

# 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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## 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 such as *The Political Thought of John Locke*, *The Machiavellian Moment* and *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. It 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. No doubt there was much consonance between the three articles. But I demonstrate through a close reading of the three articles that each author placed a very different emphasis on the status and purpose of the history of political thought, and that the differences between the articles help explain the remarkable differences in the writings the authors went on to write from the late 1960s onwards. 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 interest anyone 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 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), *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,<sup>1</sup> Dunn's 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', which was published in the journal *Philosophy* in 1968,<sup>2</sup> and Skinner's 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', which was published in *History and Theory* in 1969.<sup>3</sup>

I propose to subject these three articles to close critical examination. Not historical examination: this article is *about* the history of political thought and not an exercise *in* it.<sup>4</sup> Critical examination will indicate something which has not been observed clearly enough before, which is that each article, and therefore each author, offered a different view of the relation between history and philosophy in relation to politics.

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'),<sup>5</sup> has existed as a distinct form of literature since the early twentieth century. The most famous examples of this literature were written by the Carlyles, McIlwain, Lovejoy, Sabine and Auerbach in the first half of the twentieth century. Strauss, Voegelin, Berlin, MacIntyre and others offered intensifications and renewed relevance from the mid-century onwards.<sup>6</sup> But the Cambridge School has its roots in the narrower scholarly tradition of Acton, Maitland, Figgis and Woolf.<sup>7</sup> Pocock recently suggested that the origins of the school should be pushed back to 1949, when Laslett's edition of

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<sup>1</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, 'The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry', in P. Laslett and W.G. Runciman eds., *Politics, Philosophy and Society* (Second Series) (Basil Blackwell, 1962), pp. 183-202 (hereafter *P*). It may also be found in Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 3-19.

<sup>2</sup> John Dunn, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', *Philosophy* 43 (1968), pp. 85-104 (hereafter *D*). Also in *Political Obligation in Its Historical Context: Essays in Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 13-28.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 8 (1969) pp. 3-53 (hereafter *S*). Also in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 29-67, and heavily revised in *Visions of Politics*, Vol. I.: *Regarding Method* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 57-89.

<sup>4</sup> For historical examination see Samuel James, 'The "Cambridge School" in the History of Political Thought, 1948-1979' (Cambridge University: Doctoral Dissertation, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> *D*, p. 100, n. 1.

<sup>6</sup> James Alexander, 'The History of Political Thought and the Incommensurability of Traditions', *Storia della Storiografia* 80 (2021), pp. 11-47.

<sup>7</sup> See James Alexander, 'The Figgistorians, or, Anti-Whig Historians of Political Thought', in Paul Avis, ed. *Neville Figgis CR: His Life, Thought and Significance* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2021), pp. 65-92.

Filmer's *Patriarcha* was published.<sup>8</sup> But, as Skinner wrote, 'Laslett never supplied a theoretical account of his practice'.<sup>9</sup> And the significance of the triumvirate is that is exactly what they did.

Skinner's contribution is by far the most famous. In general, whenever the 'Cambridge School' is mentioned in the literature, by that name or by some other (they have been called 'revisionists',<sup>10</sup> 'linguistic contextualists',<sup>11</sup> 'new conventionalists',<sup>12</sup> and 'leading historians of political theory'<sup>13</sup>), Skinner is *always* mentioned,<sup>14</sup> Pocock *often* mentioned along with Skinner,<sup>15</sup> and Dunn *sometimes* mentioned along with others.<sup>16</sup> This tendency is reflected in the literature on each figure. There is a vast critical literature on Skinner.<sup>17</sup> There is a notable literature on

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<sup>8</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, 'Foundations and Moments', in Annabel Brett and James Tully eds., *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 37-49, at p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Quentin Skinner, 'Surveying the Foundations: A Retrospect and Reassessment', in Brett and Tully eds., *Rethinking the Foundations*, pp. 236-61, at p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> Charles D. Tarlton, 'Historicity, Meaning and Revisionism in the Study of Political Thought', *History and Theory* 12 (1973), pp. 307-328, Joseph Femia, 'An Historicist Critique of "Revisionist" Methods for Studying the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 20 (1981), pp. 113-134, David Boucher, *Texts in Context: Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), Andrew Vincent, *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Bevir, 'The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism', *History and Theory* 31 (1992), pp. 276-298.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Shapiro, 'Realism in the Study of the History of Ideas', *History of Political Thought* 3 (1982), pp. 535-578

