Intellectual History as Political Theory: The Relevance of Quentin Skinner

Tim Fisken, April 16, 2006

> *David Blunkett is a tyrant.*
> — Quentin Skinner[1]

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[1] *Start the Week*, radio program (London: BBC Radio 4, 20 January 2003). At the time, David Blunkett was British Home Secretary.

Quentin Skinner is often held to have advocated the study of intellectual history in opposition to what has traditionally been practiced as political theory. His criticism (along with other members of the "Cambridge School," notably Dunn and Pocock) of what he saw as widespread anachronism in the study of political theory when he began his work in the late 1960s emphasizes the importance of history to his work. It would be a mistake, however, to regard Skinner as advocating a discipline of intellectual history separate from political theory, leaving the political theorists perhaps free to continue in their anachronism. On the contrary, Skinner's interest in historically accurate readings of past texts in political theory is due to a belief that historical accuracy is important *for political theory*, a rejection of the distinction between an ahistorical political theory and an apolitical intellectual history.[2] But there is perhaps something puzzling about this. One of Skinner's central claims is that we cannot reasonably interpret historical authors as discussing issues of contemporary relevance, but must instead attempt to understand their work as a response to their own, historically specific, concerns. How, then, could this practice of intellectual history function as a form of political theory which would have any relevance to the present? This is the question I will attempt to answer in this paper. By looking in detail at Skinner's methodological writings, I will suggest that it is precisely the historical specificity of past works of theory which, by providing us with unfamiliar concepts, makes them useful in reflecting on the conceptual organization of contemporary politics.

This question touches on, I think, two of the four "mythologies" Skinner describes in "Meaning and Understanding," the mythology of doctrines and the mythology of prolepsis. In these two cases, what is "mythological" is the neglect of the historical specificity of the works

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2 Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), vol. 2, 193.

under consideration. The myth of doctrines consists of insisting on interpreting authors as if their writings are an attempt to expound a complete doctrine on some specific subject easily recognizable by us. Skinner has two objections to this; the first is that this may lead us to overestimate the significance of "scattered or incidental remarks" in our eagerness to use them as evidence of a doctrine.[3] Skinner's second objection is more significant, both for his purposes and mine. This concerns the problem of attributing to authors doctrines on subject on which *we* might expect them to have an opinion, without considering whether this is a question on which they would in fact have been expressing an opinion. Skinner gives examples of "too readily finding expected doctrines in classic text" calculated to appear absurd,[4] for instance, attributing to Marsilius of Padua the doctrine of the separation of powers developed in the American constitution, blind to "the impropriety of supposing that he *could* have meant to contribute to a debate the terms of which were unavailable to him."[5]

Central to Skinner's position here is the presupposition that to understand an author's position is to understand it as a response to some particular debate. The mythology of doctrines erroneously (or at least, without argument) assumes that these debates are perennial. It would not be problematic to attribute to past authors answers to contemporary questions if it made sense to think of the questions as perennial, as necessarily the ones the author in question would have been interested in.[6] Skinner's criticism of the mythology of doctrines, then, depends on an assertion of the historical specificity of the concerns of political theorists. This specificity would seem to render the political theory of the past inapplicable to the concerns of the present.

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3 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 66.
4 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 61.
5 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 61.
6 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 64.

Skinner likewise criticizes the mythology of prolepsis for effacing historical specificity. The prolepsis in question here is the redescription of past texts in terms of their subsequent influence; Skinner calls this the *significance* of the texts, and contrasts it sharply with the *meaning*, that is, the intention of the author in writing that text.[7] Indeed, Skinner claims that the result of this kind of proleptic reading is that "no place is left for the analysis of what its author may have intended or meant."[8] That is, for Skinner, what an author "intended or meant" (the expression here is tautologous), is historically specific; these actual intentions depend on the particular possible intentions available at a given time; as Skinner says, "it can scarcely have been Locke's intention to anticipate Berkeley's metaphysics."[9]

The neglect of this specificity, Skinner argues, apart from being philosophically untenable, leads to "parochialism."[10] Skinner's first example is the assumption that past authors must have been responding to the canonical authors we happen to be familiar with.[11] More interesting for my argument is the second form of parochialism, "the danger that the historian may conceptualize an argument in such a way that its alien elements dissolve into a misleading familiarity."[12] The thought of the past, that is, is in Skinner's view "alien," that is, specific to its time and thus at a historical distance from our own. The implication, as in the discussion of the mythology of doctrines, is that *any* attempt to bring a past text into the context of the present will dissolve its specificity, and so be misleading.

