The Triumvirate of the Cambridge School:

Pocock’s, Dunn’s and Skinner’s Methodological Articles on the History of Political Thought, 1962-1969

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Acknowledgements

I have written about the Cambridge School before, in The History of Political Thought in 2016, though that essay was largely written a decade earlier, and sought to contextualise the Cambridge School within the entire tradition of the Cambridge Historical Tripos and History Faculty. That was a broad contextualisation. Last year there was reason to circle back and think more closely about the School itself. I am indebted to John Dunn for inviting me to King’s College for a conference on related subjects in May 2019 (though he has not read and no one else except the reviewers at History of Political Thought has read the present article), to Leslie Marsh for characteristically ebullient permission to review at Macaulayan length Martyn Thompson’s recent book on Oakeshott and the Cambridge School for Cosmos and Taxis, to Alan MacFarlane, J.C.D. Clark, Boyd Hilton, Quentin Skinner, Ian Harris, John Robertson, Robert Grant for encouraging words about those performances, and to Gulsen Seven for continual encouragement to think again. In memoriam: Norman Stone, who died in 2019, not a member of the Cambridge School, though a contemporary of Skinner at Caius, and whose last note to me said he wished he could read what I’d said at King’s.
Abstract

The Cambridge School of the history of political thought exists as a tradition of teaching in the History Faculty of Cambridge University, and as a set of works including famous books like *The Political Thought of John Locke*, *The Machiavellian Moment* and *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, but acquired its distinctive status because of three methodological articles written in the 1960s by the triumvirate of J.G.A. Pocock, John Dunn and Quentin Skinner. These articles are usually assimilated to each other, with, at most, Skinner’s emphasis on ‘intentions’ being distinguished from Pocock’s emphasis on ‘languages’. No doubt there was much consonance between the three articles, especially in insisting that the history of ideas should be studied as the history of an activity or the history of ideology. But here I demonstrate through a close textual reading of the three articles that each of the triumvirate placed a very different emphasis on the status and purpose of the history of political thought, and that the differences between them offer us theoretical help in explaining the remarkable differences in the writings they went on to write from the late 1960s onwards. NB: this article is not part of the recent tendency to study the thought of the last fifty years historically, though it may of course be a preliminary to that. My concern is textual, not contextual. This article should be of interest to everyone concerned with the question of the relevance of historiography, the history of ideas and the history of political thought to the study of politics.

Keywords

Cambridge School, History of Political Thought, History of Ideas, J.G.A. Pocock, John Dunn, Quentin Skinner
The Cambridge School is famous. It is associated with the three names J.G.A. Pocock, John Dunn and Quentin Skinner, not only because of their contributions to historical *practice* in writing *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957), *The Political Thought of John Locke* (1969), the various essays in *Politics, Language and Time* (1971), *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985) and many books since, culminating, perhaps, in Skinner’s collected essays *Visions of Politics* and Pocock’s six volumes on Gibbon *Barbarism and Religion* (not to mention Dunn’s many contributions to political theory), but also because of their contributions to historical *theory* in writing the following three articles: Pocock’s ‘The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry’, which was published in the second series of Laslett’s and Runciman’s *Politics, Philosophy and Society* in 1962, Dunn’s ‘The Identity of the History of Ideas’, which was published in the journal *Philosophy* in 1968, and Skinner’s ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, which was published in *History and Theory* in 1969.

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What I propose to do here is simply to do something which has not been done before, which is to subject all of these three articles to close critical, not historical, examination.\(^4\) This is about the history of political thought not an exercise in it. I know and am known by the three authors, to varying extents, but I have not submitted this to them, because it is my concern here only to deal with the written record. Critical examination will indicate something which has not been observed clearly enough before, which is how each article, and therefore each author, offered a different view of the relation between history and philosophy in relation to politics. I shall draw out some of the theoretical consequences of this, as evidenced by what each of the triumvirate went on to write after the 1960s, though, of course, I cannot offer more than a suggestive sketch of those consequences.

Why these three articles? They are usually taken to be the foundations of the Cambridge School approach to the history of political thought—or the history of ideas which, as Dunn explained, is the ‘unitary category’ of which the history of political thought is a ‘special instance’.\(^5\) Pocock himself has been so bold as to suggest that the origins of the school should be found in 1949 rather than in 1969, at the time of Laslett’s edition of Filmer’s *Patriarcha*, but, as Skinner has put it, ‘Laslett never supplied a theoretical account of his practice, whereas Dunn and Pocock both published pioneering methodological articles’.\(^6\)

Of the three articles Skinner’s has received far more attention than the others. In general I would say that whenever the ‘Cambridge School’ is mentioned in the literature, by that name or

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\(^5\) Dunn, p. 100, n. 1.

by some other (they have been called ‘revisionists’, 7 ‘linguistic contextualists’, 8 ‘new conventionalists’, 9 or, merely, ‘leading historians of political theory’ 10) Skinner is always mentioned, 11 Pocock often mentioned along with Skinner, 12 and Dunn sometimes mentioned along with the other two. 13 This tendency is reflected in the literature on each figure. There is a vast


critical literature on Skinner. There is a significant literature on Pocock. There is hardly anything on Dunn. There are reasons for these discrepancies, which are not to do with clarity.

Bosworth and Keith Dowding, ‘The Cambridge School and Kripke: Bug Detecting with the History of Political Thought’, The Review of Politics 81 (2019), pp. 621-42, refer to Dunn and Pocock as well as Skinner even when their focus is on the latter.


or quality, but with doctrine, as I shall explain below. But the effect of them is that Skinner is almost always the exemplary figure, so that it is his argument which is being explicated even when the other two are quoted. The consequence of this is that the precepts of the Cambridge School are taken to be Skinner’s or, at most, Skinner’s as adjusted for a contrast with Pocock’s. Everyone knows that Skinner has tended to emphasise ‘intentions’ whereas Pocock has emphasised ‘paradigms’, ‘traditions’ or ‘languages’—or, to use Pocock’s flamboyant characterisation of the difference, that Skinner has dealt with parole while Pocock has dealt with langue. Sometimes the emphasis on ‘intentions’ is taken to be the precept which unites the School and distinguishes it from any other school, such as, for instance, the ‘Sussex School’ of Collini, Winch and Burrow. But this is to use Skinner as a synecdoche for the entire School: it excludes Pocock from the School, and assumes without argument that Dunn was interested more in ‘intention’ than in anything else. As far as I can see, the critical literature only notices divergences in Pocock, Dunn and Skinner to the extent of recognising Pocock’s ‘paradigms’, so that Dunn is always assimilated to Skinner, and Pocock treated as someone secondary who made

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20 See David Runciman, Times Higher Educational Supplement, 13 July 2001, p. 28. Collini, Winch and Burrow wrote a book together, shared royalties of that book to fund an annual dinner, and whimsically called themselves ‘Burrinchni’. Let it be noted that there was never such a machine or monster built out of the fibres and frames and flights of fancy of our more magnificent triumvirate. Let no one speak of ‘Dunskincock’.
an additional observation. The only exception to this is an early article by Charles Tarlton in 1973 which attributed three different emphases to the three writers (accurately, in the case of Skinner and Pocock, inaccurately in the case of Dunn)—though even he, like everyone else, treated all three together: ‘Their various statements can be taken as constituting a distinctively recognisable approach to the problem of intellectual history—a “school”, if you like.’

No doubt some of Skinner’s domination comes down to a matter of style. Richard Tuck has noted that, of Skinner’s and Dunn’s articles, ‘Skinner’s was the longer and more comprehensive of the two, and … attracted most subsequent discussion’. Gordon Schochet has noted that Pocock’s article was ‘not nearly so strident in its criticisms of rival practices as the articles published a few years later by Dunn and especially Skinner would be’. J.A.W. Gunn has noted that Skinner’s article ‘was noteworthy for its sustained dispraise of his elders’ while ‘Pocock’s struck a more positive note’. Richard Whatmore has treated all three articles as ‘classic statements about the practice of intellectual history’. But he adds that while Skinner’s article was ‘far and away the most combative of the justifications’, it was also ‘the most assertive and confident of the three’, and ‘the most accessible, clearly articulating [an] argument [for] a new method of the study of past ideas’. Dunn’s article, by contrast, was ‘much less readable and much more dense in terms of argument’. So Whatmore treats Skinner’s article as the ‘manifesto of the Cambridge School’.