<sup>13</sup> Richard Tuck, 'The Contribution of History', in Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit eds. *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Blackwell, 1993), pp. 72-89 at p. 72, also in the second edition (2012), pp. 69-88, at p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Out of a long literature, Michael Frazer, 'The Ethics of Interpretation in Political Theory and Intellectual History', *Review of Politics* 81 (2019), pp. 77-99, associates Skinner and the 'so-called Cambridge School' on p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Skinner and Pocock are singled out in Peter L. Janssen, 'Political Thought as Traditionary Action: The Critical Response to Skinner and Pocock', *History and Theory* 24 (1985), pp. 115-46, Melvin Richter, 'Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner and the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe', *History and Theory* 29 (1990), pp. 38-70, Mark Bevir, 'The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism', *History and Theory* 31 (1992), pp. 276-298, and also in Perry Anderson, *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 290, Geoffrey Thomas, *Introduction to Political Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 2000), p. 49 and Neal Wood, *Reflections on Political Theory: A Voice of Reason from the Past* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Tarlton, 'Historicity, Meaning and Revisionism in the Study of Political Thought', Shapiro, 'Realism in the Study of the History of Ideas', David Boucher, 'Conversation and Political Thought', *New Literary History* 18 (1986), pp. 59-75, Paul Kelly, 'Political Theory—The State of the Art', *Politics* 26 (2006), pp. 47-53, Adrian Blau, 'Extended Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 58 (2019), pp. 342-59 and William 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.

<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps not the place to make a complete list. But there is a literature dating from Margaret Leslie, in 'In Defence of Anachronism', *Political Studies* 18 (1970), pp. 433-447, right through Berki and Parekh (1973), Minogue (1981), Femia (1981), Boucher (1983), Nederman (1985), Palonen (2002), Lamb (2004), Perreau-Saussine (2007), Collins (2009), Steinberger (2009), Stanton (2011) and Alexander (2016), to Blau and Bosworth and Dowding (2019), cited immediately above. This list includes Pocock, who has written more than once on Skinner. See, for instance, J.G.A. Pocock, 'Reconstructing the Traditions: Quentin Skinner's Historian's History of Political Thought', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 3 (1979), pp. 95-113, 'Quentin Skinner: The History of Politics and the Politics of History', in *Common Knowledge* 10 (2004), pp. 532-50, and 'Foundations and Moments', cited in note 8 above. Finally, there are the books: James Tully ed. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Polity Press, 1988), Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), Brett and Tully eds., *Rethinking the Foundations*, Hannah Dawson and Annabel De Dijn, *Rethinking Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) and, perhaps finally, Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner eds., *History in the Humanities and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Pocock.<sup>18</sup> There is hardly anything on Dunn.<sup>19</sup> There are reasons for these discrepancies, which are not entirely to do with clarity,<sup>20</sup> or quality, as I shall go on to explain, but with doctrine. The consequence is that Skinner is always the exemplary figure, so that the precepts of the Cambridge School are 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'<sup>21</sup>—or, to use Pocock's characterisation of the difference, that Skinner has dealt with *parole* while Pocock has dealt with *langue*.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes the emphasis on 'intentions' is taken to be the precept which unites the School and distinguishes it from any other school, such as the 'Sussex School' of Collini, Winch and Burrow.<sup>23</sup> But this is to use Skinner as a synecdoche for the entire School: so that Dunn is assimilated to Skinner, and Pocock treated as someone secondary who made an additional observation. Even in the early 1970s it was possible to say: 'Their various statements can be taken as constituting a distinctively recognisable approach to the problem of intellectual history—a "school", if you like.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Among many critical studies are articles by Iain Hampsher-Monk, 'Political Languages in Time—The Work of J.G.A. Pocock', *British Journal of Political Science* 14 (1984), pp. 89-116, Samuel James, 'J.G.A. Pocock and the Idea of the Cambridge School in the History of Political Thought', *History of European Ideas* 45 (2019), pp. 83-98 (to which Pocock replied), and John Robertson, 'John Pocock's Histories of Political Thought', *Storia della Storiografia* 75 (2019), pp. 11-45. There is a book, D.N. DeLuna ed., *The Political Imagination in History: Essays Concerning J.G.A. Pocock* (Baltimore, MD: Owlworks, 2006), with essays by J.C.D. Clark and others. But as Michael Printy suggests in 'Skinner and Pocock in Context: Early Modern Political Thought Today', *History and Theory* 48 (2009), pp. 113-21, at pp. 119-20, 'Perhaps the most insightful and most prolific commentator on the works of J.G.A. Pocock has been Pocock himself'.

<sup>19</sup> There is Nicholas Rengger, 'Trust, Prudence and History: John Dunn and the Tasks of Political Theory', *History of Political Thought* 16 (1995), pp. 416-437, and articles by Alexander (2004) and Tseng (2013) in the same journal. There is also *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn* eds. Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (Cambridge University Press, 2017), but it lacks critical engagement.

