that the *text* itself should form the self-sufficient object of inquiry and understanding"? (Skinner, 1969: 4). Skinner himself leads us to doubt his claim when he identifies among the errors of the "textists" their frequently mistaken views of the relevant intellectual context in which to interpret their authors, as, for example, when Hobbes is identified by some as the unspoken target for Locke's *Second Treatise*, or the unspoken influence on it (Skinner, 1968: 25–26). But one cannot employ a mistaken version of the intellectual context without being concerned with context, and therefore without having ceased to treat the text as autonomous and altogether self-sufficient.

Which of the historians of political philosophy has endorsed Skinner's textism? Consider, for example, Strauss's Machiavelli book. In order to help understand the texts with which he is concerned, the *Prince* and *Discourses*, Strauss employs a wide variety of extra-textual, contextual materials—other Machiavelian writings, Livy's history, other historians such as Polybius and Tacitus, other political philosophers, other writings on politics contemporaneous with Machiavelli, some of which include the "mirror of princes" literature, political events in Italian history, theological and institutional developments in the church (Strauss, 1958: *passim*). And this book is not atypical of the normal practice in the field.

The middle ground between two patently one-sided views, is always desirable territory to hold but Skinner has constructed a straw antinomy here. This is not to say that there is no genuine disagreement between Skinner and those he criticizes on the relation between text and context, but he drastically overstates the degree and misstates the character of the difference when he paints his opponents as proponents of "the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text."

Skinner misstates the character of the position he opposes; he also presents a highly questionable account of the forces that impel his opponents to the textism he attributes to them. He says the textists, like all historians, approach their materials with "expectations," or "models and preconceptions," or "unconsciously applied paradigms" whose familiarity to the historian disguises their inapplicability to the past" (Skinner, 1968: 6–7). The chief offending paradigms derive from the very justification which the textists use for their study of past thought. Since they study the historical texts for the sake of finding the "timeless element" and "dateless wisdom" in them, and in order to demonstrate their "continuing relevance," the historians commit themselves to the text as such: "to suggest . . . that a knowledge of the social context is a necessary condition for an understanding of the classic texts is equivalent to denying that they do contain any elements of timeless and perennial interest, and is thus equivalent to removing the whole point of studying what they said" (Skinner, 1967: 4–5).

But Skinner's conclusion follows neither in practice, as we have already seen, nor in theory or logic. To argue or to suspect that a work contains "timeless elements," or truths about politics does not imply in any way that one should or must ignore the context in attempting to understand that work. All thought finds expression or is communicated in some context; an appreciation of the context may be requisite to understanding the thought expressed, but that fact of itself says nothing whatever about whether the thought is true or "relevant." To have relation to a particular context is not necessarily to be bound exclusively to that context.

Skinner seems to assume that the search for the "timeless elements" commits the historian to a kind of present-minded desire to find his own familiar thoughts in the text (cf. Skinner, 1968: 8–9). But the historian may turn to the past with exactly the opposite expectation or hope, to find thought different from that of the

present, as many of the leading historians of political philosophy—including Voegelin, Arendt, and Wolin—quite explicitly attempt to do (cf. Gunnell, 1979: 40–57). The commitment to the search for the “timeless elements” in fact commits one only to the possibility that some given thought expressed in the past is not disqualified from being true merely by virtue of having been produced in some other time or place. One is surely not committed to the actual truth of any historical philosophy; far less to the view that past philosophies agree with present opinions. Moreover, as Nietzsche argued, such a commitment, far from necessarily producing historical distortions may be requisite for the grasp of the historically *eigentlich*. Every thought is thought about something; every thinker tries to bring his readers via his words to the understanding of the matter of his thought. A text is like a man who stands on a hill pointing the way to a distant city, perhaps shrouded in cloud and difficult to discern. If the travelers for whom he points the way refuse to look along the line of sight for themselves, for example if they look only at the man and not to what he points towards, they will never see the city. And if they believe the man is blind and thus does not know where the city is, they will be inclined not to look with the care and attention that may be needed for them to see the city (cf. Strauss, 1959: 66–68; Zuckert, 1977: 65–66).

Skinner illustrates the consequences of historians’ preconceptions or “paradigms” in his Baconian catalogue of the “mythologies” the historians promulgate on the basis of their commitment to the text alone. Armed with the desire or expectation to find “timeless truths” in the classic works, says Skinner, the textist fall readily into the first and “most persistent” Mythology of Doctrines. If, Skinner seems to have them reason, the philosophers present “timeless truths” about politics then they ought to have doctrines on all the recognized topics of politics; if the philosophers do not have teachings on these topics then the interpreter either “converts some scattered or quite incidental remarks” into a “doctrine,” or blames the thinkers for not having had such a doctrine, or more extremely, the interpreter “supplies the classic theorists with doctrines which are agreed to be proper to their subject, but which they have unaccountably failed to discuss (Skinner, 1967: 7, 13, 13).