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25 Whatmore has commented that Skinner’s article is ‘sometimes said to be’ the manifesto of the Cambridge School in at least three different places. For instance, see Richard Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?* (Cambridge: Polity
No one has ever complained that Skinner is hard to read. By contrast, Felix Gilbert and Larry Dickey have found Pocock ‘not easy to read’. And Jon Elster has thought it odd that Dunn while possessing a ‘strong streak of common sense… should choose to convey it in a language normally reserved for those writers who are most devoid of it’, while Robert Grant has lamented Dunn’s ‘convoluted style’ in which ‘two-thirds’ of an essay ‘may be taken up with a minute, pedantic specification of the conditions under which the ensuing argument might or might not be considered plausible’. There is something in these criticisms. The problem is that such criticism encourages commentators to treat Skinner’s article as exemplary and ignore what on examination are significant differences between the three members of the triumvirate.

Now, it is something to understand Skinner’s argument. And it is something to understand the difference between Skinner and Pocock in relation to ‘intentions’ and ‘paradigms’. But to go only this far is to ignore the fact that there are evident differences here not only about the method but also about the status and purpose of the history of political thought, and that these differences in doctrine had significant consequences. No one has, for instance, explained just why Skinner has remained so determined that the history of political thought should contribute to political theory, why Pocock has continually abjured any such intention, and why Dunn, though not objecting to the intention, has refused to write any history of political thought since 1969.

Press, 2016), p. 45 (and pp. 42-6 for other quotations in the text). The source of this may well be Tuck, ‘The Contribution of History’ where he refers to ‘two most important manifestos for a new kind of history of political thought’, meaning Dunn’s and Skinner’s, at p. 80. Pocock himself called the 1969 article of Skinner ‘the manifesto of an emerging method of interpreting the history of political thought’, in ‘Quentin Skinner’, at p. 537.


One reason among others, I am suggesting, is theoretical. These writers, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, made very different assumptions.

Of course Pocock, Dunn and Skinner did generate an overlapping consensus on relatively uncontroversial points—such as that the history of ideas should abide by historical canons—but they differed entirely in what they considered the significance of the subject to be. In order to demonstrate this, I shall examine closely the arguments of each of their articles in turn. Remarkably this is something which has never been done before.

II

Pocock’s ‘The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry’ is written in a now antique manner, as if for the educated layman. We are not yet in the heavily written style of Dunn and Skinner. What makes Pocock’s essay distinctive is that it is an answer to Oakeshott’s famous inaugural lecture from 1951, ‘Political Education’. Pocock is not exactly critical of Oakeshott, but certainly wants to distance himself from what he supposes to be Oakeshott’s conservatism and wants to come up with a more generous theory of the history of political thought.

What is distinctive to Pocock’s essay—what we shall not find in either Dunn or Skinner—is tolerance towards different ways of studying political thought. After he asks for better methods on the first page he adds: ‘I shall not be suggesting that this, or any other, formulation is the only basis on which the discipline can be effectively carried on’.29 It is also on the first page that he clarifies that he is particularly concerned with the ‘language (or languages)

29 P, p. 183.
of politics’. And it is on the second page that he mentions Oakeshott. So even at the outset Pocock’s emphasis on languages, his intention to complicate Oakeshott’s position, and his tolerance are evident. The tolerance is evident in utterances like the following: ‘There is no one set of assumptions from which alone it is proper to approach the history of political thought.’

He says this in his initial comment on Oakeshott’s position, or what he calls a ‘traditionalist’ position. Pocock follows Oakeshott in characterising not only the thinkers we study but also our study of them as part of a tradition.

The traditionalist attitude consists in accepting (1) the indefinite variety of these possible approaches, (2) that there is no a priori reason for preferring any one of them to others, (3) that we can never hope to rid ourselves entirely of the simultaneous presence in our thoughts of more than one of the different sets of assumptions.

Pocock thinks that Oakeshott’s method is to see a tradition as ‘an inheritance’ from ‘within’ which the historian ‘settles down to conduct his thinking’. If I return briefly to Oakeshott’s essay on Political Education, the first thing we notice is that Oakeshott writes about ‘tradition’ as if it is a singular, indeed, as if it is an abstraction, so that everyone, everywhere, has their tradition. But though that is indeed how he writes for much of the essay, he in fact clarifies it in exactly the way Pocock suggests, indicating that even the singular tradition he appears to refer to is in fact far from simple or coherent or singular.

Let us quote from Oakeshott: ‘A tradition of behaviour is not a fixed or inflexible manner of doing things.’ In a crisis, though we might seek some steady authority to guide us,
there is ‘no recourse outside the fragments, the vestiges, the relics of [our] own tradition of behaviour which the crisis has left untouched’.\textsuperscript{33} ‘A tradition of behaviour is a tricky thing to get to know’. It ‘may even appear to be essentially unintelligible… neither fixed nor finished; it has no changeless centre to which understanding can anchor itself’.\textsuperscript{34} Since I have begun quoting bits of Oakeshott to illustrate that his concept of ‘tradition’ is a lot more elusive than one might think from a casual reading of ‘Political Education’—and that Pocock was right to see it in 1962 as something fragmentary—I should also notice that Oakeshott continues to say that the important form of history is ‘the history, not of political ideas, but of the manner of our political thinking’.\textsuperscript{35} Oakeshott, however, is also tolerant, for he shifts towards the end of his lecture to comment on political philosophy.

Since political philosophy is not what may be called a ‘progressive’ science, accumulating solid results and reaching conclusions on which further investigations may be based with confidence, its history is specially important: indeed, in a sense, it has nothing but a history—which is a history of incoherencies philosophers have detected in common ways of thinking and the manner of solutions they have proposed, rather than a history of doctrines and systems.\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 128.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 130.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 132.
And then there is the conclusion which Pocock, and presumably many others, found conservative: ‘Political philosophy cannot be expected to increase our ability to be successful in political activity.’

Pocock’s comment on Oakeshott’s traditionalism is that it makes a ‘reasonably satisfactory intellectual activity’ possible—the ‘activity of thinking from within a pattern of inheritance’. But what he wants to do is to ‘distinguish between the various positions of which our tradition consists with as great a degree of precision as possible’, and this is what he proceeds to do in his own essay. He thinks the traditionalist does not make such a ‘clarification’ possible and may leave us in a state of ‘vagueness and pretension’.

What Pocock does to clarify matters is to distinguish ‘two approaches’:

Political thought may be regarded as an aspect of social behaviour, of the ways in which men behave towards each other and towards the institutions of their society; or it may be regarded as an aspect of intellectuality, of men’s attempt to gain understanding of their experience and environment.

This is obvious enough. It is a distinction between theory and practice, and Pocock knows things are not simple enough to enable us to distinguish them fully. After all, ‘the human mind does pursue implications from the theoretical to the practical and from the practical to the theoretical’. Nonetheless, he thinks it is possible to observe how political thought exists on ‘a

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37 Ibid., p. 132.
38 P., p. 184.
39 P., p. 185.
40 P., p. 185.
41 P., p. 186.
number of different levels of abstraction': so that ‘the historian of political thought’, depending on how low or high the level of abstraction is, may ‘find himself engaged both in strictly historical reconstruction and in a kind of philosophical reconstruction’. The problem is not with the fact of this, for Pocock is tolerant. The problem is with mistaking one for the other. ‘The history of political thought has a constant tendency to become philosophy.’ This is because the historian may mistake the ‘indefinite rationality’ of his subject and ‘seek to understand past political thought by raising it to ever higher levels of generality and abstraction’. This will become a common theme in Dunn and Skinner. What we do not want is ‘a single narrative, taking place at a high level of abstraction’. Or, rather, since Pocock is tolerant, he allows that ‘we may write the history of thought in terms of abstractions at any level of generality, no matter how high, so long as we can provide independent verification that the abstractions we employ were employed in the relevant field, at the relevant time, by thinkers included in our story’.