<sup>20</sup> Though it should be acknowledged that Pocock and Dunn have more taxing prose styles than Skinner has. Felix Gilbert found Pocock's cadences 'not easy to read'. See Felix Gilbert, 'Corruption and Renewal', *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 March 1976, pp. 306-308, at p. 306. Laurence Dickey agreed in 'The Pocockian Moment', *Journal of British Studies* 26 (1987), pp. 96-107, at p. 97. Dunn's style is, as he admits, more Ciceronian than Tacitean. Jon Elster 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'. See Jon Elster, 'Why Bother About Politics', *London Review of Books*, 3 (5-18 February 1981), p. 8. And Robert Grant observed a 'convoluted style' in service of 'a minute, pedantic specification of the conditions under which the ensuing argument might or might not be considered plausible'. See Robert Grant, 'The Impotent State', *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 August 1996, pp. 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, J.A.W. Gunn, 'Republican Virtue Reconsidered, or a Sop to Cerebus', in DeLuna ed., *The Political Imagination in History*, pp. 101-128, at p. 127.

<sup>22</sup> Pocock, 'Reconstructing the Traditions', p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> See David Runciman, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 13 July 2001, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Tarlton, 'Historicity, Meaning and Revisionism in the Study of Political Thought', p. 307.

It has become standard in the literature to take Skinner's article as architectonic.<sup>25</sup> Richard Whatmore in *What is Intellectual History?* declared that all three articles are 'classic statements about the practice of intellectual history'. But since Skinner's article was 'the most accessible', 'the most assertive and confident', and 'far and away the most combative' in advocating 'a new method of the study of past ideas', it was in effect the 'manifesto of the Cambridge School'.<sup>26</sup>

Pocock, Dunn and Skinner generated an overlapping consensus on relatively uncontroversial points—such as that the history of ideas should abide by historical canons—but closer consideration reveals that they differed entirely in their fundamental picture of the relations between philosophy, history and politics. Such close consideration also indicates some of the reasons 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 been reluctant to derive anything simple from the history of political thought for political theory.

## II

Pocock's 'The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry' is more essay than article. There are several things which make it distinctive. The first is that it exhibits something not to be found in either Dunn's or Skinner's article, which is tolerance about different ways of studying political thought. Pocock maintains throughout that 'there is no one set of assumptions from which alone it is proper to approach the history of political thought.'<sup>27</sup> The second is that he is, even in 1962, concerned with the 'language (or languages) of politics'.<sup>28</sup> The third is that, in large part, the essay is a critical reflection on Oakeshott's famous inaugural lecture from 1951, 'Political Education'. Pocock wants to distance himself from what he supposes to be Oakeshott's

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<sup>25</sup> For sometimes reluctant acknowledgement of Skinner's casting a shadow over the others, see Gordon Schochet, 'The "Ancient Constitution: as Necessary Interpretative Trope', in DeLuna ed., *The Political Imagination in History*, pp. 11-25, at p. 14, Tuck, 'The Contribution of History', p. 80, and Gunn, 'Republican Virtue Reconsidered', p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p. 45 (and pp. 42-6 for other quotations in the text). Tuck, in 'The Contribution of History', p. 80, also referred to 'two most important manifestos for a new kind of history of political thought', meaning Dunn's and Skinner's. Pocock, in 'Quentin Skinner', p. 537, called Skinner's article 'the manifesto of an emerging method of interpreting the history of political thought'.

<sup>27</sup> *P*, p. 184.

<sup>28</sup> *P*, p. 183.

‘traditionalist’ position, and wants to come up with a more generous account of the history of political thought.

In ‘Political Education’ Oakeshott was mostly concerned with ‘a tradition of behaviour’ rather than a tradition of thought. ‘A tradition of behaviour is not a fixed or inflexible manner of doing things.’ It ‘may even appear to be essentially unintelligible... neither fixed nor finished; it has no changeless centre to which understanding can anchor itself.’<sup>29</sup> Oakeshott was interested in the question of what happens in a crisis. Though we might seek some steady authority to guide us, he suggested that there is ‘no recourse outside the fragments, the vestiges, the relics of [our] own tradition of behaviour which the crisis has left untouched’.<sup>30</sup> In relation to ideas, Oakeshott was disparaging. He claimed that the important form of history is ‘the history, not of political ideas, but of the manner of our political thinking’.<sup>31</sup> And in relation to political philosophy, he wrote:

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.<sup>32</sup>

Finally there came 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.’<sup>33</sup>

In his essay Pocock does not want to argue against Oakeshott’s politics, but does want to register some opposition to Oakeshott’s flattening of the history of thought into philosophical incoherencies.

The traditionalist attitude consists in accepting (1) the indefinite variety of ... possible approaches, (2) that there is no *a priori* reason for preferring any one of them to others,

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Oakeshott, ‘Political Education’ in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), pp. 111-136, at, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

(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.<sup>34</sup>

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'.<sup>35</sup> Pocock admits that this 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'.<sup>36</sup> He thinks the traditionalist does not make such a 'clarification' possible and may leave us in a state of 'vagueness and pretension'.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup>

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'.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, he thinks it is possible to observe how political thought exists on 'a 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'.<sup>40</sup> The problem is not that this is the case, for Pocock is tolerant. The problem is with mistaking one for the other. So here is the charge: '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

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<sup>34</sup> *P*, p. 184.