The Mythology of Doctrines often leads historians into the error of finding in their thinker a doctrine that is not historically *eigentlich*; one particularly blatant form of this danger is “sheer anachronism” (Skinner, 1967: 7). Skinner’s examples are always instructive and his discussion of anachronism is especially so. Marsilius of Padua makes some “remarks” which lead some interpreters to debate “whether Marsilius should be said to have had a ‘doctrine’ of the separation of powers,” a doctrine familiar to the historian from his knowledge of political reflection at a much later date (Skinner, 1968: 8). Skinner is probably correct to find the attribution of a doctrine of separation of powers (in anything like the form in which it appears in the *Federalist*, for example) a real anachronism. But that is not really the thrust of Skinner’s point:

And even those experts who have denied that Marsilius should be credited with this doctrine *have based their conclusions on his text*, and not at all by pointing to the impropriety of supposing that he *could* have meant to contribute to a debate whose terms were unavailable to him, and whose point would have been lost on him (Skinner, 1967: 8 [emphasis supplied]: cf. parallel discussion of Coke, 9).

The issue is not then the *empirical* issue whether Marsilius had such a doctrine or not, or whether his thought is consistent with such a doctrine or not, but rather is an issue to be settled *a priori*. But how can we know he could not have had such a doctrine? Because “the historical origins of the doctrine itself can be traced to [a] historiographical suggestion . . . first canvassed two centuries after Marsilius’ death (Skinner, 1967: 8). But this really begs the question, for if Marsilius did have a genuine doctrine of separation of powers, then Skinner must be mistaken in his belief about the doctrine’s origins. Surely *the* question is the empirical one of whether Marsilius did or did not have the doctrine, and the only way that question can be answered is through reading Marsilius’ text.

Skinner means to say, further, that knowledge of the intellectual context makes it a nearly dead certainty that Marsilius had no such doctrine, whatever impression stray comments may leave with a contemporary historian: Marsilius’ context presents strong evidence that his predecessors and contemporaries were not thinking about the separation of powers or the concerns that led more modern authors to discuss it. Even granting for the sake of argument that thought is largely incremental, that a thinker takes his point of departure from the intellectual currents that swirl about him and moves the “state of the art” only some few steps from where he picked it up to a position reachable from where he started, we cannot make the jump Skinner wishes to make. For we do not know in advance what thoughts might be in reach from what other thoughts. At best, we have our preconception of the structure of the thought, no doubt inherited from our intellectual context, but surely we would be committing the very sin Skinner warns against were we to impose that structure on the thinkers of the past as though their thought must follow the track of our thought.

Skinner finds all forms of the Mythology of Doctrines strongly question-begging: “if all the writers are claimed to have *meant* to articulate the doctrine with which they are being credited, why is it that they so signally failed to do so, so that the historian is left reconstructing their implied intentions from guesses and vague hints?” Skinner of course knows the answer to his question: “the authors did not (or even could not) have meant after all to enunciate such a doctrine” (Skinner, 1978: 10; cf. 16), which, Skinner assures us, is “the only plausible” answer (Skinner, 1978: 10).

But it is a matter of common experience, after all, that writers do not always (do they ever?) say explicitly everything they think or intend (cf. Tarcov, 1982: 694). Reasons of time, space, or focus of attention surely rank high among some of the other plausible answers that might be given to Skinner’s question. We

need not, but we might also add the interesting answer Skinner suggests later in his essay: he refers us to “the various oblique strategies which a writer may always decide to adopt in order to set out and at the same time disguise what he means” (Skinner, 1978: 32). He illustrates his point with the cases of Hobbes and Bayle, both of whom “had particular cause to recognize that religious heterodoxy was a very dangerous commitment,” and thus, we would presume, to wish to communicate it only by means of “vague hints,” or perhaps even less (cf. Skinner, 1978: 21–22).

No author gives every step of his thinking, and every act of reading requires thinking along with the author in order to fill in the unsaid. Different authors leave different amounts unsaid, the most interesting ones, we would suspect, leaving the most unsaid. This phenomenon, it seems to me, justifies a degree of attention to the text itself, and especially to the structure and order of the text: if the interpreter can account for the movement of the text; for the way one thing follows another, that provides some guarantee he is in the groove set by the writer, that he is at least sighting along the line of vision along which his author is pointing.

When interpreters try to apply the thought of a past thinker to a problem that thinker did not explicitly address, this may, as Skinner says, represent “a means to fix one’s own prejudices on to the most charismatic names, under the guise of innocuous historical speculation” (Skinner, 1978: 13–14). But an abuse of this sort does not imply that there is no legitimate function to the kind of interpretive speculation Skinner condemns. Even if a given thinker could have had no opinion on a certain topic—say, nuclear war—because he lived at a time when the phenomenon in question was unknown, that does not mean necessarily that his doctrine or position has no answers to give when quizzed about that phenomenon. When interpreters “fill in” in this way, they are not so much attempting to say what their thinker thought or intended in the narrow sense, but rather they are trying to see how the world looks when viewed as the philosopher in question did. This represents one way to test our understanding of the principles of a doctrine. If we can construct an analysis of phenomena the thinker did not explicitly address we test and further our grasp and ability to use, and thus our understanding of the thought. It is also a way to test the doctrine—how able is it to deal with problems other than those the philosopher explicitly addressed, how much light does it shed on aspects of experience to which it was not explicitly applied? (Cf. Tarcov, 1982: 694.) That is, readers “fill in” in a variety of ways and for a variety of good reasons, some having to do with practice, some with the philosophical enterprise of assessing the truth of the doctrine, and some with the historical enterprise of discovering what the thinker *eigentlich* meant. When sensibly done, it is an eminently sensible thing to do.