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7 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 73.
8 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 72.
9 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 78.
10 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 74.
11 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 75.
12 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 76.

But when taken to this extreme, the position becomes problematic. Skinner, as a historian, is clearly interested in describing and discussing the thought of the past, and so in "putting it into contact with the present" in *some* sense of my rather vague phrase above. So the question must be, if we accept Skinner's criticisms of the idea of perennial problems and of the parochialism of expecting the political theory of the past to address the questions of the present, what account can we give of how the meaning of past texts is recoverable at all? Furthermore, it seems to me, any such account will address in some way the question of how the history of political theory relates to our own attempts to theorize politically in the present. The challenge presented by Skinner's work, that is, is not to simply deny that the political theory of the past could ever be relevant to us, but rather to consider a sort of relevance which would not effect a parochial reduction of the history of political thought to familiar or perennial doctrines.

Skinner of course is not unaware of these questions. On the contrary, his famous injunction that "we must learn to do our thinking for ourselves," occurs precisely in the context of the discussion of the value for us of historical study.[13] Skinner argues that the essential "philosophical, even moral, value" of past texts lies in their distance from the present, in the way that they demonstrate the contingency of our own ways of framing political questions.[14] A method capable of making the history of political theory relevant in the only way it can be, would then have to be capable of recovering this past theory in its unfamiliarity.

Arguably, Skinner's practice when he has concerned himself with contemporary political theory has gone somewhat beyond the program sketched in his methodological works. In "The

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13 Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in Quentin Skinner and James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 66. I quote this edition as it contains the sentence in its most well-known form.

14 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 88.

Idea of Negative Liberty: Machiavellian and Modern Perspectives," Skinner does not simply discover "contingencies of our local history and social structure," but goes on to take a specific position in a contemporary debate.[15] Skinner's target is Berlin's equation of negative liberty with the liberal conception of liberty as the absence of constraints on individual behavior.[16] For Skinner, this position amounts to the belief that *our* concept of liberty is necessarily *the* concept of liberty.[17] Skinner's earlier remarks about the utility of intellectual history suggest his aim here, which is to undermine this presentist conceptual limitation. However, Skinner goes on to insist that history can not only denaturalize our current conceptions, but also (and this is its superiority to conceptual analysis), "show that it [a concept] *has in fact* been put to unfamiliar but coherent uses,"[18] that is, to produce (or retrieve) a specific conception which could be contrasted with "our" conception. Furthermore, this conception will not only show the contingency of present conceptions, but the process of historical retrieval will itself contribute to a philosophical investigation of the concept; it is not only of historical interest but "of immediate philosophical significance."[19] Thus the past conception is relevant only while it is still in some sense kept at a historical distance, maintaining its historical specificity as a challenge to contemporary conceptions, as Skinner makes clear when he argues that because historical perspectives "enable us to stand back from our own beliefs and the concepts we use to express them," they are capable of "forcing us to reconsider, to recast or even … to abandon some of our current beliefs in the light of this wider perspective."[20]

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15 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 89.
16 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 2, 187.
17 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 2, 192.
18 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 2, 191.
19 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 2, 195.
20 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 2, 195.

One could argue that here Skinner is departing from his historical program and taking on a different role, that of the political theorist.[21] This strikes me as implausible for two reasons. First, it neglects Skinner's rejection of the distinction between philosophy and the "history of ideas."[22] Of course, Skinner's self-description is not definitive, but this claim does seem to be borne out by the way in which the political-theoretical argument he makes in "The Idea of Negative Liberty" depends upon his more clearly historical work. It is difficult to see how he could present the Machiavellian concept of liberty as a challenge to the contemporary concept if he had not undertaken the historical study of Machiavelli's language of liberty and virtue necessary to retrieve that concept. Finally, and similarly, this objection is hard to reconcile with a text such as *Liberty Before Liberalism*, which concerns itself almost entirely with discussion of texts in their historical concept, and yet which Skinner presents as putting forward an argument about liberty with contemporary relevance.[23]