<sup>35</sup> *P*, p. 184.

<sup>36</sup> *P*, p. 184.

<sup>37</sup> *P*, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> *P*, p. 185.

<sup>39</sup> *P*, p. 186.

<sup>40</sup> *P*, pp. 186-7

abstraction'.<sup>41</sup> What Pocock does not want, and what Dunn and Skinner later on will not want, is 'a single narrative, taking place at a high level of abstraction'. Though, 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'.<sup>42</sup>

Pocock 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'.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> Pocock is especially acute about the fact that though at a philosophical level theory and practice are easy to distinguish, this is not so at a lower level of abstraction, where they are almost impossible to distinguish.<sup>45</sup>

He asks how 'our methods [should] be refined'.<sup>46</sup> Pocock's answer is a broad one: there is no singular hypothesis about 'intentions' here. '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.'<sup>47</sup> Here, in miniature, is a glimpse of the distinction Pocock will later elaborate as the distinction between *parole* and *langue*: between 'how ideas, beliefs and arguments help us to understand the actions of men in particular situations' and 'the regular employment of relatively stable concepts'.<sup>48</sup> Throughout Pocock uses the Oakeshottian or Weldonian word 'vocabularies', and his own preferred word 'languages', and suggests that these are plural.<sup>49</sup> 'There is no reason to suppose that a society will have only one language; we may rather expect to find several.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *P*, p. 187.

<sup>42</sup> *P*, p. 188.

<sup>43</sup> *P*, p. 189.

<sup>44</sup> *P*, p. 190.

<sup>45</sup> *P*, p. 193.

<sup>46</sup> *P*, p. 193.

<sup>47</sup> *P*, p. 194.

<sup>48</sup> *P*, p. 195.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. *P*, p. 195.

<sup>50</sup> *P*, p. 195.

Pocock is tolerant enough to admit that the ‘historian’s point of view’ may mean that we ‘underestimate the significance of political philosophy in the classical sense’.<sup>51</sup> And he by no means wants to undermine this significance. Indeed: ‘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.’<sup>52</sup>

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...’<sup>53</sup> Pocock is tolerant throughout, allowing the higher political philosophy to be, while he draws attention to the significance of the lower history of political thought. But there is also the suggestion that in one sense the priority should be reversed. ‘The only alternative to anatomizing [a] 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’.<sup>54</sup> Rather than 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 perhaps more important because it is the original of political philosophy.

### III

Dunn’s ‘The Identity of the History of Ideas’ is dense and poetic. There are points at which it is hard to distinguish digression from the 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*’.<sup>55</sup> Dunn echoes Pocock when he writes:

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

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<sup>51</sup> *P*, p. 196.

<sup>52</sup> *P*, p. 201.

<sup>53</sup> *P*, p. 196.

<sup>54</sup> *P*, p. 202.

<sup>55</sup> *D*, p. 87.

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.<sup>56</sup>

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”.’<sup>57</sup> 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.’<sup>58</sup> Like Pocock, Dunn wants to explore the fallen nature of much thought. He observes that ‘incompleteness, incoherence, instability and the effort to overcome these are its persistent characteristics’.<sup>59</sup> He has as strong a sense as Pocock that thought takes place at different levels, that its subject matter involves ‘past thinking, philosophy, ideas, ideologies’.<sup>60</sup>

Dunn also begins with a distinction between history and philosophy. He notes that the history of ideas is criticised in two ways. Firstly, historians say that as history it is too abstract, because ideas are granted implausible agency: ‘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.’ Dunn says nothing about Oakeshott’s or Pocock’s ‘traditions’ or ‘languages’ being similarly abstract, but there is an intimation of divergence, of a narrowing of focus. Secondly, philosophers say that the history of ideas ‘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’.<sup>61</sup>

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 symmetry by arguing that the history of ideas, properly understood, is the attempt at the highest level to make sense of what one is studying *both* historically *and* philosophically. In order to see this point clearly one has to refuse to be distracted by some of

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<sup>56</sup> *D*, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> *D*, p. 87.

<sup>58</sup> *D*, p. 88.

<sup>59</sup> *D*, p. 88.

<sup>60</sup> *D*, p. 89.

<sup>61</sup> *D*, at p. 85.

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,<sup>62</sup> the history of political thought is the history of 'two things', which correspond to 'two sorts of integral explanation'.<sup>63</sup> 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'.<sup>64</sup> He wants to avoid this choice.

Let us try to distinguish the two positions. The first is the search for 'causal' explanation, while the second is the search for 'rational' explanation. He comments that they are *different*: 'the attempt to reduce them to the same type of enterprise is absurd'.<sup>65</sup> 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.'<sup>66</sup> 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.