Skinner misunderstands the motives which impel interpreters to “fill in” or “fill out” when he claims they do so because they are “set” to “expect that each

classic writer . . . will be found to enunciate some doctrine on each of the topics regarded as constitutive of the subject” (Skinner, 1968: 7). He finds similar motives behind his second Mythology of Coherence.

If the basic paradigm for the conduct of the historical investigation has been conceived as the elaboration of each classic writer’s doctrines on each of the themes most characteristic of the subject, it will become dangerously easy for the historian to conceive it as his task to supply or find in each of these texts the coherence which they may appear to lack (Skinner, 1968: 16).

It is a “danger” to seek to supply this coherence “because the history written according to this methodology can scarcely contain any genuinely historical reports about thoughts that were actually thought in the past” (Skinner, 1968: 22). But the whole of Skinner’s conclusion here rests on his unstated assumption that all “appearance of incoherence” is actual incoherence. Obviously, some apparent incoherence is the real thing, but is it always so? Especially ought we to guard ourselves against the too ready attribution of incoherence to a writer of the past. The unfamiliarity of his thought may make it seem incoherent, but an effort at thinking it through may bring the historian to see its essential coherence. We may be especially prone to see incoherence at first in the thought of great thinkers. They are above all the ones most likely to think of the world in a way that shifts it out of focus for most readers, precisely because the great thinkers think about the world more deeply, and in ways that dissolve familiar relationships and forge new ones. If the world were easy to understand, then philosophy would not be the difficult and ongoing enterprise that it is; then those who have gone furthest in thinking could express their thought in such a way that no reader would ever be struck by apparent incoherence; then we could have an indefeasible and objective methodology of interpretation. Then we might not even have to think in order to understand the philosophers.

But perhaps the great thinkers are more given to incoherence than most men precisely because they push hardest at the boundaries of thought. Perhaps their incoherences are even indications of incoherence in the order of things, or at least in the line of thought of the thinker in question. But can we not aspire to a coherent understanding of incoherence, that is, to an understanding, so far as possible, of just what produced the incoherence in question? Is there another way to achieve this than by pressing every apparent incoherence and attempting to make it yield up either a hidden coherence or the structure of its incoherence? And can we do this without engaging in the activities Skinner condemns?

Not every apparent incoherence or contradiction is necessarily a real contradiction. Indeed Skinner recognizes this fact in the part of his essay where he speaks of Hobbes’ and Bayle’s strategies of concealing their heterodox theological views. Bayle’s *Dictionary* “contains most of the doctrines appropriate to a Calvinist theology of the most rigorous and unforgiving kind.” Yet it contains a good deal else, and Skinner sides with those who “dismiss this overt message by

appealing to the presence of a desperate, systematic irony" (Skinner, 1978: 33; but cf. 19–22).

The interpretive "procedure" governed by the Mythology of Coherence "gives the thoughts of various classic writers a coherence and an air generally of a closed system, which they may never have attained or even been meant to attain" (Skinner, 1978: 17). Of course, he is correct; they may not have intended or achieved such a level of coherence, but then they may have done so. What is one to do in the face of this uncertainty over what was achieved in a given text? We have here a particularly difficult form of the hermeneutic circle, but Skinner's general approach is not a good way through this difficulty. We can discern here a strong trace of an underlying positivist attitude: he wants a method guaranteed in advance and for all occasions. But interpretation, like life, is a bit of an adventure, and we cannot know our end point before we set off. The demand that we do so only guarantees we will not get far from where we start.

Skinner does make one very valuable suggestion: in the light of uncertainty about the degree of coherence and unity an author achieved we do well to orient ourselves by the author's own statement of intention. We ought not "in the interests of extracting a message of higher coherence from an author's work, to discount the statements of intention which the author himself may have made about what he was doing" (Skinner, 1978: 18). Nor, I would add, ought we to dismiss the value of statements by authors of works apparently incoherent that they are not in fact so (cf., e.g. Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*: Preface). Unfortunately Skinner's practice is not as good as his precept.

So it comes about that much current practice in the history of ideas deliberately endorses one of the more fantastic doctrines of the scholastics themselves: the belief that one must "resolve antinomies." The aim, for example, in studying the politics of Machiavelli need not therefore be restricted to anything so straightforward as an attempt to indicate the nature of the developments and divergences from the *Prince* to the later *Discourses*. It can be—and has been—insisted instead that the appropriate task must be to construct for Machiavelli a scheme of beliefs sufficiently generalized for the doctrines of the *Prince* to be capable of being *aufgehoben* into the *Discourses* with all the apparent contradictions resolved (Skinner, 1978: 20).

But in asserting that Machiavelli's books relate as a historical development, Skinner disregards Machiavelli's own indications of his intentions and of his understanding of the relationship between the two works (cf. Baron, 1961: 217–57). Judging from internal cross-references, the *Discourses* was already in existence when Machiavelli wrote the *Prince*, and the *Prince* when Machiavelli wrote the *Discourses*. Machiavelli explicitly leaves the reader puzzled as to which book was written first: his intention must be that the reader is to take the books as contemporaneous. Moreover, as Leo Strauss pointed out, Machiavelli indicates in the prefaces to both books that they both contain "everything he knows," that is, the same content, if presented from different points of view, the

points of view indicated by the different addresses of the two books (Strauss, 1958: ch. 1). While it is true, as Hans Baron emphasizes, that there are many apparent disagreements between Machiavelli's two books, yet in itself that does not imply either historical development or ultimate disagreement.