To resolve this apparent difficulty we need to consider in detail the specific philosophy of language which allows Skinner to criticize the "mythologies" he identifies in "Meaning and Understanding," and which underpins his alternative methodology. Skinner's central reference point is Austin's theory of speech acts; however, we shall see in the course of explicating his use of Austin's theory that Skinner alters and extends the theory to account for the difference between a speech act and the production of a text, and it is from these differences that Skinner creates a method which allows for the recovery of past political theory without reducing it to familiarity.

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21 As is argued in Jon Wilson, "Two Concepts of Quentin Skinner," *The Voice of the Turtle Summer Books Special* (1999), available online at http://www.voiceoftheturtle.org/show_article.php?aid=152
22 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 2, 194.
23 Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Skinner emphasizes the importance of understanding political texts as attempts to "do things with words," and so his interest in Austin focuses on the distinction between locution and illocution.[24] To say that, however, might obscure an important point that Skinner makes: while he insists that locution and illocution are conceptually separable, he explicitly denies that they are independent, writing that "there can be no doubt that the meaning of utterances helps to limit the range of illocutionary forces they can bear."[25] This is significant because it marks a space between Skinner and some of those he draws on. Skinner appears to endorse Strawson's "questioning [of] the prominence Austin assigns to conventions (as opposed to speakers intentions)."[26] However, for Skinner this does not mean that we can understand texts by reference to authors' intentions with no reference to conventions, because intentions and conventions are intimately connected. The central question for Skinner is "the relationship between the linguistic dimension of illocutionary force and the capacity of speakers to exploit that dimension."[27]

To make clear where Skinner differs from Austin, we can turn to Derrida's critique of the latter. Derrida begins by praising speech act theory for apparently avoiding construing language in terms of the communication of a transparently accessible meaning.[28] This likewise is what Skinner finds valuable in Austin: the rejection of the idea that the meaning we are interested in is accessible transparently in the text. However, Derrida goes on to question how successful Austin has actually been in this, by looking at Austin's discussion of failed performances. Austin is aware

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24 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 103.
25 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 114.
26 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 106n.
27 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 105.
28 Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," trans. Alan Bass, in Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 98.

that the failure of a speech act is a permanent possibility, that "*all* conventional acts are exposed to failure";[29] however, Derrida argues, he fails to draw the consequences of the fact that this permanent possibility is a necessary possibility, that is, that which prevents language's proper operation cannot be understood as something outside of language, but is inherent in the way language functions.[30]

This condition of both success and failure lies in what Derrida call iterability. For a speech act to carry illocutionary force it must, as Austin emphasizes, take place according to certain conventions, it must repeat certain ritualistic forms ("I promise...," "I name this ship..."). However, the repeatability of utterances which allows them to function conventionally is a general iterability, which allows them to be repeated in circumstances where they do not perform the associated illocutionary act; where they are performed in the theatrical sense, or used ironically. Austin excludes as parasitical or derivative these uses of language, but they depend on precisely the same structure of iterability as successful (or "serious") uses of language.[31]

Having identified this tension in Austin, Derrida goes on to suggest the way in which Austin defers the difficulty created by it. This is where the concept of intentionality becomes crucial. What, for Austin, ensures the "seriousness" of an utterance is, finally, the intention of the speaker. However, if this is to overcome the *aporias* of conventionality, this intention must be entirely separate from convention. Thus Austin's theory finally fails to give an account of meaning which does not depend on some foundational, transparently accessible meaning. If intentions are to

29 Derrida, "Signature," 100.
30 Derrida, "Signature," 101.
31 Derrida, "Signature," 103.

exclude the failure which is a necessary possibility of language use, they must be fully present, either in the presence of the speaker herself, or by the presence of her meaning in the text.[32]