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.<sup>67</sup>

Again:

The completion of both types of investigation is a necessary preliminary to the construction of an indefeasible explanation of either type.<sup>68</sup>

And again:

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<sup>62</sup> *D*, p. 86.

<sup>63</sup> *D*, p. 92.

<sup>64</sup> *D*, p. 86.

<sup>65</sup> *D*, p. 89.

<sup>66</sup> *D*, p. 91.

<sup>67</sup> *D*, p. 86.

<sup>68</sup> *D*, p. 86.

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.<sup>69</sup>

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 'a full account of its *truth* status'.<sup>70</sup> He deplores the fact that the two sorts 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'.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

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. There are moderate utterances about the importance of recognising historical distance and avoiding 'anachronism'.<sup>73</sup> But such moderation is undermined by scepticism. Consider the following passage about the subjectivity of the historian or philosopher:

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.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *D*, pp. 86-7.

<sup>70</sup> *D*, p. 90.

<sup>71</sup> *D*, p. 91.

<sup>72</sup> *D*, p. 92.

<sup>73</sup> *D*, p. 96.

<sup>74</sup> *D*, pp. 87-88.

The question is whether we can escape fiction. Pocock thinks we can. But Dunn is not so sure. He even 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.’<sup>75</sup> 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’ will remain a theme in Pocock’s writings after 1962, so this pessimism will remain 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’.

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.<sup>76</sup>

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.<sup>77</sup>

This is *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, to say the least, is not something that the authors of either *The Machiavellian Moment* or *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* will go on to admit.

Dunn 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.’

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<sup>75</sup> *D*, p. 97.

<sup>76</sup> *D*, p. 98.

<sup>77</sup> *D*, p. 98.

This is exactly what Skinner will say. But where Skinner will say *only* this, and where Pocock has said that we can *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. The disagreement here is obscured by the quoting of Yeats's *Byzantium* on 'the fury and mire of human veins', and even by shifting into a high academic poetic register in the prose.

But then we have a now notorious 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.'<sup>78</sup> What this means is that we must as a matter of necessity 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 will be 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 in a sense *difficult* and in a sense *impossible*. 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.'<sup>79</sup> He recognises that what he has written 'is very much a counsel of perfection, or despair'.<sup>80</sup> He would like it if his requirement that the history of ideas be *both* historical *and* philosophical were a pragmatic and possible one. But he knows it is not. The final line of the article is: 'All this is whistling to keep our courage up and in no 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.'<sup>81</sup>

#### IV

Skinner's 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' is in appearance far more imposing than Pocock's essay or Dunn's meditation. In 1962 Pocock merely refers to Oakeshott, cites Meineke, Sabine and his own work, gives as examples 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,

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<sup>78</sup> *D*, p. 98.

<sup>79</sup> *D*, p. 99.

<sup>80</sup> *D*, p. 96.

<sup>81</sup> *D*, p. 99.

Locke, Hume, the *Iliad*, Blake, Milton and Dante), refers to Ryan, Passmore, Winch, Collingwood and others, has thirty-three footnotes, which refer to Hare, MacIntyre, Skinner, Taylor, Popper, Runciman, Laslett, J.L. Austin and others. He says he has learnt from Collingwood's *Idea of History*, other books on history by Gardiner, Dray, Gallie and Danto, and 'also from striking works by practising historians', Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*.<sup>82</sup> 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'. He thanks a few other scholars, and then adds: 'Where it remains opaque, it does so through no fault of theirs, but merely as a result of my own obstinacy.'<sup>83</sup> Whereas Dunn writes in wit and wither, Pocock writes with ease and assurance. Skinner, by way of contrast, is not so much withering as scathing about the 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 of Marsilius, Coke, Locke, Hobbes and Bayle, none of which I shall refer to here), and has two hundred and five footnotes. He is, broadly speaking, *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 article we have just considered.<sup>84</sup>

Several of Skinner's 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 our 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.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *D*, p. 100-1, n. 6. Cf. *S*, p. 7 n. 17 & 18 for similar admiration of Gombrich and Kuhn. Pocock's use of Kuhn was, of course, equally paradigmatic.

<sup>83</sup> *D*, p. 104 n. 33.

<sup>84</sup> *S*, p. 53 n. 205.

<sup>85</sup> *S*, p. 6.

History then becomes a pack of tricks we play on the dead.<sup>86</sup>

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.<sup>87</sup>

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.<sup>88</sup>

We must learn to do our thinking for ourselves.<sup>89</sup>

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.<sup>90</sup>

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 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.

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<sup>86</sup> *J*, p. 14.

<sup>87</sup> *J*, p. 18.

<sup>88</sup> *J*, p. 35.

<sup>89</sup> *J*, p. 52.

<sup>90</sup> *J*, p. 53.

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, as 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'.