One stands in no less danger of losing the "historically *eigentlich*," as well as other things, if one resolves at the outset to stop analysis and interpretation with apparent incoherences and apparent contradictions. Skinner and the other Cambridge historiographers dwell only on the danger of overreading.

The history thus written [under the aegis of the Myth of Coherence] becomes not a history of ideas at all, but of abstractions: a history of thoughts which no one ever actually succeeded in thinking, at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained (Skinner, 1968: 18).

Skinner's claim is literally untrue, of course, for the historian, if no one else, "succeeded in thinking" these thoughts and "attained" this "level of coherence." If the achievement is actual, then it is obviously possible, and if possible for the historian, why not for the thinker in the first place?

Skinner and the others support their election of the Scylla of underreading by appeal to some "empirical considerations," some "commonplaces" about thinking. First, we know as a matter of common experience that "many people" often "adopt incompatible ideals and beliefs," and even, he says, do so "consciously." Of course, the obvious question arises whether commonplace observations about "most people" stand as our most reliable guides when dealing with the kinds of people we typically study in the history of thought. We have, I think, experiences of "other people"—fewer to be sure—who seem remarkably thoughtful and able, to a high degree, to be consistent in their "ideals and beliefs" to say nothing of their thoughts (cf. Tarcov, 1982: 693).

Echoing an earlier article by John Dunn, Skinner brings forward a "second consideration":

to think at all is surely to engage in an "effortful activity," and not just to manipulate effortlessly some sort of kaleidoscope of neutral images. . . . It is surely empirically commonplace that we engage in an intolerable wrestle with words and their meanings, that we characteristically spill over the limits of our intelligence and get confused, and that our attempts to synthesize our views may in consequence reveal conceptual disorder as much as coherent doctrines (Skinner, 1968: 30; cf. Dunn, 1972: 160–61).

Thinking is indeed an effortful activity, and the historiographers' methodology seems to be designed to insulate the interpreter from that hard work, for it encourages the historian not to engage in that "intolerable wrestle," but rather to rest easy with whatever pops out at him. We must, moreover, be as careful not to extrapolate from our abilities and achievements to those of others as we are not to extrapolate from our historical moment to the past. There are gymnasts, for example, who can achieve things with their bodies which, had I not seen, I would not even imagine to be humanly possible from my own experience. Aren't the

thinkers of the past whom we study perhaps among the gymnasts of the mind? Ought we to close ourselves to their possible achievements on the basis of a perception of our own failings? That seems especially foolish, when, as Skinner concedes, the historian can achieve the level of coherence that Skinner denies to the philosopher. Beneath the apparent modesty of Skinner's strictures lies an odd arrogance, and—dare we say it—progressivism. For what else but his superior historical situation allows the historian to succeed as a thinker so much better than the thinkers of the past?

II. THE ICE OVER THERE IS VERY THIN— THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Theory rather than history undergirds the efforts of the Cambridge historiographers, for no strictly empirical conception of historical studies can make intelligible, much less support, the most characteristic and puzzling claims Skinner makes. As we have seen, for example, he castigates scholars who try to decide whether Marsilius possessed a doctrine of separation of powers on the basis of Marsilius' texts rather than "by pointing to the impropriety of supposing that he *could* have meant" to put forward such a doctrine (Skinner, 1967: 8). Indeed, Skinner elevates the attempt to discover what "it might in principle have been possible for someone to communicate" into the chief task of history of ideas (Skinner, 1968: 49). The historically *eigentlich* emerges from knowledge of what are almost a priori possibilities of what *could* have been said, rather than from examination of what was said with a view to understanding what was thought.

The theory which drives Skinner toward this odd conception of the nature of study in history of ideas derives from an amalgam of recent developments within Anglo-American analytic philosophy, which he and the other Cambridge historiographers apply to the problem of the interpretation of past thought. "Philosophic analysis was the agency which began to liberate the historian for the pursuit of his own method," Pocock tells us, a development which it is especially "gratifying to record" for "much of the previous confusion originated in a confounding of the function of the historian and the philosopher" (Pocock, 1971: 11). Historians require philosophic analysis *about* their enterprise, but not *in* their enterprise. That analysis derives from and expands upon J. L. Austin's thesis about the performative quality of language. In using language one not only can say things, but in saying things, also do things. Austin uses as one of the clearest examples of such linguistic performances the exchange of vows in a wedding ceremony. In such utterances, Austin argues, one is not describing "what I should be said *in so uttering* to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (emphasis added) (Austin, 1975: 6). Austin, and Skinner after him, often use the formula: "in saying something we are doing something," to describe the performative character of speech acts (Austin, 1975: 12).

Austin introduces the term “illocution” to capture the “performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something” (Austin, 1975: 99–100). An example, one that figures in several of Skinner’s discussions of the issue, may help to clarify the point: to say “the ice over there is very thin,” may, under certain circumstances at least, be to issue a warning, that is, “to say something with the *force* of a warning” (Strawson, 1964: 444). The mere grasp of the words, syntax, and so on of the sentence, that is, of the meaning of the statement, does not secure understanding of what has been said. Thus, Skinner concludes, “meaning” and “understanding” are not “strictly correlative terms” (Skinner, 1968: 45). To understand a statement one must grasp the illocutionary force of the statement as well as its meaning. But the illocutionary force of a statement depends on a wide variety of contextual circumstances, and not merely on “what was said.” Focusing merely on “what was said,” what Austin calls the locution, and in Skinner appears as the text, cannot supply understanding, for it cannot supply knowledge of the illocutionary force.