For Skinner's theory of language to accomplish what he wants, he cannot depend on this form of intentionality. For a historian, the author is never present, and to assume the presence of meaning in a text absent its context condemns us to to the kind of textual interpretation Skinner charges must lead to parochialism.[33] Leaving aside any philosophical objections one might have to intentions considered as internal, mental properties, such an approach is unavailable to Skinner for the fairly prosaic reason that, rather than being interested in a theory of spoken language, he is specifically concerned with interpreting texts where the author is not present, indeed usually long dead, and so their mental states are in principle absolutely unrecoverable. Hence also Skinner's emphasis on the intention *in* writing, which exists to the extent it is manifested by the text that is produced, as opposed to the motive *for* writing, which may be separate from the text and quite inaccessible.[34] Skinner thus distances himself from intentions considered as properties of individuals by appealing to the idea of *social meanings*.

It is helpful, I think, in understanding Skinner's philosophy of language to look in more detail at his distinction between intentions and motives. Skinner develops the distinction in reference to Davidson's rejection of the idea (drawn from Wittgenstein) that explanations of acts are not causal explanations. Davidson argues that to explain an act we need to identify a mental "pro-attitude" (a general term covering motives, intentions, desires, reasons, etc) towards that act and, for our explanation to be correct, this pro-attitude must be identical with the brain state that

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32 Derrida, "Signature," 106.
33 If context is in fact inescapable, to proceed as if it were irrelevant to interpretation means we will simply end up smuggling our *own* context into our interpretation.
34 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 138.

causes the act.[35] Skinner is happy to accept this account for those cases he describes as motives, that we do indeed have mental states that cause our actions.[36] Against both Wittgenstein and Davidson, however, he distinguishes this from explanations in terms of intentions, which he argues are non-causal.

The alternative to causal explanation that Skinner puts forward is explanation by redescription. Rather than explaining an action by saying why it was done, redescription tells us what it means or, as Skinner "colloquially" puts it, what its point is.[37]

There are two significant points to make here about redescriptive explanation. One is that to redescribe an utterance tells you something more about the utterance itself, it identifies, in some sense, what the utterance *is*. This is why Skinner can say that redescriptive explanation is prior to causal explanation, that we may need to know what sort of act an act is before we can explain why it was done: "it may be appropriate, before asking about someone's motives, to ask whether the performance of their action itself bears any conventional elements of (non-natural) meaning or (illocutionary) force."[38] The second, and related, point, is that redescription does not point to anything separate from the utterance itself, unlike a causal explanation which must identify something separate which caused the utterance. If describing intentions is a form of redescriptive explanation, then, the intention identified will not be some property of an author separate from a text, but rather a property manifested by the text. Or rather, as the sort of meaning at issue here is social meaning, a property of a text in its social context.[39] The redescriptions with which we can

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35 Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 12-14.
36 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 139.
37 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 137.
38 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 138.
39 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 135.

acceptably explain an utterance are limited by the meanings available to the author of the utterance, which are a matter of the language employed by the speaker and her audience. Thus, explaining the intention of an author requires first that we consider the range of possible intentions, the social meanings existing for the author.[40] Skinner's focus is therefore much less individualist then we might expect of a theory based around authors' intentions, and in particular does not depend on the sort of presence of meaning criticized by Derrida. Rather than something private, an intention is a particular location in a given space of social meanings. The question remains, however, of how we are to understand this "space" which provides the social meanings employed by authors through their intentions.

Grice attempts to develop the social presuppositions of meaning by critically examining a view of language as causal communication, where X means Y iff X has a tendency to be uttered by speakers who believe Y, and X has a tendency to cause hearers to believe Y.[41] The difficulty with this causal account is that it does not sufficiently circumscribe what is to count as meaning, in the sense in which Grice is interested. Grice specifically distinguishes natural meaning, the sense in which we can take something as a sign of something else (spots as a sign of measles, for example) from non-natural meaning, the sense in which some sign can be used to communicate something else.[42] Explaining meaning by reference to causal tendencies appears incapable of making this distinction. Many acts may tend to case certain beliefs, without thereby meaning the proposition that comes to be believed, or indeed meaning anything at all (Grice's example is the tendency

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40 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 97.
41 H. P. Grice, "Meaning" in his *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). Grice is actually a little more careful in his formulation, referring to "some attitude (cognitive or otherwise)" rather than "belief" (215). For simplicity, I shall concentrate on the case of belief, as Grice does for most of his essay.
42 Grice, "Meaning," 214.

that putting on a tailcoat will cause the belief that one is about to go to a dance[43]). To deal with these cases, Grice turns to an account of meaning in terms of intentions. He suggests that X means that Y iff X is intended to induce the belief that Y. This still fails to be sufficiently restrictive, however, and in response to this Grice introduces a more strongly intersubjective account of meaning.