But Pocock wants more than this. He wants the historian to begin his enquiries by finding the appropriate level of abstraction of the piece of political thought he is studying. The historian may find that ‘the piece of thought in question may be as well or better explained on assumptions which do not endow it with maximum rational coherence’. While the philosopher is ‘interested in the thought produced in so far as it can be explained in strict rationality’, the historian is ‘interested in … behaviour’ and how thought emerged out of a ‘tradition of behaviour’. So any historian who ‘confuses himself with the philosopher’ will simply fail to write good history. Pocock editorialises on this theme for a few pages, and seems to suggest that to

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42 P, pp. 186-7
44 P, p. 188.
45 P, p. 189.
46 P, p. 190.
study history at a lower level of abstraction is to study it a greater level of relevance. If we consider thought at a lower level of abstraction, then the claim that theory and practice are unrelated is harder to maintain: is, in fact, refuted.\(^{47}\)

He then goes on to ask how ‘our methods [should] be refined’.\(^{48}\) Interestingly, when we consider what will later be emphasised by Skinner, Pocock is far less concerned with a narrow emphasis on the ‘motive’ or ‘intention’ behind an idea, the \(y\) behind the \(x\) evident on the page. Pocock thinks there is much more than this. ‘How a man justifies his actions is determined by factors not at his command, and what they are must be ascertained by studying both the situation in which he is placed and the tradition within which he acts.’\(^{49}\) Both the situation studied by the historian of action and the tradition studied by the historian of thought. To use the words Pocock was to adopt in his later writings, we have the distinction between parole and langue: ‘how ideas, beliefs and arguments help us to understand the actions of men in particular situations’ and ‘the regular employment of relatively stable concepts’.\(^{50}\) Over the next few pages Pocock uses the Oakeshottian or Weldonian word ‘vocabularies’ and his own word ‘languages’.\(^{51}\) Languages are plural. ‘There is no reason to suppose that a society will have only one language; we may rather expect to find several.’\(^{52}\)

He observes that we can distinguish ‘traditional languages’ from ‘theoretical languages’, since he is concerned with explaining the use of the former to discuss politics’. Yet he is tolerant enough to admit that the ‘historian’s point of view’ may mean that we ‘underestimate the

\(^{47}\) P, p. 193.

\(^{48}\) P, p. 193.

\(^{49}\) P, p. 194.

\(^{50}\) P, p. 195

\(^{51}\) E.g. P, p. 195.

\(^{52}\) P, p. 195.
significance of political philosophy in the classical sense’. There is something apologetic about this. He says a few pages later that ‘the business of the historian of thought is to study the emergence and the role of the organising concepts employed by society, and the knowledge that this role has necessary limitations need not deter him’. And again: ‘Sooner or later, our historian must abandon his role of a student of thought as the language of a society, and become a student of thought as philosophy’ as he becomes more and more concerned with ‘theoretical generality’.

Already the later Pocockian manner is here: the tendency to write authoritatively rather than argumentatively. Already the habit—much in evidence in *Barbarism and Religion*—of writing as if we are all together is here: ‘We reach a point…’ Pocock is tolerant and open-minded throughout, insisting on his two levels of making sense of political thought. And he ends with this open-mindedness, allowing the higher political philosophy to be, but creating space for his lower-level history of political thought, saying: ‘The only alternative to anatomizing that tradition in the socio-linguistic way that has been suggested, seems to be the attempt to study it by converting it into a philosophy that has probably grown out of it or grown up in it’. Notice the reversal. Instead of suggesting that political philosophy is somehow purer and hence prior to mere political thought, he suggests that the lower ‘political thought’—where theory and practice are harder to separate—is more important for study since it is the source of political philosophy.

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53 *P*, p. 196.

54 *P*, pp. 198-9.

55 *P*, p. 201.

56 *P*, p. 196.

Dunn’s ‘The Identity of the History of Ideas’ is a very dense piece, even poetic at times, and sometimes bedevilled by an obscure use of words like ‘it’ and ‘this’. There are points at which it is hard to distinguish digression from an assertion of a major argument, but there is an argument, and though it resembles Pocock’s in some respects—mainly in terms of questioning the relation of history and philosophy—it urges something rather different.

Let me begin with what is shared. The problem with the history of ideas, as history, is that it has not been written ‘as the history of an activity’.

Reified reconstructions of a great man’s more accessible notions have been compared with those of other great men; hence the weird tendency of much writing, in the history of political thought more especially, to be made up of what proposition in what great books remind the author of what propositions in what other great books.

An excessively philosophical approach will not yield ‘any sort of historical account of an activity which we would recognise, in common sense terms, as “thinking”’. Since much history has been written in a philosophical manner, it follows that ‘it is often extremely unclear whether the history of ideas is the history of anything which ever did actually exist in the past.’ Like Pocock, Dunn wants to explore the fallen nature of much thought. He observes that ‘incompleteness,

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58 D, p. 87.
59 D, p. 87.
60 D, p. 87.
61 D, p. 88.
incoherence, instability and the effort to overcome these are its persistent characteristics.\textsuperscript{62} He has strong a sense as Pocock that thought takes place at different levels, that its subject matter involves ‘past thinking, philosophy, ideas, ideologies’.\textsuperscript{63}

The architectonic of the article is the distinction between history and philosophy. Dunn begins by saying that the history of ideas receives two criticisms. Firstly, that as history it is too abstract, so that in some works ideas appear to do things: ‘it is written as a saga in which all the great deeds are done by entities which could not in principle, do anything’. ‘In it, Science is always wrestling with Theology, Empiricism with Rationalism, monism with dualism, evolution with the Great Chain of Being, artifice with nature, Politik with political moralism.’ This is, interestingly, the history of ideas as we sometimes find it in Walter Ullmann, in Isaiah Berlin and even in J.G.A. Pocock later on—this is clearly a charge that could be made against Pocock’s writing of the history of political thought in terms of ‘traditions’ or ‘languages’. This criticism is the criticism of the history of ideas by historians. Secondly, we have the criticism of the history of ideas by philosophers. This is that it ‘is insensitive to the distinctive features of ideas, unconcerned with, or more often ineffectual in its concern with, truth and falsehood’. In sum, the history of ideas—and hence the history of political thought—‘is characterised by a persistent tension between the threats of falsity in its history and incompetence in its philosophy’.\textsuperscript{64}

It is very important to notice the evenhanded way that Dunn begins the article, for the symmetry is continuous throughout. Unlike Pocock, who continually tries to separate the history from the philosophy, and Skinner, who will mostly write as if only the history is of any concern, Dunn maintains balance. This is because his argument is a perfectly symmetrical one: that the history of ideas, properly understood, is the attempt at the highest level to make sense of what

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} D, p. 88.
\item \textsuperscript{63} D, p. 89.
\item \textsuperscript{64} D, at p. 85.
\end{itemize}
one is studying both historically and philosophically. In order to see this point clearly one has to refuse to be distracted by some of Dunn’s explanations or digressions. Throughout the article the number two is mentioned again and again: there are ‘two types of criticism’ of the history of ideas’, 65 the history of political thought is the history of ‘two things’ which correspond to ‘two sorts of integral explanation’. 66 What Dunn thinks we have in the history of ideas is ‘advocacy of different forms of enquiry within [one] subject-matter’, so that whether we engage in one or the other may simply be ‘a tactical choice between compelling simplifications’. 67 He wants to avoid this choice.

Let us try to distinguish the two positions. The first is historical, the second philosophical. The first is the search for ‘causal’ explanation, or ‘why an act seemed appropriate’ while the second is the search for ‘rational’ explanation, or ‘why an argument seemed cogent’. 68 He comments that they are different: ‘the attempt to reduce them to the same type of enterprise is absurd’. 69 But both are necessary. ‘There are two necessary components to the identification of every past performance of philosophical importance, two descriptions of the act which require very different verificatory procedures.’ 70 Dunn sees that the relation between the two is an ‘intimate one’. In effect, he suggests we must do both. This perhaps unexpected claim should be illustrated with some quotations.