Skinner’s principles of interpretation turn us from the text itself to the context, or more accurately, to the kind of interaction between text and context in which illocutionary force is graspable. Skinner’s special theory of interpretation arises, however, from his answer to the question of what makes possible the “uptake” or grasp of the illocutionary force of a statement (Skinner, 1970: 118). He argues, in brief, that “any intention capable of being correctly understood by A [the auditor] as the intention intended by S [the speaker] to be understood by A must always be a socially conventional intention—must fall, that is, within a given and established range of acts which can be conventionally grasped as being cases of the intention” (Skinner, 1970: 133). The conventions determine what can be said, and thus set bounds and limits to what any given utterance could possibly have been intended to say.

Now it should be clear that we stand here at the very center of the understanding from which Skinner’s critique of his fellow historians emerged and by which Skinner is led to the kind of a prioristic history we have already noticed. If we have adequate knowledge of the conventions prevailing at a given time and place we are in a position to know in advance, so to speak, what can or cannot possibly be said in that time and place. Thus we arrive at Skinner’s explicit mandates for an “appropriate methodology for the history of ideas.”

The role of convention in securing understanding of the illocutionary force of utterances forms the subject of a debate between Skinner and P. F. Strawson over the meaning of Austin’s doctrine. Thinking of the performative role of saying “I do” in a marriage ceremony, Austin himself affirmed the essential role of convention in bringing off the performance (e. g. Austin, 1975: 14, 105; Strawson, 1964: 441). Strawson agrees that “illocutionary force is a matter of convention . . . in a great number of cases,” but claims also that “there are many cases in which it is not as conforming to an accepted convention of any kind (other than those linguistic conventions which help fix the meaning of the utterance) that an

illocutionary act is performed” (Strawson, 1964: 443). He gives the example of “the ice over there is very thin.” There are circumstances in which this statement will have the illocutionary force of a warning, but “without its being the case that there is any storable convention at all . . . such that the speaker’s act can be said to be an act done as conforming to that convention” (Strawson, 1964: 444).

Skinner asserts, to the contrary, that “any intention capable of being correctly understood by A as the intention intended by S to be understood by A must always be a socially conventional intention” (Skinner, 1970: 133). Skinner’s argument in favor of that claim is remarkably thin however. “Even when the locution . . . and the circumstances . . . are both appropriate . . . for the act performed to be assessable as one of warning, a further question still remains, as to whether there exists any mutually recognizable convention such that to speak in the way S speaks in warning A will be acceptable as a form of warning, and so capable of being taken by A as a warning” (Skinner, 1970: 131). We may concede, as Strawson did, that sometimes it is indeed the case such a convention is necessary, nonetheless we must concur with Strawson’s judgment that this does not always seem to be the case. Skinner tries to show the essentiality of some established social convention or other by raising the question, why might S in this situation not carry out his intention to warn A in this way. He may believe that A will get the point, but react differently from what he (S) intends (for example, get alarmed or annoyed), or A may miss the point of the utterance, that is, not understand it as a warning. In a breathtaking leap of logic Skinner soars over the chasm from this latter possibility to the conclusion that “some element of convention and mutual understanding of it” is necessary for one to get the point of an utterance. Skinner talks as if every instance of “getting the point” is an instance of a statement being seen to fit into some linguistic convention or other, and every case of the point being missed as due to the absence of a mutually understood convention.

The example at hand is a powerful counter-example to Skinner’s position however. Neither he nor Strawson provides any analysis of what actually is involved in allowing the sentence “the ice over there is very thin,” to be taken, in the appropriate circumstances, as a warning. Skinner suggests it can serve as a warning because there exists a convention that it will be used in that way, and that people learn this convention in the way they learn that SOS signals distress. But the cases are really quite different, which can readily be seen if we consider the conditions which must be met for A to get the point of “the ice over there is very thin” as a warning. First, A must be a skater or someone otherwise on or possibly about to go on the ice, or concerned with someone on or about to go on the ice. If A were immobile and he and S both knew he would never go onto the ice, the statement in question could only be a matter of information (or perhaps something else), but not a warning addressed to A. A must also understand something about ice—that thin ice is ice which is less likely to hold a person’s weight. He must also understand that falling through the ice could be a danger-

ous or at least extremely unpleasant experience. Were he altogether ignorant of the feel and effects of icy water he might not understand the statement as a warning, for a warning requires awareness of something dangerous or otherwise to be avoided, and he might again just consider it a point of information, or perhaps even an invitation for a swim. To get the point of the statement as a warning then requires that the auditor be in a certain situation, possess certain information or understandings about ice, icy water, human bodies and so on, and that he or she be able to “put two and two together,” that is, be able to draw the inference from “the ice over there is very thin” to “it is dangerous to go over there.” The auditor need not know any conventions about issuing warnings to skaters, unless the various pieces of information required are considered to be such conventions. They certainly are not the sort of conventions (if it makes sense to call them that at all) that Skinner has in mind, for they are not conventions about warning. On the basis of reasoning of this sort Skinner erects his entire doctrine and methodology of interpretation, for he believes it establishes “the essential conventionality of speech acts,” and thus the necessity and possibility of understanding any given utterance via the linguistic conventions surrounding it and securing its illocutionary force (Skinner, 1970: 132–33).