After trying various possibilities, Grice concludes that we can analyze "A means such-and-such by uttering x" as "A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention,"[44] and then to explain the meaning of phrases in general by reference to what is usually meant by the phrase. The point here, though, is that meaning for Grice is, indeed, social meaning; it does not depend solely on features of the speaker or author, but rather on features shared by the author and the audience.

Grice, then, gives us an account of a social intentionality. However, despite Skinner's expression of approval for Grice's account, it may not in fact give him the kind of intentionality he needs.[45] To illustrate this I turn again to Derrida, particularly his insistence that the possibility of language use in the absence of the author or speaker is not derivative but a necessary structural feature of language.[46] It is here that Grice's theory seems open to Derridean objections. For Grice, linguistic (or, more broadly, non-natural) meaning arises when a speaker intends that her utterance be taken by her audience as intended to communicate some meaning X. However, in the absence of any natural features of the speaker that convey the given meaning, how are the audience to understand the utterance as intended to convey X, and so how is the author able to

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43 Grice, "Meaning," 216.
44 Grice, "Meaning," 220.
45 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 133.
46 Derrida, "Signature," 91.

intend that they so interpret the utterance? Such an intention could never be realized, and so could only be a private desire; on the Wittgensteinian understanding of language shared by Skinner and Grice, such an intention would be no intention at all. For instance, it might be that screaming and pointing towards a fire serves to warn others of the fire, but it does so through natural features of the action, the noise and the motion of pointing, not through the recognition that it is intended to communicate something. For the act to communicate *non-naturally*, in Grice's sense, the audience would have to have recourse to something apart from the action itself that allowed them to interpret the action as intended to communicate, and the speaker has to have recourse to the same separate structure to formulate the intention that her action be so understood. This question of the necessary separation of language as a set of conventions from the intentions of the author is precisely the difficulty identified by Derrida, but it is just here that Grice's analysis stops. He assumes that intention can solve the problem of language as such, when in fact his analysis merely allows us to identify the more fundamental problem.

Skinner, however, does consider this issue, not through an engagement with Derrida, but in his criticism of Strawson's narrow understanding of conventions.[47] Instead of specific and more-or-less explicit conventions, Skinner talks of a pervasive ideological context.[48] Skinner presses an argument which is similar to Derrida's against Strawson, who he criticizes for concentrating on a dialogic situation in which both participants are present, and thus neglecting the way in which social context stands against individual authors, thereby providing the possibility of their particular expression.

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[47] Quentin Skinner, "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1970), 118-38, at 135-7.

[48] The term "ideological context" I take from Quentin Skinner, "Hermeneutics and the Role of History," *New Literary History*, 7 (1975), 210-33, at 216.

Skinner elucidates this sense of context through his discussion of a cultural lexicon. Such a lexicon consists of the words available to us, but not considered merely as an aggregate, but in their relationships to one another, the circumstances in which we can legitimately apply them, and the evaluative forces they can be made to bear.[49] As an example, Skinner considers the debate over whether Duchamp's ready-mades ought to be considered works of art. He points out that this debate centers on the meaning of the term "art," which includes the question of whether ready-mades fall under the category of art (are objects which are not deliberately created as art still art?), the relation of art of other concepts (can an object be both useful and a work of art?), and the value of art (if any old object can be art, is art worth anything?).[50] A context, then, is a complex structure of words and possible practices.[51]

This gives us a possible way of reformulating Skinner's project (although one I am not sure he would necessarily assent to), which I will explore in the remainder of this paper. Although Skinner has tended to construe his methodology in terms of understanding the intentions of authors, we can see that this is intimately linked with understanding a cultural lexicon. This lexicon is a structure which we can conceptually distinguish from the particular discursive acts which employ it; however, it only exists materially (or, at least, we can only ever hope to have access to it) *in* these discursive acts. The question of understanding authorial intentions, then, when these are understood in Skinner's sense, becomes first and foremost the question of extracting these conceptual structures from the texts that are our evidence of their existence.