65 D, p. 86.
66 D, p. 92.
67 D, p. 86.
68 D, p. 89.
69 D, p. 89.
70 D, p. 91.
The connection between an adequate philosophical account of the notions held by an individual in the past and an accurate historical account of these notions is an intimate one; [and] both historical specificity and philosophical delicacy are more likely to be attained if they are pursued together, than if one is deserted for the other at an early stage of the investigation.⁷¹

Again:

The completion of both types of investigation is a necessary preliminary to the construction of an indefeasible explanation of either type.⁷²

And again:

A rational explanation of a past philosophical dilemma, a causal explanation of past philosopher’s enterprise and an account of either rendered intelligible to an ignorant layman will display a considerable symmetry of form.⁷³

The bar is being set very high. Any doubt that this is so should be dispelled when we see that Dunn suggests that a piece of thought ‘could only be said to be fully understood historically if everything were known about its conditions, before going to add that even if this were possible—and Dunn seems to imply that it is not—this sort of historical explanation would not amount to

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⁷¹ D, p. 86
⁷² D, p. 86.
⁷³ D, pp. 86-7.
‘a full account of its truth status’. He deplores the fact that the two sort of ‘verificatory procedures’ are not always properly distinguished. He also deplores the fact that when they are distinguished this is often ‘to make one of the two descriptions of the act all-important and the other trivial’. That is to say, though philosophers may prefer to explain a piece of thought rationally and historians may prefer to explain it causally, it is both that are necessary. This is because the history of political thought is ‘two things, at least; the set of argued propositions in the past which discuss how the political world is and ought to be and what should constitute the criteria for proper action within it; the set of activities in which men were engaged when they enunciated these propositions’. It is ‘a history of political arguments on the one hand and ‘a history of political arguing’ on the other.

Over the next few pages Dunn emphasises the historical side of the equation, but there should be no doubt that he would have laid emphasis on the other side had the habits of historians been different. And so we return to the point: ‘The correct identification of the premises of arguments and the explanation of these [is] the basic precondition for an adequate account, whether historical or philosophical.’ In other words, in order to understand something philosophically we cannot but pay attention to the meanings evident at the time. ‘To abstract an argument from the context of truth-criteria which it was devised to meet is to convert it into a different argument.’ Of course it possible to read this as if it is only a point about recognising historical distance and avoiding ‘anachronism’.

But Dunn’s scepticism goes far deeper than this.

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74 *D*, p. 90.
75 *D*, p. 91.
76 *D*, p. 92
77 *D*, p. 96.
78 *D*, p. 96
In this regard, it is worth noticing that Dunn seems far more aware of the subjectivity of the historian or philosopher than either Pocock is or Skinner will be. Consider the following passage from early on in the article:

The history of thought as it is characteristically written is not a history of men battling to achieve a coherent ordering of their experience. It is, rather, a history of fictions—of rationalist constructs out of the thought processes of individuals, not of plausible abridgements of these thought processes.\(^79\)

The question is whether we can escape fiction. Pocock thinks we can. But Dunn is not so sure. Later in the article he admits that ‘causal explanations’ might be no better than ‘fictions’. ‘Only if we learn to make our fictions explicit are we ever likely to escape from our present conceptual morass, from the persisting problem of never knowing just what we are talking about.’\(^80\) It is important to recognise this for what it is. Dunn is not saying that we can never escape our present conceptual morass: but his language is pessimistic, and it is pessimistic because he is so aware of the difficulties involved. Just as ‘languages’ remains a theme in Pocock’s writings after 1962, so this pessimism remains a theme in Dunn’s writings after 1968.

The subjectivity of the historian or philosopher is noted again at the end of the article, when he reflects on ‘context’.

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\(^79\) D, pp. 87-88.

\(^80\) D, p. 97.
The problem of interpretation of always the problem of closing the context. What closes the context in actuality is the intention (and much more broadly, the experiences) of the speaker.\textsuperscript{81}

This requires comment. First of all, ‘intention’ will be the emphasis of Skinner. But it is important to see what Dunn says next.

The problem of the historian is always that his experience also drastically closes the context of utterance; indeed all too readily turns a fact about the past into a fact about the intellectual biography of the historian.\textsuperscript{82}

This is \textit{not quite} to say that the historian makes up history, but it runs it very close: in effect, Dunn is saying that it is impossible to say what the historical context is if we cannot easily distinguish it from the context of the historian. This is not something that the authors of either \textit{The Machiavellian Moment} or \textit{The Foundations of Modern Political Thought} would have wanted to admit.\textsuperscript{83}

He sounds what can be taken to be a conciliatory or conventional note when he writes: ‘The causal story, in so far as we can still discover it, has always to be elaborated first. Its historicity is its sufficient and its sole legitimate immunity from our philosophical prejudices.’ This is exactly what Skinner will say. But where Skinner will say \textit{only} this, and where Pocock has said that we can \textit{nonetheless} write in other ways too, Dunn is not only stating that this is a precondition for the other activity but that the two go together. If we read this line alone we

\textsuperscript{81} D, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{82} D, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{83} C.f. my comment on \textit{Barbarism and Religion} in Cosmos and Taxis.
could say that Dunn agrees with Skinner. But everything else in the article argues against this conclusion. Perhaps there is some awkwardness here, for Dunn quotes Yeats’s *Byzantium* on ‘the fury and mire of human veins’ and even shifts into a high academic poetic register himself.

*But there is a second epigram: ‘The history of philosophy, like the history of science, must needs be Whig as to subject-matter, just as, like all history, it must be Tory as to truth.’* What this means is that we must as a matter of necessity (‘must needs’) select our subjects from what is preoccupying us in the present, but must as a matter of choice follow the precepts of Butterfield when we study those subjects. Again, this is a recognition of the sort Pocock and Skinner were reluctant to make, of the intractability of the subject, of the difficulty of getting anything off the ground at all, of the difficulty of escaping the present.

It is important to recognise how Dunn is not so much advocating a method as suggesting that the correct method is at least difficult and quite possibly impossible. If I may cut out a clause from one of his long sentences, he recognises that what he has written ‘is very much a counsel of perfection, or despair’. It is important to notice that after the mostly moderate statements with which the article comes to an end, he ends on a starkly pessimistic note. In reflecting on the historian’s difficulty at establishing historical context, he says: ‘Such a project is not merely… logically impossible. It is also in a more pragmatic sense overwhelmingly difficult.’ Dunn runs through his moderate suggestions one last time: that we need the history of ideas to be both historical and philosophical if it is to withstand the two criticisms with which he began. But the final line of the article is: ‘All this is whistling to keep our courage up and in no

84 D, p. 98.
85 D, p. 96.
86 D, p. 99.
immediate danger of instantiation. But unless we have a picture of the possible shape of success, it will be hard to see why we do it all so badly.\textsuperscript{87}

This is perhaps the reason why Dunn abandoned the history of political thought.

IV

Skinner’s ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’ is in appearance far more imposing. In 1962 Pocock refers to Oakeshott, cites Meineke, Sabine and his own work, gives examples using Bodin, Hume and Burke, and has only six footnotes. There are no acknowledgements. A sign of a changed academic culture is in the fact that in 1968 Dunn offers far more examples (Hobbes, Plato, Galileo, Revolutions, Locke, Hume, the Iliad, Blake, Milton and Dante), refers to Danto, Ryan, Passmore, Winch, Collingwood and others, has thirty-three footnotes, which include references to Hare, MacIntyre, Skinner, Taylor, Popper, Runciman, Laslett, J.L. Austin and others. He says he has learnt from Collingwood’s \textit{Idea of History}, other books on history by Gardiner, Dray, Gallie and Danto, and ‘also from striking works by practising historians’, Kuhn’s \textit{Structure of Scientific Revolutions} and Gombrich’s \textit{Art and Illusion}.\textsuperscript{88} He adds that ‘th[e] paper arises out of several years of discussion of the subject with Mr Peter Laslett and, especially, Mr Quentin Skinner (see his article ‘The Limits of Historical Explanations’, \textit{Philosophy} vol XLI (July, 1966), for a partly analogous, partly contrasting view’). He thanks a few other scholars, and then adds: ‘Where it remains opaque, it does so through no fault of theirs,

\textsuperscript{87} D, p. 99.