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 not by historians but by literary critics, F.W. Bateson and F.R. Leavis, in their exchange about 'The Function of Criticism'.<sup>91</sup> 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, to judge by the first pages of this article, one would not expect this outcome.

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'.<sup>92</sup> This is something promised by neither Pocock nor Dunn. Skinner will offer a *clear* account of how to improve the writing of the history of political thought: this will be to eliminate present philosophical concerns and concentrate on the genuine historical elements in older works. Skinner is mostly critical of other historians. But 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

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<sup>91</sup> *S*, p. 3 n. 2.

<sup>92</sup> *S*, p. 4.

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 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. It is *sufficient* rather than *necessary*.

I have said that Dunn is sensitive to the subjectivity of the historian. 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 'one's own expectations about what he must have been saying'.<sup>93</sup> 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 again 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'.<sup>94</sup> What Skinner objects to is simply the 'crude possibility of crediting a writer with a meaning he could not have intended to convey'.<sup>95</sup> This is very likely if instead of seeing an idea as something historically changeable we 'hypostatise it into an entity'.<sup>96</sup> The entire tenor of Skinner's piece is to identify all the historians from Lovejoy onwards who have committed the error of supposing that ideas have remained unchanged through time: so that Machiavelli may have 'anticipated' Marx,<sup>97</sup> or that Hobbes might have failed to offer 'genuine insights' into our contemporary discussions.<sup>98</sup> Skinner echoes Pocock and Dunn in saying that there is a tendency for 'the historian to conceive it as his task to supply or to find in each of these texts the

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<sup>93</sup> *S*, p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> *S*, p. 7.

<sup>95</sup> *S*, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> *S*, p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> *S*, p. 11.

<sup>98</sup> *S*, p. 15.

coherence which they may appear to lack'.<sup>99</sup> He cites Pocock's article at this point, and notes Pocock's point about different 'levels of abstraction' but does not dwell on this point himself.<sup>100</sup> His own concern is to claim, as 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 his points with variety, and then offers an epigram to gild the hammer.

The methodological suggestion proposed by Skinner is one which has been alluded to by Dunn. This is summarised in the word 'intention': it 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'.<sup>101</sup> 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*. This was to seem important to many historians afterwards. For Skinner, *x* marks the spot: and beneath it is the buried treasure, to be excavated by the historian. Philosophers refuse, like Leavis, to dig; and anyone attempting to do 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 words, but their use'.<sup>102</sup> This is the historical emphasis, on *use*. 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 is 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

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<sup>99</sup> *S*, p. 16

<sup>100</sup> *S*, p. 16 n. 69.

<sup>101</sup> *S*, p. 31.

<sup>102</sup> *S*, p. 37.

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.<sup>103</sup> 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’.<sup>104</sup> So, by the end of section IV Skinner has dismissed both the *textual* approach, which simply collapses in the face of a recognition of *historical distance*, and the *contextual* approach, which has to be refined so that it is not a question of studying causes or meanings but understandings.

In section V Skinner 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.’<sup>105</sup> Skinner calls this, for short, the ‘complex intention’ of the author.<sup>106</sup> And this, to all intents and purposes, is the end of the article, but for a coda of four pages which begins on p. 49 and runs on until the end.

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’.<sup>107</sup> This is Skinner’s first flourish: that since the *only* way to ‘understand’ any text from the past is historically then it follows that there is nothing except historical knowledge to be derived from texts. When stated this way, it seems false. Pocock would have said it was 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*

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<sup>103</sup> *S*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>104</sup> *S*, p. 47.

<sup>105</sup> *S*, p. 48.

<sup>106</sup> *S*, p. 49.

<sup>107</sup> *S*, pp. 50 & 52.

*John Locke*—which is why even those scholars who do not read Dunn’s methodological article do pay attention to his book.

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.’<sup>108</sup> 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? Though he says he ‘cannot now explore’ the ‘exciting possibility’ of ‘a dialogue between philosophical discussion and historical evidence’,<sup>109</sup> he says that the possibility is that after studying the history of ideas we will 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 has the same content as the first flourish but it is now 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’.<sup>110</sup>

Skinner rarely drifts into poetry. He is not Dunn. But he can ascend into rhetoric. And there is nothing more rhetorical than this: and, we might add, marvellous: for he *giveth* as well as *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’.

## V

Let me sketch some broad judgements on the significance of these three articles 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 began as historians. All of them wanted to think historically about politics, rather than only philosophically. In this they have much in common with forerunners in America like Strauss, Voegelin, Arendt and Wolin and in Oxford and

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<sup>108</sup> *S*, p. 52

<sup>109</sup> *S*, p. 49.

<sup>110</sup> *S*, pp. 52-53.