According to the historiographers, philosophy tells them that “there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, with as many different answers as there are questions, and as many different questions as questioners.” The opposite view, or at least the opposite possibility, animated those earlier historians who tended to “confound the function of the historian and the philosopher.” If, of course, there are no “perennial problems in philosophy,” then it follows there is “simply no hope of seeking the point of studying the history of ideas in the attempt to learn directly from the classic authors by focusing on their attempted answers to supposedly timeless questions” (Skinner, 1968: 50).

Even if Skinner is correct about the role of convention in securing uptake, he does not succeed in establishing his major claim, to the effect that “there are no perennial problems.” Skinner’s theory about convention, however, can only establish at best that the communication of a thought occurs within a particular set of circumstances which are relevant to the possibilities of audience uptake of the authors’ intentions in making the statement, but he has not thereby established that the thought involved could not “transcend” the particular situation in which it was made. Indeed, if the possibility of speaking about the truth of any statement remains within Skinner’s frame, then there is no reason to discount the possibility of “timeless truths” being expressed by past thinkers. Skinner himself admits that the conventions are less binding than he sometimes suggests when he deals with the “very intractable” issue of innovation in the realm of thought:

If S’s speech act is also an act of social and linguistic innovation which S nevertheless intends or at least hopes will be understood, the act must necessarily, and for that reason, take the form of an extension or criticism of some existing attitude or project which is already convention-governed and understood (Skinner, 1970: 135).

The conventions, then, do not govern what may be thought, nor do they even govern what may be said. They govern, at most, in what way a thought may be expressed to a given audience. But, among other things, they may be ignored or rejected. In sum, Skinner's more strictly historicist conclusions of a Collingwoodian sort cannot be made to follow from his Austinian linguistic conventionalist arguments. (See appended essay on Pocock.)

Although I suggested earlier that Skinner drastically overstated the case when he characterized the approach of the textists in terms of a commitment to the text alone as solely adequate for understanding past thought, nonetheless the redirection Skinner and the others wish to effect is substantial and indeed lies in a direction away from the text. It would rather be more accurate to say that the textists, or the best of them in any case, focus not on the text as such but on the matter of which the text speaks—not on the matter as it is or might appear to the unassisted eye, but on the matter as the author of the text is trying to get or help them to see. To return to our earlier metaphor, the textists look whither the guide points, attempt to follow his line of vision; they neither look at the guide as a self-sufficient activity, nor to the landscape quite independently of his guiding or pointing activity. Those who use philosophic texts as mere points of departure for their own thinking, or for their own free associating, act like those who look to the landscape without any particular guidance from the guide. The historiographers, more to avoid the ahistorical defects of the latter approach, would look to the guide, but not to the matter. They fear they would see not what he sees, but rather, since everybody has his own (historical) vantage point, what comes to view from where they stand. Stated like this, the historiographers' position sounds much like an orthodox historicism, in, for example, the form of Nietzschean perspectivism. In fact it differs in an important respect that is worth repeating here. For Nietzsche, our knowledge of the guide too is infected by the perspectivalness of all our knowledge; the historically *eigentlich* appears as a bootless aspiration. If there are no perennial problems, if every act of thought "is *inescapably* the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend," then the same must apply to our efforts to understand those "acts of thought" (Skinner, 1967: 50). In a word: if past thinkers could not, in principle, think themselves out of their situations, then present historians cannot, in principle, think themselves into those situations. The historiographers are caught in an untenable middle ground between historicism and nonhistoricism.

If Skinner is correct, there must be as many equally valid—and equally invalid—histories of thought as there are "particular occasions and particular problems." Can Skinner and Pocock, even armed with their method, achieve the historically *eigentlich* any better than Wolin or Cassirer? The history constructed by Wolin, for example, presents "[his] individual answers to [his] individual questions." And the same for Skinner. But Skinner treats his predecessors altogether differently from what one might expect. He reasons with them, just as

they reasoned with those whom they studied. He subscribes to the Mythology of Doctrines—in the very act of attributing to them the Doctrine of Doctrines. He subscribes to the Mythology of Coherence in the very act of supplying a coherent reason or account for their practice of seeking coherence in the thinkers they study. Above all, Skinner speaks to them—and to other authors he addresses in a whole series of articles—as though it makes sense to speak of “the matter,” in this case, the best way to approach the history of ideas, and not senseless to blame them for not having done it the way he concludes is best. He acts as though he and the others are all addressing a common question, to which there might be better or worse answers, and, perhaps even a “timeless truth,” and not at all as though these are only “individual questions, with as many different questions as there are questioners” (Skinner, 1968: 50). Nor, as we shall see, does he apply to them any of the methodological tenets he blames them for not applying to the thinkers of the past.

My point is not so much to urge Skinner to apply his standards consistently to these men—this is more or less what Gunnell did in his recent book and exchange with Pocock—but rather to point out that the moment Skinner takes seriously an issue under discussion, the moment he thinks about “the matter” he forgets entirely everything he parades out when he is not being serious. When he is actually thinking about something, Skinner of course behaves just as the previous historians did, and as the philosophers did before them.