\textsuperscript{88} S, p. 7 n. 17 & 18.
but merely as a result of my own obstinacy." Pocock has written an essay, and prefers pomp to wit. The withering style of Dunn lends itself to wit better, as his article is really a statement about the weakness of the entire literature. Skinner, by way of contrast, is not so much withering as scathing about the particular errors of his contemporaries. His piece is of course longer than Pocock’s (which is twenty pages), Dunn’s (which is fifteen rather denser pages, and three-and-a-half pages of notes): Skinner’s is fifty-one pages long. It offers many historical examples, refers to innumerable authors (he did a lot of work on his examples, on, say, Marsilius, Coke, Locke, Hobbes, Bayle, none of which I shall refer to here), and has two hundred and five footnotes. He is for MacIntyre, Wolin, Collingwood, Gombrich, Pocock, Hampshire, Taylor, Strawson and against Bateson, Leavis, Morgenthau, Catlin, Morris, Gough, Lovejoy, Bury, Strauss, Cranston, Weldon, Friedrich, Parkin, Cassirer, Watkins, Avineri, Seliger and Mansfield, and many others on both sides. He mentions that Pocock and others read the article. But: ‘I owe a particular debt to John Dunn, and it will readily be seen that my own discussion owes a great deal to his article, “The Identity of the History of Ideas”, Philosophy 43 (1968).’

Several of its lines are quotable out of context, and summarise the basic precepts of the Cambridge School well, so I shall quote them, as others have quoted them before:

The perpetual danger, in our attempt to enlarge out historical understanding, is thus that our expectations about what someone must be saying or doing will themselves determine that we understand the agent to be doing something which he would not—or even that he could not—himself have accepted as an account of what he was doing."

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89 D, p. 104 n. 33.
90 S, p. 53 n. 205.
91 S, p. 6.
History then becomes a pack of tricks we play on the dead.  

The history thus written becomes a history not 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.

My concern here, however, is not empirical but conceptual: not to insist that such histories can sometimes go wrong, but that they can never go right.

We must learn to do our thinking for ourselves.

To learn from the past—and we cannot otherwise learn from it at all—the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements, is to learn the key to self-awareness itself.

Most of these lines point in the same direction—except the last two. The first four lines are all about the important of recognising the historical distance which separates a reader in the present from a writer in the past. The last two lines are about the significance of this: unlike Pocock, who seems not to mind that writers shall continue on in their own way as long as he is understood to have improved everyone’s awareness of his way, and unlike Dunn, who with rather more

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93 S, p. 18.
94 S, p. 35.
95 S, p. 52.
96 S, p. 53.
pessimism expects everyone to continue despite the almost defeating difficulties involved in saying anything certain, Skinner imposes an absolute prohibition. He sees distance, and so declares boldly that nothing can be taken from the history of ideas, or more particularly, the history of political thought: ‘We must do our thinking for ourselves.’ Another way of putting this would be to say that Skinner insists that nothing philosophical can be taken out of what is historical. And once we see this then we see that the very last line somewhat contradicts this, because Skinner ends the article with a sudden eagerness to assure us that, in fact, there is a philosophical justification of studying the history of political thought, though it might not be what we originally expected.

But let us turn to Skinner’s long text. Over the fifty years since it was published it has received much criticism but hardly any analysis. Unlike Pocock, who wants to defend his own practice—and he said, later, Laslett’s practice—and elaborate it further than it was elaborated by Oakeshott, and unlike Dunn, who wants to condemn an entire set of practices, Skinner proceeds extremely methodically. Pocock begins with Oakeshott’s account. Dunn begins with the criticisms the history of ideas receives from two sides, the historical side and the philosophical side. Skinner begins in medias res, by beginning with a particular problem. This is what happens ‘whenever an historian of ideas confronts a work which he hopes to understand’.

At the outset of his essay Skinner says that he wants to reject two ‘orthodox’ positions: the first is that the context, meaning the entire social context, determines the meaning of a text, and the second is that the text itself is the key to its own meaning. In a footnote, he refers to two essays by not historians but literary critics, F.W. Bateson and F.R. Leavis, in their exchange about ‘The Function of Criticism’. When Skinner came to revise his article for publication in Visions of Politics he deleted the references to Bateson and Leavis, but they are important because they enable us to see that Skinner’s ambition was to place himself somewhere between ‘context’ and ‘text’. This middle position was, in effect, a different interpretation of ‘context—which is why
Skinner afterwards was associated with the word ‘context’ even though, judging by the first pages of this article, one would not have expected this.

It is clear at the outset that Skinner wants to advocate an approach to the history of ideas which is ‘more satisfactory as history’, but also—and here comes the possible contradiction—something which will ‘invest the history of ideas with its own philosophical point’.97 This is something which neither Pocock nor Dunn have promised. Skinner offers a clear account of how to improve the writing of the history of political thought: and this is to eliminate present philosophical concerns and concentrate on genuine historical elements in works. But it is mostly negative, critical of other historians. And he offers a clear account of something philosophical than we can get out of this—defying expectations, since the first thing he offers appears to make that impossible.

It is important not to follow Skinner down every line of observation and argument and illustration in his article. Skinner is not above using his own jargon, elevating his observations into apparently systematic points, reminiscent of Bacon’s idols. For Skinner these are ‘mythologies’—the ‘mythology of doctrines’, the ‘mythology of prolepsis’, the ‘mythology of coherence’, the ‘mythology of parochialism’ and so on. But they all more or less come down to the same point, which is about historical distance. To assume that there is no distance between the present and the past is a mistake. To write about ‘timeless elements’, ‘universal ideas’, ‘dateless wisdom’, ‘perennial problems’ and so on, is to make this mistake. The mistake is of assuming that we can read ancient or medieval or even relatively recent works as if they are contemporary. It goes without saying that even for Skinner this is a historical mistake. But he does not say that it is philosophically acceptable—as Pocock does, and even as Dunn might admit were he willing to admit that anything was acceptable. Instead he writes as if nothing can be

97 S, p. 4.
acceptable if it is not historically acceptable. This is where he is to some extent in accord with Dunn—which explains his reference to the sympathy between his article and Dunn’s—because Dunn also makes historical acceptability a condition of any good understanding. Skinner goes further than this: what is historically acceptable is itself the only good understanding. There is no other. And it is sufficient rather than necessary.

I have said that Dunn is sensitive to the subjectivity of the historian, the particular subjectivity. Skinner can appear to be, as he is, for instance, in a passage in which he says that when one considers an older author one brings to bear on ‘one’s own expectations about what he must have been saying’. But this soon seems to be not so much about the creative vagaries of the individual historian as about the shared condition of all historians, which is of being separated from the assumptions of the past. The major point is, as before, about historical distance.

It is a simple point. If we read a past utterance as if it is made in the present, as if we share some eternal contemporaneity, then we will end up in ‘historical absurdity’ and ‘anachronism’. What Skinner objects to is simply the ‘crude possibility of crediting a writer with a meaning he could not have intended to convey’. This is very likely if instead of seeing an idea as something which has changed historically we ‘hypostatise it into an entity’. The entire tenor of Skinner’s piece is to ‘call out’, as we would now say, all those historians who commit the error of supposing that ideas have remained unchanged through time: so that Machiavelli may have ‘anticipated’ Marx, or that Hobbes might have failed to offer ‘genuine insights’ into our

98 S, p. 6.
99 S, p. 7.
100 S, p. 9.
101 S, p. 10.
102 S, p. 11.
contemporary discussions. Skinner sometimes makes the point that Pocock and Dunn have both made, about how there is a tendency in the history of ideas to study ideas in terms of their coherence, and for ‘the historian to conceive it as his task to supply or to find in each of these texts the coherence which they may appear to lack’. He cites Pocock’s article at about this point, and notes Pocock’s point about different ‘levels of abstraction’ but cannot be said to be very interested in this point himself. His own interest is in making the claim, which I have already quoted, that the history of ideas is ‘a history of thoughts which no one ever actually succeeded in thinking, at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained’. Skinner’s brilliance is in the persistence with which he restates this point in many ways over and over again, and then offers an epigram to hammer home the point the reader has already accepted.