Cambridge like Barker, Collingwood, Oakeshott, Trevor-Roper and Berlin. But they were purer in their emphasis on ‘history alone’, an unusual *sole fide*: they wanted to write 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 ‘unit-ideas’ but as a history of an activity. Pocock wrote: ‘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.’<sup>111</sup> Much can be found in all three articles that would confirm this. And we may say that the impetus of the Cambridge School has been to encourage the writing of more history and especially more apparently historical history.

However, it should be obvious now 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 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. But these methods have received much criticism.

The criticisms, taken as a whole, are a consequence of their attempt to find a balance between history and philosophy. Some have said the triumvirate contradicted their own claims.<sup>112</sup> Some have said that these claims were ‘vaguely and arbitrarily specified’.<sup>113</sup> 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 should be deeper or the philosophy sharper.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Pocock, ‘Quentin Skinner’, p. 538.

<sup>112</sup> The classic instance is when Boucher in 1980 decisively pointed out that *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* contradicted many of the precepts of ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’. David E.G. Boucher, ‘On Shklar’s and Franklin’s Reviews of Skinner: The Foundations of Modern Political Thought’, *Political Theory* 8 (1980), pp. 406-408.

<sup>113</sup> Tarlton, ‘Historicity, Meaning and Revisionism in the Study of Political Thought’, p. 312.

<sup>114</sup> 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 National Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 159-174, at p. 166 and Robert Wokler, ‘The Professoriate of

The 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.<sup>115</sup> This is not how Skinner and Pocock have seen history. Dunn is less clear.

The members of the triumvirate all 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.<sup>116</sup> Dunn 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’.<sup>117</sup> But his own point was always broad in scale. In 1992, while reflecting again on Skinner’s and Pocock’s methods, he called 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’.<sup>118</sup> Pocock’s answer to Skinner’s criticism was rather more closely critical. What he did, in effect, was to tell Skinner that he, Skinner, could write history in accordance with not only his own but also with Pocock’s ideas. When Pocock reviewed *Foundations* in 1979 he 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*

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Political Thought in England since 1914: A Tale of Three Chairs’, in *ibid.*, pp. 134-158 at p. 154, as well as by more obvious cases like Ian Shapiro, Perry Anderson, Neal Wood, and Ellen Meiksins Wood, also by Melvin Richter, ‘Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*’, *History and Theory* 29 (1990), pp. 38-70 at p. 50. On the other side, Michael Oakeshott and Keith Thomas questioned whether Skinner, for instance, could make sense of texts written at the highest philosophical level. See Michael Oakeshott, review of ‘Foundations of Modern Political Thought’, *Historical Journal* 23 (1980), pp. 449-53, and Keith Thomas, ‘Politics Recaptured’, *New York Review of Books* 26 (17 May 1979), pp. 26-9.

<sup>115</sup> 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.

<sup>116</sup> See Quentin Skinner, ‘Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action’, *Political Theory* 2 (1974), pp. 277-303, at p. 288. See also, for ambiguous criticism of Pocock (how sharp it is depends on how one reads it), Quentin Skinner, ‘On Intellectual History and the History of Books’, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 1 (2005), p. 29-36.

<sup>117</sup> John Dunn, review of *Politics, Language and Time* in *The Spectator*, 29 June 1972.

<sup>118</sup> John Dunn, ‘The History of Political Theory’, in *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11-38, at p. 22.

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.<sup>119</sup> Pocock's writings from 1979 were consciously designed to be studies in the *conflict* between rival languages—a change of policy which he made clear in articles in the early 1980s.<sup>120</sup> 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 *langues* and *paroles* did matter, the distinction was only about which plane of understanding to emphasise: the act, or the tradition which constrained the act. Certainly, by 2001, Skinner could comment in respect of Pocock, 'Our approaches converge'.<sup>121</sup> The other question was what the significance of this history was, apart from the writing of better history: that is, what the significance of this history was for politics. Pocock remained 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'.<sup>122</sup> 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'.<sup>123</sup> Whatmore has rightly commented that Skinner has sometimes been accused of being too historical, sometimes been accused of being too philosophical.<sup>124</sup> Perreau-Saussine has rightly suggested that Skinner's work has always pulled in 'two directions'.<sup>125</sup> By contrast, Pocock's work pulls in one direction, Dunn's in no direction in particular.

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<sup>119</sup> Pocock, 'Reconstructing the Traditions', pp. 95 & 99.

<sup>120</sup> See, for instance, J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Reconstruction of Discourse: Towards the Historiography of Political Thought', *MLN* 96 (1981), pp. 959-980, J.G.A. Pocock, 'Virtue, Rights and Manners: A Model for Historians of 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, Philippon, 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. Many 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*.

<sup>121</sup> P. Koikkalainen and S. Syrjäniemi, 'Interview with Quentin Skinner', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6 (2002), pp. 32-63, at p. 49.

<sup>122</sup> David Boucher, 'New Histories of Political Thought for Old?', *Political Studies* 31 (1983), pp. 112-121, at p. 114.