III. THE WATER UNDER THERE IS VERY COLD— INTERPRETIVE PRACTICES

Even if Skinner’s method were theoretically better grounded than it is, it sets logical requirements that can never be met in practice. First of all, Skinner could never draw the kind of a priori conclusions he seeks. For instance, should he find out that conventionally (normally?) people in the 13th century who spoke of the difference between the legislative and the executive meant that in an Aristotelian rather than a Montesquieuan sense, it nonetheless does not follow that Marsilius might not, in principle, have meant it in the latter sense. Even if we accept the highly dubious notion that no one can say anything which a convention does not warrant, we can never be certain we possess all the conventions available at a given time for any given source or sources. If Marsilius can be fairly shown to have spoken in a Montesquieuan way, the most Skinner would be able to infer was that there was an otherwise unknown convention (or, for Pocock “paradigm”) allowing that.

Secondly, the logic of Skinner’s position leads him to emphasize the priority of authorial intention, yet his method at the same time closes him off from understanding texts in the way their authors understood them. Skinner insists, on the one hand, that “no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something

which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done" (Skinner, 1969: 28):

This special authority of an agent over his intentions . . . excludes the possibility that an acceptable account of an agent's behavior could ever survive the demonstration that it was itself dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself. For if a given statement or other action has been performed by an agent at will, and has a meaning for him, it follows that any plausible account of what the agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing. Otherwise the resulting account, however compelling, cannot be an account of *his* statement or action (Skinner, 1969: 28–29).

Skinner defends this thesis about authorial intention courageously and lucidly in a series of essays addressed to various interpretive theses which, in one way or another challenge it (cf. Skinner, 1971: 15–16; Skinner, 1972: 394–408; Skinner, 1975–76: 213–15).

On the other hand, however, true to their methodological directives, the historiographers hold back from looking through the texts to "the matter" with which the text is concerned, and thus they withhold themselves from the crucial interpretive activities, such as seeking coherence, "filling in" and "filling out" and so on which are part of the interpreter's task of "thinking through" a text. "Thinking through" not only provides the only access to "the matter," but it also provides the only access to the text as an historical entity, for if Skinner is correct in general that to reach the historically *eigentlich* one must orient oneself by authorial intention, then one must recognize that the conventionalism at the core of Cambridge historiographism stands as a bar to that, for it puts the reader or interpreter in an altogether different frame of mind toward the text in question than the author of the text could have had. The authors of the texts understood their efforts not in terms of prevailing linguistic conventions, nor in terms of abstracting from prevailing "traditions" or "paradigms," but in terms of the matter.

At the same time, Skinner's theory about the nature of texts and their relation to context leads in practice to difficulties in the handling of both text and context. Skinner's *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* contain much useful and even some interesting information, but more than anything it reminds of a Cecil B. DeMille movie—a cast of thousands, but nothing very much of interest to say about the thinkers. Were Machiavelli, or any of the other thinkers, so flabby as Skinner makes them? Led by his method away from the matter of the thought, Skinner's work naturally substitutes erudition for engagement.

Skinner also largely misses the character of the texts with which he is concerned. He takes the simple expressive sentence—"the ice over there is very thin"—as the model for the communication act which one studies in history of political philosophy. He looks at texts in terms of basic or primitive nuggets or units of meaning—the sentence. He attempts to generate understanding by the context of an utterance, without recognizing that the first and foremost context is

the other sentences of the text, as structured and organized by the author. The author is not communicating to us merely a string of sentences; rather he communicates a thought or thoughts, which present a way of grasping or seeing “the matter” at hand, and presents or points to reasons which recommend this way of grasping as true. The author cannot communicate that grasp directly for he has not the power to transfer his thoughts directly. He can only speak in sentences which necessarily appear one after another and in some structured relationship with each other. The meaning is in the whole, in the complex thought the author may lead the reader to think by thinking through what is presented, and not in any colligation of primitive nuggets of meaning. The grasp of the matter as the author in question grasped the matter, which is the ultimate task not only of philosophical but of historical studies of the Rankean sort also, is itself a synchronous thing, but must be built up from the necessarily diachronously presented text. The transformation of the text from a diachronous to a synchronous entity might well be a shorthand way to describe the necessary and proper task of the interpreter, a task Cambridge historiographers fail to perform.

Cambridge historiographism focuses the interpreter’s attention away from the text, away from its structure and holistic or organized character, and towards the context. More than once in his various writings, Skinner gives the following illustration which reveals the way in which he brings text and context into interaction.

Suppose an historian comes across the following statement in a Renaissance moral tract: “a prince must learn how not to be virtuous.” Suppose that the sense and the intended reference of the statement are both perfectly clear. . . . Now suppose two alternative truths about the statement itself: either that such cynical advice was frequently offered in Renaissance moral tracts; or that scarcely anyone had ever publicly offered such cynical advice as a precept before. It is obvious that any commentator wishing to understand the statement must find out which of these alternatives is nearer the truth. If the answer is the first alternative, the intended force of the utterance itself in the mind of the agent who uttered it can only have been to endorse or emphasize an accepted moral attitude. But if the answer is the second, the intended force of the utterance becomes more like that of rejecting or repudiating an established moral commonplace. Now it happens in fact that something like each of these historical claims has been advanced in turn by historians of ideas about the statement to this effect in Machiavelli’s *Prince*. Now it is obvious not merely that only one of these claims can be correct, but also that the decision on which one is correct will very greatly affect any understanding of what Machiavelli can have been intending to achieve (Skinner, 1969: 46–47).