The methodological suggestion proposed by Skinner is one which has been alluded to by Dunn. It is ‘intention’: that is, ‘to understand the relation between what a given writer may have said, and what he may be said to have meant by saying what he said’. It is very important to be clear about this. Skinner rejects Bateson and Leavis: he rejects the idea that behind a piece of thought is an entire social context, and he rejects the idea that behind a piece of thought is nothing at all. So for Skinner, and this is the coup of his article, the suggestion is that behind a piece of thought, x, is something specific, y, which is the ‘meaning’ or intended meaning or, particularly, the meaning that was meant in the expression of x but which is not identical to x. And this obviously seemed important to many historians afterwards. For Skinner, x marks the spot: and beneath it is the buried treasure, to be excavated by the historian, since only the historian could dig it out. Philosophers refuse, like Leavis, to dig; and anyone attempting to do

103 S, p. 15.
104 S, p. 16
105 S, p. 16 n. 69.
106 S, p. 31.
what Bateson does would excavate the entire landscape. The ‘intention’, very importantly, is not some prior meaning—what anyone really meant—but is what the active intention was, what the practical purpose was: ‘we should study not the meanings of the world, but their use’. This is the historical emphasis, on use.\(^\text{107}\) Skinner is interested, to use Pocock’s distinction, in thought as action not thought as thought. So the history he wants to write is the history of uses.

If from section I onwards the emphasis was on the weakness of the Leavis case, from section IV on the emphasis is on the weakness of the Bateson case. Of course, he says, one cannot ignore context. But it is not enough to look for full exhaustion of causality, since this will not help us explain the use. He admits that for some thinkers a motive or intention may be a cause, but he narrows his focus—and it has to be admitted that his argument is ingenious here (and this is where the appeal to J.L. Austin is made)—so that he can distinguish behind any action ‘an intention to have done it’ (‘call it a cause if you like’) and ‘an intention in doing it’. It is the second which is not a cause. This is the buried treasure, the \(y\), Skinner is looking for. The point is a simple one, and it is that the meaning of an utterance—and, by analogy, a text—is one thing and understanding it is another. What we have to understand, and in this Skinner follows Austin exactly, is what the speaker or writer is doing in uttering something and the meaning they intend to convey even if it is not literally the meaning they are expressing.\(^\text{108}\) Call this ‘intention’, call it ‘use’, but extracting this thing, this \(y\), is what Skinner wants the historian of ideas to do. ‘It cannot … be enough to study either what the statement meant, or even what its context may be alleged to show about what it must have meant’: rather, we must study ‘how what was said was meant’.\(^\text{109}\) So, by the end of section IV Skinner has dismissed both the textual approach, which simply collapsed in the face of a recognition of historical distance, and has dismissed the contextual

\(^{107}\) S, p. 37.

\(^{108}\) S, pp. 45-6.

\(^{109}\) S, p. 47.
approach which has to be refined so that it is not a question of studying causes or meanings but understandings.

In section V he summarises. His ‘alternative methodology’ is as follows: ‘The understanding of texts… presupposes the grasp both of what they were intended to mean, and how this meaning was intended to be taken. It follows from this that to understand a text must be to understand both the intention to be understood, and the intention that this intention be understood, which the text itself as an intended act of communication must at least have embodied.’\(^{110}\) Skinner calls this, for short, the ‘complex intention’ of the author.\(^{111}\) And this is, to all intents and purposes, is the end of the article, but for a coda which begins on p. 49 and runs on until the end on p. 53.

In this coda, Skinner says two things.

The first is that since ‘there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy’ it follows that ‘there is … 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’ and from this—since this applies to all historic thought—he derives the result that ‘we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves’.\(^{112}\) This is Skinner’s first flourish: that since the only way to ‘understand’ any text from the past—which includes all of them, or almost all of them—is historically then it follows that there is nothing except historical knowledge to be derived from texts. When stated this way, it seems false. But it is what Skinner states, and, as we know, the strongest repetition of it in an actual work of history was made by Dunn in *The Political Thought of John Locke*—which is why even those scholars who do not read Dunn’s methodological article do pay attention to his book.

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\(^{110}\) S, p. 48.

\(^{111}\) S, p. 49.

\(^{112}\) S, pp. 50 & 52.
The second thing Skinner says is a flourish in another direction. ‘It is by no means my conclusion, however, that because the philosophical value at present claimed for the history of ideas rests on a misconception, it must follow that the subject has no philosophical value in itself at all.’\textsuperscript{113} Every reader of this article must have paused here with a great sense of anticipation—even those readers who were inclined to criticise everything written so far. For has not Skinner made this impossible? For the time being, though he ‘cannot now explore’ the ‘exciting possibility’ of ‘the possibility of a dialogue between philosophical discussion and historical evidence’,\textsuperscript{114} that exciting possibility, he says, is that we will after studying the history of ideas historically be better able to ‘show the extent to which those features of our own arrangements which we may be disposed to accept as traditional or even “timeless” truths may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history’. This is obviously the same as the first thing, but now it is erected into a ‘general truth’. This truth is that ‘history itself [will] provide a lesson in self-knowledge’. And if this sounds like a general truth about scepticism or relativism Skinner adds one more line to indicate that this is not the case, since ‘to learn from the past… the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements, is to learn the key to self-awareness itself’.\textsuperscript{115}

Skinner rarely drifts into poetry. He is not Dunn. But where Pocock remains always prosaic, though \textit{stately and elegant}, Skinner can ascend into rhetoric. And there is nothing more rhetorical than this: and, we might add, skilful: for \textit{he giveth} as well as \textit{taketh away}, and, by some magic, appears to restore ‘what is necessary’ at the last moment despite having appeared until that point to suggest that every truth is ‘contingent’.

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{S}, p. 52
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{S}, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{115} \textit{S}, pp. 52-53.
Let me offer some broad considerations on the significance of these three articles in indicating some of the conditions for what was written afterwards in the history of political thought and also what was taken afterwards to be the significance of historical study for political theory.

No doubt all three of the triumvirate have been historians, at least for a time, and in some respects, and all of them have wanted to think historically about politics, rather than only philosophically. In this they have much in common with writers in America of an earlier generation like Strauss, Voegelin, Arendt and Wolin and writers in Oxford and Cambridge like Ernest Barker, R.G. Collingwood, Michael Oakeshott, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Isaiah Berlin. But, further than all of these, they appeared to emphasise what we could call ‘by history alone’, an unusual sola fide: that is, writing within proper historical canons as laid down by Herbert Butterfield’s *Whig Interpretation of History*. This meant studying texts in their time, in ‘context’, and it meant ‘closing the context’, especially by treating the history of ideas not as a history of reified or disembodied ideas but as a history of an activity. The activity was to be understood in terms of intentions, and intentions were to be understood in terms of what it was possible to express in language. Pocock offered the minimal account of what the triumvirate were about. ‘What we have all been doing is insisting that a certain bracket of the study of politics be perceived as a history of activity and be conducted within the discipline of history.’¹¹⁶ Much can be found in all three articles that would confirm this. And, we may say, that the impetus of the Cambridge School, or its effect, was to encourage the writing of more history. And they succeeded.

However, it should be obvious after this close reading that there were fundamental differences between these three authors about the significance of history for general understanding. Skinner, by far the most influential, said, ‘You must write like this’. Pocock, less influential, because far more reasonable, said, ‘You can write however you please, as long as you know what you are doing’. Dunn, least influential, for obvious reasons, said, ‘You can write as you please, but be aware that what you are attempting is likely far beyond what is possible.’ Their methods, such as they are, have been interesting and confusing. There is certainly something to be learnt from the narrow focus on what a writer does in writing something and the broader focus on what tradition or language or paradigm a writer appeals to or writes out of—that business of parole and langue of which Skinner and Pocock have made so much. These methods have received much criticism.