<sup>123</sup> Koikkalainen and Syrjäniemi, 'Interview with Quentin Skinner', p. 54.

<sup>124</sup> Richard Whatmore, 'Intellectual History and the History of Political Thought', in *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History* ed. Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 109-129, at p. 120.

<sup>125</sup> Emile Perreau-Saussine, 'Quentin Skinner in Context', *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007), pp. 106-122, at p. 118.

In the end, the historical methods sketched in these articles are, I think, refuted by Dunn's argument that the context cannot be closed objectively because it is perpetually in the condition of being opened subjectively. 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'.<sup>126</sup> 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* or even *tunnelled* through rather than *erected* by the historian. The writers of the Cambridge School in their writing of history have been '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 *philosophers* of an odd sort, 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 certainly defeated any attempt he might have made to write anything as magisterial in the history of political thought as either Pocock or Skinner.

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 *Virtue, Commerce and History* and in *Barbarism and Religion*, especially in relation to his exploration of different understandings of 'enlightenment'). Skinner has written elaborate explorations of his original methodological suggestion, refining it, defending it and 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. He, unlike Pocock, and especially since *Liberty Before Liberalism* in 1998, and in

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<sup>126</sup> F.R. Leavis, 'The Responsible Critic: Or the Function of Criticism at any Time', *Scrutiny* 19 (1953), reprinted in *Selections from Scrutiny* ed. F.R. Leavis (Cambridge University Press, 1968), Volume II, pp. 280-303, at p. 293.

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),<sup>127</sup> has been complicated by Skinner’s late interest in the study of rhetoric. If the 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’.<sup>128</sup> The problem is that Skinner has not reconciled his continued interest in having the past intervene in the present—as it does in *Liberty Before Liberalism*—with his ‘postmodern’ or ‘rhetorical’ sense that the distinctions necessary to make this work no longer exist.<sup>129</sup> Finally, Dunn has written many works on various aspects of political theory, has reflected disparagingly on the relative status of empirical political science, normative political philosophy and the history of political thought, and has continued to judge 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 straightforwardly historical, or even straightforwardly philosophical. He writes as if everything is preliminary. *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 sum, Skinner was preoccupied with finding an actual way of turning aspects of the history of political thought into something of philosophical and political relevance, and as time went on his writing became more preoccupied with distinctions and adjustments of arguments.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Boucher, ‘On Shklar’s and Franklin’s Reviews of Skinner’.

<sup>128</sup> Koikkalainen and Syrjamäki, ‘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.’

<sup>129</sup> Robert Lamb, ‘Quentin Skinner’s Post-Modern History of Ideas’, *History* 89 (2004), pp. 424-433, at p. 431.

<sup>130</sup> 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 Prokhorovnik, ‘Approaching Political Theory Historically: An

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 which, when closely studied, indicate *theoretical* constraints that conditioned the very different works they wrote from the late 1960s on. It has been suggested to me<sup>131</sup> 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 writings of Tuck, Hont, Sonenscher, Pagden, Brett, Nelson and many others right up to the present—Smith, Forrester, Bejan, Brooke, Bourke, Sagar, Nakhimovsky, Stanton, Skjönsberg et al—and also, in particular, 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'.<sup>132</sup> This is of course possible, perhaps necessary, certainly interesting. But since my purpose is textual rather than contextual—*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. 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* reason, 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.

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 *paroles*. It was about

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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.

<sup>131</sup> 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.

<sup>132</sup> Richard Whatmore, 'Introduction to the New Princeton Classics Edition', in J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. vii-xxii at xi.

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 has tried like Daedalus to elevate *factum* until it is *logos*.<sup>133</sup> 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, it is necessary to say three things.

1. It is possible to admire all three, as long as we recognise how different they are. I have been told that this article 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. Dunn was originally *theoretically* the most ambitious, but made it impossible for himself to write history as compelling as the history Pocock and Skinner found it possible to write. Skinner always seems, because of his exactitude, to have impressed himself most on historians requiring a justification, and also to have required the most elaborate response—even here. The analysis of Pocock may seem simple and even satirical, but he never changed his original view that history and philosophy were equally valid enterprises, and that he would only contribute to the former. 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 low or historical register. The critical 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 this crux, even if the output or impact or consequence of all this is far less 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—and not the name of an achievement. This is not to say that Pocock, Dunn and Skinner are lacking in achievement. I am second to none in admiring their greatest

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<sup>133</sup> 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. He seems to write about 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.

works. But I reserve the right to disagree with them, though I have not done that here, and to 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 inclination to exhibit the different ways in which historical insights about the writings of the dead may act on the minds of those yet living.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> 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 broadly rather than come into close focus. 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 permission to review at Macaulayan length Martyn Thompson's 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 and Robert Grant for encouraging words about those performances, to Iain Hampsher-Monk for engaged attention, and to Gulsen Seven for continual encouragement to think again. I should say that I know and am known to 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. *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.