Now, according to Skinner, that “decision” could not be made “from studying the statement itself and its meaning.” This claim is most revealing of Skinner’s position, for it makes clear his view that the interpretive task is to “decode” these nugget-like entities, “statements.” But this statement by Machiavelli does not exist by itself as though it were an autonomous text. It exists within a larger text

which serves to locate its meaning and point. Machiavelli, for example, has many other things to say about virtue in the *Prince*, including the famous description of how his treatment of his themes differs in general from the treatments of all previous writers. Individual statements find their place within the context of a structure of many other individual statements, and their meaning therefore does not lie open to a wide array of possible illocutionary understandings when they are grasped in context (cf. Tarcov, 1982: 697). Especially important is a focus on the structure of a text, for the structure contains the author's articulation of the interrelation between his statements, that is, the way in which they serve as contexts for each other. But the Cambridge historiographers are remarkably indifferent to the structure of the works they study. (In his more recent theoretical work, Skinner seems to be discovering the import of structure, however. He indicates his belief that for some class of text—for example, Shakespeare's plays—understanding may arrive more from a grasp of structure than of external context [Skinner, 1975–76]).

Moreover, Skinner's statements of the alternative meanings of Machiavelli's statement is false, or at least misleading. If others said the same as Machiavelli, he "can only" have intended "to endorse or emphasize an accepted moral attitude," says Skinner. No, Machiavelli can have intended several other things as well, including getting his readers to see why such a statement was true, or how it related to other opinions people hold. That is, just because one agrees with others in a statement, that does not make agreeing with others the *point* of the statement. The point of the statement can only be seen by attending to Machiavelli's text.

Instead of working with the text as a text, instead of "thinking through," the historiographers "look around," attempt to establish meaning by setting in context. That approach leads them to hypostatize context: "an appeal to *the* context is deceptive: one never has—at least in the case of complex texts—*the* context" (LaCapra, 1980: 254). The historiographer's historical research shows that very well, for we have Pocock's book *The Machiavellian Moment* and Skinner's *The Foundation of Modern Thought*, covering much of the same material, but reading it off rather different constructs of the context. Not merely do they present different constructs of the context—and thus of the authors they are considering—but more importantly they present *their* view of the context, generated quite freely and with little regard for the sense of context of the authors under study (cf. Tarcov, 1982: 708). For example, it is surely correct that one needs to consider how Machiavelli's works are written into his context (what illocutionary force he intended them to have), but one needs to follow Machiavelli's own indications about his context. Both Skinner and Pocock are notable for the degree to which they impose external contextual materials on their authors. Machiavelli, for example, speaks a great deal of his context as he understands it and as he intends to address it. The historiographers ignore Machiavelli's own presen-

tations, however, and impose what, in the case of Pocock, is a highly structured, highly artificial context which seems to relate far less to Machiavelli and his contemporaries than to Pocock's previous historical research, or certain *idées fixes* of his (cf. Pocock, 1975: 3–83; Pocock, 1971: 233–72; Pocock, 1957).

Political philosophy or political thought in relation to political life or political action stands as a central theme in the work of the Cambridge historiographers, but the peculiar interpretation of the work into its origin and the peculiar detachment of the work from any other possible context upon which they insist is untenable. By refuting the Cambridge historiographers we cannot guarantee that history of political philosophy will prove useful to our political life, nor that it will not degenerate into a mere colligation of claims about text and context mainly of interest to scholars, and not of much interest even to them. But we can hope to have contributed to the survival of the possibility of the understanding and appropriation—for these are not opposed but intimately related activities—of political philosophy.

APPENDIX: POCOCK'S WORK

Convention stands at the center of Pocock's work also, but he never manages to mount as sophisticated a philosophical explication of his position. For Pocock, the relevant conventions are "paradigms." Political societies contain one or more "paradigms" by which they discuss their political (and other) aspects. Like Skinner's linguistic conventions, these paradigms determine what can or cannot be said at any given time or place, but thinkers may mix together these paradigms or the paradigms may "migrate" from one context to another, and thus produce or allow innovation and difference. Pocock puts far less weight on authorial intention than Skinner does, for his paradigms carry more of the weight of thinking than do Skinner's conventions. They seem to be more highly structured than Skinner's conventions, or perhaps, organized at a higher level of complexity. Skinner's conventions seem to apply at the level of individual statements, whereas Pocock's paradigms seem much more like what we would recognize as "theories" or structured, complex, and stable sets of opinions (Pocock, 1971: 3–41).

Pocock's notion of paradigm remains hopelessly vague, however; one wonders whether paradigm is not just a fancy (and therefore obscuring) way of saying that at any given time political society is characterized by sets of more or less prevailing, more or less authoritative, opinions on many or most matters of importance. As restated, that is no doubt correct, but how far does this observation take us towards the new methodology of the historiographers? Pocock attempts to ground his "transformation" of the study of history of political philosophy with the claim that all political thinking "is now redefined as the exploration and sophistication of political language," that is, what he had called in his previous article "a series of abstractions from experience, or from a tradition" (Pocock, 1971: 15; Pocock, 1962: 190). Let us not pause to explore in any detail what actually follows from what, for Pocock just gives us no reason to believe his account of "paradigms" or of the character of thinking is true.

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