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49 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 163-9.
50 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 163-4.
51 Kuhn, in discussing his own idea of a lexicon, describes it as a sort of taxonomy through which people clarify their experiences (Thomas Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure: Philosophical Essays*, *1970-1993, with an Autobiographical Interview*, [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000], 308-13).

How, then, is this achieved? We can find a discussion of the practice of intellectual history which explicitly addresses the question in these terms in Kuhn's reformulation of the concept of "paradigm" in response to Kripke's and Putnam's externalist theories of meaning.[52] Kripke and Putnam both argue that the referent of a term is determined by its history, the causal chain connecting uses of the term to the object to which it refers. Kuhn endorses this theory, but points out that the causal chain cannot be given for each term individually, without reference to other terms.[53] Instead, terms are introduced into a pre-existing vocabulary by reference to terms already in that vocabulary, as with Putnam's example of "water" introduced as the "same liquid" as some sample, which references the pre-existing use of the term "liquid."[54] Kuhn points to more complex, but common, examples, where a term is introduced as part of a group of terms with its own structure, such as force, mass, and acceleration.[55] In the cases discussed by Skinner, such complexes will be the norm, as political theory does not generally deal with objects which can be given an ostensive definition.

Kuhn goes on to argue that this holism produces statements which are "quasi-analytic," which must be accepted as a precondition of using the terms involved with other members of the linguistic community.[56] Kuhn's argument is that studying the history of these terms can allow us to identify these quasi-analytic statements, and thus recover the structure of the vocabularies they constitute, both their causal relation with the world, and the internal relations between concepts. Thus, studying the arguments which are put forward and accepted by past authors with a view to

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52 Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" in his *Philosphical Papers* (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), vol. 2.
53 Kuhn, *Road*, 43-4.
54 Putnam, "Meaning," 226.
55 Kuhn, *Road*, 67.
56 Kuhn, *Road*, 304.

the presuppositions which underlie these arguments allows us to delineate the context within which they were working. This would give us the desired method of recovering past theories along with the structure that makes them unfamiliar, because along with the theory we retrieve a context of associations and presuppositions alien to our own ways of thinking.

This suggests that the process of understanding past political theory depends on coming to understand what is unfamiliar in the vocabulary of the theory, and so is not completely captured by accounts of "translating" past theory into our contemporary vocabulary. Bevir, for instance, argues that to "describe the meaning of classic works to our contemporaries in words they understand" is to translate it into our vocabulary.[57] Drawing on Davidson's rejection of a plurality of incommensurable conceptual schemes, Bevir then suggests that this translatability undermines the alien character of past texts supposed by Skinner.[58] While I agree that to understand past political theory must mean to explain it in our own vocabulary, I think the relationship between meaning and context I have been sketching suggests that "translation" may not be the best term for this sort of understanding. Translation of statements or passages may fail to capture the structure of terms used in the original text and so will, at least without a further gloss explicating the relations between these terms, lead to erasing important details of the original argument, producing either a superficially familiar position, or one in which the connection between the statements made is not apparent.

Kuhn discusses this issue in more detail. He considers the example of how one would go about interpreting a text of phlogiston chemistry. Clearly, this would involve a number of terms which are not part of our vocabulary: "phlogiston" is the obvious one, but there are also other

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57 Mark Bevir, "Are There Perennial Problems in Political Theory?" *Political Studies* 42 (1994), 662-75, at 664.
58 Bevir, "Perennial Problems," 667.

terms of the scientific discourse of the time (Kuhn's examples are "element" and "principle," used with different meanings from their contemporary ones[59]). One could attempt to translate this text by finding equivalents for words and phrases which preserve truth, for instance translating "α is richer in phlogiston than β" as "α has a greater affinity for oxygen than β."[60] However, we cannot do this systematically; there is no one term that we can substitute for "phlogiston" which will preserve the truth of those statements in the older text which were confirmed by the experience of the author. We would have to translate "phlogiston" by a variety of different terms depending on context.[61] Doing this, however, as Kuhn points out, would render the argumentative structure of the text incoherent, because these arguments depend on phlogiston being the same thing wherever it is mentioned:

> Substituting unrelated or differently related expressions for those related, sometimes identical, terms of the original must at least suppress those beliefs [expressed through the use of related terms], leaving the text that results incoherent. Examining [such a] translation, one would repeatedly be at a loss to understand why those sentences where juxtaposed in a single text.[62]

Instead of this sort of translation, then, Kuhn argues we should explain how these terms are used, allowing us to acquire the language in which the old text was written. This process will of course take place in our own language, but the result will not be a translation *into* that language, but instead the understanding of a language different from our own.

Skinner makes the same distinction between translating into our own language and learning a new language in arguing against Davidson.[63] It is this ability to delineate in our own language the structure of another language that makes it possible to practice intellectual history as political

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59 Kuhn, *Road*, 42.
60 Kuhn, *Road*, 40.
61 Kuhn, *Road*, 41.
62 Kuhn, *Road*, 41-2.
63 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 30.

theory in the way Skinner does. The focus on a historically specific context allows Skinner to isolate and retrieve the way political theory was practiced at a particular point. The virtue of this for Skinner as a political theorist is that it separates his account of intellectual history from a teleological narrative of political theory, either of development or decline. This narrative approach was central to political theory in the first half of the 20th century, either in the developmental "ideas and institutions" tradition, or in the Straussian account of the forgetting of natural right.[64] In contrast, Skinner emphasizes that what he finds theoretically valuable in the history of political theory is its contingency and diversity.[65] The central example in Skinner's work is the neo-Roman theory of liberty, which is valuable precisely because of its eradication from contemporary liberal-democratic politics, and hence its alterity. The neo-Roman theory, plucked out of the past and recreated with its alien conceptual structure by the intellectual historian, provides a way of reflecting on the categories of contemporary politics that would otherwise be unavailable; it also provides us with new possibilities for critique.

And so I draw to a close with a few remarks as to what form of critique is made possible by Skinner's methodology. The most obvious form of critique, an application of past theories to present circumstances, is ruled out by the unfamiliarity of the theory which is so important to Skinner. We could not immediately apply the neo-Roman theory to contemporary politics because we do not know what its terms would refer to—who are citizens, what institution if any corresponds to the *res publica*, and so on. But through considering questions of this sort we may find the neo-Roman theory useful in producing new theories, because the unfamiliarity of the neo-Roman theory also challenges us to think in ways which would appear unobvious from

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64 Robert Adcock and Mark Bevir, "The Remaking of Political Theory," (Unpublished), 4, 11.
65 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 88.

within liberal political theory. Past political theory may encourage us to consider how we can use the resources of our own vocabulary in non-standard ways. Skinner writes that an awareness of the contingency of our own values

> can help to liberate us from the grip of any one hegemonal account of those values and how they should be interpreted and understood. Equipped with a broader sense of possibility, we can stand back from the intellectual commitments we have inherited and ask ourselves in a new spirit of enquiry what we should think of them.[66]

This is not a normative critique, as past political theory does not tell us what we *should* think of our present values (it is *past* precisely to the extent it does not address these values), but only provides us with new ways of formulating the question. Nor does intellectual history as practiced by Skinner provide us with a Kantian critique, a demonstration of the conditions of possibility of politics. Rather, it is the inverse, a critique in Foucault's sense, which asks "in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?"[67] Considering political theory historically, therefore, is not of mere historical interest. Rather, the historical method allows us to capture some of the ways in which the political theory of the past eludes or falls between our present categories, suggesting ways in which we could do the same, making possible "a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression."[68] As Skinner puts it:

> We are of course embedded in practices and in part constrained by them. But those practices owe their dominance in par to the power of our normative language to hold them in place, and it is always open to us to employ the resources of our language to undermine as well as to underpin these practices. We may be freer than we sometimes suppose.[69]

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66 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 6.
67 Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in his *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 45.
68 Foucault, "What," 45.
69 Skinner, *Visions*, vol. 1, 7.

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