The criticisms are, taken as a whole, a consequence of their attempt to find a balance between history and philosophy. Some have said the triumvirate contradicted their own claims.\textsuperscript{117} Some have said that these claims were ‘vaguely and arbitrarily specified’.\textsuperscript{118} I would myself say that Skinner went rather too far in specifying them and therefore left himself open to endless criticism. Some scholars have repeated versions of criticisms the triumvirate made of their predecessors by asking for an even better history of political thought, in which, depending on whether one is radical or liberal, either the history is deeper or the philosophy sharper.\textsuperscript{119} The


\textsuperscript{118} Tarlton, ‘Historicity, Meaning and Revisionism in the Study of Political Thought’, p. 312.

\textsuperscript{119} Varieties of these criticisms have been made by Iain Hampsher-Monk, ‘The History of Political Thought and the Political History of Thought’, in Iain Hampsher-Monk and Dario Castiglione eds., The History of Political Thought in
point is that if one is attempting to steer a path between history and philosophy one is always open to being called antiquarian by one critic, ideological by another, excessively contextual by one, excessively textual by another. Unless, of course, one supposes that history is best understood as a branch of philosophy, or that both history and philosophy are best understood as branches of dogmatics. This is not how Skinner and Pocock have seen history. Dunn is less clear.

The members of the triumvirate recognised the difference in emphasis between ‘intention’ and ‘paradigm’. Skinner once or twice offered mild criticisms of Pocock, which more or less came down to the view that if we focus on languages we may misunderstand the particular meaning of a particular author. Dunn in the 1970s also commented that Pocock’s emphasis on ‘languages’ or ‘paradigms’ rather than on what particular writers had said came dangerously close to being a ‘methodological commitment to a political or literary naïveté’.

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120 This is arguably how Michael Oakeshott and Maurice Cowling respectively saw history. Idealism is important here. It has been echoed in some recent writing. See, for instance, Mark Bevir, ‘Why Historical Distance is Not a Problem’, *History and Theory* 50 (2011), pp. 24-37.


his own point was always something broader than this. In 1992, when he discussed Skinner’s and Pocock’s methods, he asked for a history ‘which both succeeds in meeting the epistemic standards set by the historicist school and also fully engages with the political importance of the words or concepts that it studies’. Naturally, this would be ‘an extraordinarily demanding intellectual genre’. In fact, it was ‘as yet almost wholly unwritten’. Pocock’s answer to this criticism was rather more searching. What he did, in effect, was to tell Skinner that he, Skinner, was actually writing history which accorded with Pocock’s ideas. When he reviewed *Foundations* in 1979 Pocock not only repeated his own point that ‘there are legitimate non-historical and perhaps transhistorical, approaches to the study of political thought’, he also observed that Skinner confined himself to the use of language rather than the language used: ‘with the parole rather than the langue’, ‘with verbum as factum rather than as logos’. Pocock engaged in a remarkably close study of Skinner’s work, and even used it as the inspiration for the clarification of his own enterprise, because he found in Skinner’s *Foundations* two languages or traditions, and took this to be an achievement Skinner did not recognise about his own work, but one which acted as a criticism of the studies of separate or singular languages which he himself had written right up to and including his own *The Machiavellian Moment* in 1975. Pocock’s writings from 1979 were increasingly consciously to be studies in the conflict between rival languages—a change of policy which he made clear in his articles in the early 1980s which were published in *Virtue, Commerce and History* in 1985. His emphasis was no longer on any particular langue but explicitly on langues which existed together, came into conflict, and yet could be found blurred together.


The point is that even though the distinction between langue and parole did matter, the distinction was only about which plane of understanding to emphasise, the act or the tradition out of which an act was acted. Certainly, by 2001, Skinner could comment in respect of Pocock, ‘Our approaches converge’. The more serious question was what the significance of this history was beyond the making of better history: that is to say, what was the significance of this for politics. Pocock remained neutral or uncommitted on this question. As Boucher put it, Pocock continued to insist that ‘it is possible to conduct both an historical and a philosophical account of the same text’. Skinner denied this. Instead he saw himself as ‘walking a tightrope’, declaring: ‘I want my work to be as historical as I can possibly make it, but I also want it to have some political point’. Whatmore rightly says that Skinner has sometimes been accused of being too historical, sometimes been accused of being too philosophical. As Perreau-Saussine

Political Thought’, Political Theory 9 (1981), pp. 353-368. Perhaps most explicitly, in terms of acknowledging the challenges, direct and indirect, presented to his work by Hexter, Forbes, Skinner, Philipsson, Hirschmann, Tuck, see J.G.A. Pocock, ‘The Machiavellian Moment Revisited: A Study in History and Ideology’, Journal of Modern History 53 (1981), pp. 49-72. ‘That [Pocock’s own book] forms part of the vision it aims to describe can be accepted and allowed for’ is the last line on p. 72, and quite a remarkable admission. As far as I can see, most commentators on Pocock have not recognised the full significance of the revision of his perspective (in favour of a plurality of languages) after Machiavellian Moment.


suggested in 2007, Skinner’s work has always been pulled in ‘two directions’.

By contrast, Pocock’s work pulls in one direction, Dunn’s in no direction in particular.

In the end, any historical methods sketched in these articles are, I think, refuted by Dunn’s observations which, when taken all together, indicate that the context cannot be closed objectively because it is continually subjectively in the condition of being opened. The recognition that we are Whigs as to subject and Tories as to truth defeats any attempt to settle the meaning of any past utterance on politics, because, as Leavis saw, the ‘context’ of the historian, ‘as something determinate is, and can be, nothing but his postulate; the wider he goes in his ambition to construct it from his reading in the period, the more is it his construction.

Both Pocock and Skinner’s success in writing great imaginative histories have depended on their repressing this recognition and pushing very hard the ‘myth’, if I dare call it that, that something historical has been discovered or recovered rather than erected by the historian. The writers of the Cambridge School have been in their writing of history ‘realist’ rather than ‘idealist’ about the historical past. They have supposed history to be out there rather than something here: they have written as if their histories correspond to something in the past rather than cohere with the evidence of what remains from the past. So they have certainly overestimated the sense in which the history is communicating with us now and underestimated the fact that they, in the guise of historians, but actually as theorists, have been communicating with us now. There may be other flaws in Dunn’s work, but I think that, despite everything, he has seen this from beginning. But this has defeated his attempt to write anything as magisterial in the history of political thought as either Pocock or Skinner.

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The differences between the three articles may be taken to explain why each of Pocock, Dunn and Skinner have gone on to write as they have done: at least, to explain some of the theoretical limits they placed on themselves at the outset. Needless to say, justice cannot be done here to all the twists and turns of the last half century. But in general it is possible to see at least some inevitability (and I mean this in T.S. Eliot’s sense of the inevitability of the lines in a good original poem) in the fact that Pocock has written vast, tolerant, exploratory and collaborative histories, considering the past sense of the past (in *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*), the great arc of one particular political language (in *The Machiavellian Moment*), and, since the 1980s, the relations between a variety of political languages (in his response to Skinner’s *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, in *Virtue, Commerce and History* and in *Barbarism and Religion*, especially in relation to his exploration of different understandings of ‘enlightenment’), throughout combining his insights with the work of many others from Momigliano, Gilbert and Baron to Hont, Burrow and Skinner. Skinner has written elaborate explorations of his original methodological suggestion, refining it, defending it, abandoning it, in innumerable articles and interviews, has written a vast history in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, and in his more recent works has offered ingenious accounts of the state and liberty, as well as explorations of close rhetorical analysis. He, unlike Pocock, and especially since *Liberty Before Liberalism* in 1998, and in tandem with political philosophers like Philip Pettit, has tried to substantiate the suggestion originally made in 1969 that the history of ideas done historically would yield something of contemporary philosophical relevance. This apparent sharpening of the original doctrine, or the attempt to dramatise the ‘exciting possibility’ first anticipated in 1969 (as Boucher notes, ‘anticipated’ was emphatically not a Skinnerian word in 1969 but had become one by 1978), has been complicated by Skinner’s late interest in the study of rhetoric. If the

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132 Boucher, ‘On Shklar’s and Franklin’s Reviews of Skinner’.
original business of the historian was to find the $y$ behind the $x$, then the particular problem was to penetrate the incoherence, incompleteness and irony evident in the $x$ in order to find the $y$: and, over time it seems as if Skinner abandoned the $y$ and turned his attention to the $x$ alone. Some scholars have called this his ‘postmodern turn’. Certainly, we find interviews later on where he more or less abandons everything he positively suggested in ‘Meaning and Understanding’. For instance, in 2001 he said in an interview ‘I no longer feel quite so sure about identifying the historical meanings of texts’.\(^{133}\) The problem is that Skinner has not reconciled his continued interest in making the history of political thought make the past intervene somehow in the present—as it does in *Liberty Before Liberalism*—and his ‘postmodern’ or ‘rhetorical’ sense that the distinctions necessary to make this work no longer exist.\(^{134}\) Finally, Dunn has written many works on politics—books on revolution, socialism, democracy, and essays on various aspects of political theory, has continually considered the relative status of empirical political science, normative political philosophy and the history of political thought, and has continued to reflect that everywhere achievement is always less than ambition: that most writing has simply failed to do what it has set out to do. He has not, since 1969, published anything simple about the history of political thought. *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* is a slight book. But, in its way, it is as magnificent as *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* or *Barbarism and Religion*.

In retrospect, all of this should confirm that the apparent differences between the three articles considered here were real differences which remained to condition—and I am saying no

\(^{133}\) Koikkalainen and Syrjamaki, ‘Interview with Quentin Skinner’, p. 50. For another example of Skinner’s ambivalence, see Quentin Skinner et al, ‘Political Philosophy: The View from Cambridge’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2002), p. 1-19, at pp. 13-4. ‘Skinner said that his own practice had been profoundly changed by reading postmodern critiques: the stress on ambiguity; the idea that some arguments [NB *some*, not *all*] are just tissues of metaphor… Later [he] agreed that there is of course more to texts than the metaphorical.’

more than this, condition—their subsequent works. Skinner was preoccupied with finding an actual way of turning some aspects of the history of political thought into something of philosophical political relevance, and usually concerned himself with narrow technical findings. Pocock was preoccupied with the purer historical question of summing his sense of the findings of all of the best work in the history of political thought. And Dunn could not be satisfied either with Pocock’s magisterial retreat, which culminated in *Barbarism and Religion*, or with Skinner’s brilliant suggestions, which culminated in *Liberty Before Liberalism*, and so remained continually critical, a stance which had no culmination, since no final work could exhibit such a stance.

No one laid down a method that they slavishly followed. However, each member of the triumvirate stated something which retrospectively can be seen to have laid down the lines of what they thought was possible and when closely studied, as they have been studied here, indicate there are theoretical constraints which conditioned the very different works they wrote from the late 1960s on. It has been suggested to me that the story here could be broadened and deepened with reference to the twists and turns in Skinner’s and Pocock’s methodological writings, and the possible extensions in the writing of Tuck, Hont, Sonenscher, Pagden, Nelson and many others right up to the present—Smith, Forrester, Sagar, Bejan—and also, in particular,

135 This, I think, would explain why the most decisive challenges to Skinner have come in the form of technical adjustments to his exact claims, most importantly in the 1990s, by David Runciman in relation to the state and by Philip Pettit in relation to republicanism. See Raia Prokhovnik, ‘Approaching Political Theory Historically: An Interview with Quentin Skinner’, in Gary Browning, Raia Prokhovnik and Maria Dimova-Cookson eds., *Dialogues with Contemporary Political Theorists* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 181-195 at pp. 186-7. To offer a contrast, I think Pocock is remarkable for having tried to assimilate all criticisms within an enlarged historical sensibility. Dunn, by his own admission in a lecture given in King’s College, Cambridge in May 2019, has been decisively influenced by no one since 1970 except Istvan Hont.

136 By the reviewers for *History of Political Thought*, whose disagreements I was grateful for and took as a sign that of how much general knowledge there is of this subject and how that itself is proof of the significance of the School.
with reference to the interesting letters from the late 1960s that Whatmore quoted in his recent introduction to *The Machiavellian Moment* in which Pocock suggested to Skinner that they write a ‘joint manifesto’. This is of course possible, perhaps necessary, certainly interesting. But since my purpose is textual rather than contextual—involving close reading of important statements, with inferences about the theoretical consequences of this rather than tracking exact changes over time at length (*about the history of political thought, not an exercise within it*)—I have decided not to pursue this here, since the force of my claim here would not be altered by going into questions of impetus or motivation, interesting though these are. For instance, on the question on the possibility of there being a shared manifesto by Skinner and Pocock, I am sure there are several actual reasons why it never happened, but this is ancillary to the theoretical reasons, which would be that, at a certain level, in the early 1970s, and likely at a rather deeper level than either wanted to go into each other’s work, their views were strictly incompatible. Marx and Engels they were not. And Dunn was also equally independent, though in a better position to have collaborated with Skinner had he chosen to do so.

Even in the closest collaborations of the Cambridge School there was always wide divergence, and it was not really about the distinction between *langues* and *parole*. It was about whether one agreed with Pocock that different methods were acceptable, with Skinner that only one method was justified, or with Dunn that no methods were in the end likely to be satisfactory. To put it another way, Pocock has always been happy to consider *verbum* separately as *factum* and *logos*, and has worked in his garden on his *facta*, leaving the *logos* to others. Skinner

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has tried like Daedelus to elevate factum until it is logos. And Dunn has considered logos unattainable, so he has only been left with the Sisyphean task of carrying the load of verba as facta.

In sum (and with some parenthetical second thoughts):

1. It is possible to admire all three, as long as we recognise how different they are. (I have been told that this particular piece appears to imply a scale of value, as if I think Dunn’s achievement was higher than Skinner’s which was higher than Pocock’s. This is not the case. For though Dunn was originally theoretically the most ambitious, he made it impossible for himself to write history as compelling as the history Pocock and Skinner have found it possible to write. In addition, my analysis of Pocock’s article of 1962 may seem satirical, but that is not the intention. Pocock was later to write in a much more rigorous theoretical style, but, as far as I can see, and despite subtleties I am not concerned with here, he did not alter his original view that history and philosophy were equally valid enterprises, though he would only contribute to the former. And this is, I think, a perfectly respectable position: indeed, the one of the three which I would be most likely to accept, of course because it is easiest to accept.)

2. A School has arisen out of the contradictions and complexities evident here, not out of any simple doctrine or set of precepts. (The contradictions and complexities are a consequence of writing at a high level about texts often written at a high level but susceptible of being explained in both a high or philosophical and also a deep or historical register. The critical

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138 This is a point misunderstood by Kari Palonen, ‘John Pocock and Quentin Skinner: The Machiavellian and the Weberian Moment’, *Ideas in History* 3 (2009), pp. 61-79, who only finds Pocock’s doctrine stranger than Skinner’s because he himself is uncritically committed to Skinner’s. Amusingly, from the point of view of 2020 he distinguishes Pocock and Skinner as if all the differences between them come down to the fact that Pocock was ‘Leave’ and Skinner was ‘Remain’ in terms of their attitudes to the European Union. I remain sceptical. But it may be a future source of future analysis, if we think that Cicero was ‘Remain’ as well as Roman and Aristotle, on his way to Assos, was ‘Leave’. 
encounter of history and philosophy has complicated all thought since Hegel, and I think that it is an index of the importance of the Cambridge School, along with others who have followed the same path, that it has insisted on the importance of that crux, even if the output or impact or consequence of all this is far less apparently clear than anything offered by mere history or mere philosophy.)

3. The Cambridge School is the name of an endeavour—or a set of related, even conflicting, endeavours—not the name of an achievement. (This is not to say that Pocock, Skinner and Dunn are lacking in achievement. I am second to none in admiring their greatest works. But I reserve the right to disagree with them, though I have not done that here, and criticise them. Criticism here has not been polemical, but analytical, intended to indicate that the manner of studying the history of political thought associated with Cambridge owes its fertility to an actual theoretical intractability, a not entirely coherent set of theoretical clarities, and a relentless exploring of the different ways that historical insights about dead writers might act upon the active contemporary minds of both writer and reader.)