USING RELEVANCE AND RECEPTION WITHIN A CONTEXTUALIST APPROACH

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The aim of this article is to demonstrate how intended meaning can be captured through reception in historical textual analysis. I argue in favor of a contextualist approach for the history of political thought that includes reception actively. More precisely, I will argue in favor of a Skinnerian approach, or what Mark Bevir describes as soft linguistic contextualism.[2] The Skinnerian approach has provoked considerable debate and there is an extensive literature on the subject. It is not my intention, nor would it be possible, to reopen this debate here. My intention is to raise the fundamental theoretical problems of the project of constituting a historical context that allows, in a contextualist view, the inference of the intended meaning of an author. In my opinion, the major problem with the Skinnerian approach lies not within a demand of contextualization and its steps of analysis, but rather in the theory of language which provides the theoretical basis for such a contextualization. In other words the major problem lies in the speech acts theory of Austin and Searle.

Derrida is certainly one of the most powerful critics of intentionalism and contextualism. Without rallying to his position, the challenges posed by this criticism should be taken seriously. Especially when applied to Austin and Searle's theory of speech acts, and despite Searle's extensive responses to Derrida, his criticisms seem quite intact.[3] In reaction to or affiliation with postmodernist or deconstructivist challenges there has been a good deal of refreshing debate in

the field of theory or philosophy of history.[4] However, it will not be discussed here. It seems that the philosophical debate would best be served at this stage by going back to questioning its basis which lies in one way or another in language theory. Despite a higher consciousness of theoretical problems within the community of historians, the gap between philosophy of history and historical day to day practice seems to be growing bigger. Thus, a pragmatic approach to the question of historical interpretation will be presented here.

I seek to offer a formal analysis of the problem of context and intention. Consequently, I will try to overcome the kinds of criticism for which Derrida stands here exemplarily, by relying on the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson. Indeed, this theory identifies the shortcomings of classical speech acts theory and offers an alternative approach to the study of human communication. The question sought to be answered is how is a context constructed and reconstructed. I particularly seek to show what would be a specific historical context in which a specific historical meaning, intrinsically different from other present meanings – of course a historical meaning is also present –, would be constituted.

What an author intended to express in writing and the influence on this by other texts is strongly linked – this is usually not a matter of dispute. Consequently, the study of origins of ideas or of thought, or the influence of ideas on other ideas is often quite naturally part of the recovery of intended meaning in a contextualist approach.[5] However, this brings up a major difficulty. In contextualism there is a chasm between influence and intended meaning, in that the acknowledgement of influence does not usually show *how* the influence shaped the intended meaning. This would amount to considering reception as part of the intended meaning. But influence is not theorized in the contextualist approach, and neither is reception. In other words, in a contextualist approach, reception of meaning and intended meaning are dissociated from each other. The problem arises from the fact that in contextualism the context is considered to be given and conventional. It will be shown here that it is not. Basing the argument on the achievements of relevance theory, I will demonstrate how it is possible to link received meaning and intended meaning and to translate these two methodologically into a contextualist approach. In order to illustrate the theoretical statements on the building of a context, I will rely on an analysis of Spinoza's concept of sovereignty and a famous

sentence from Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws* on judges. While arguing in favor of a soft contextualist approach to the history of political thought, I will show that reception of meaning and constitution of meaning cannot, and should not, be dissociated within the practical endeavor to reconstitute intended meaning. Thereby, it is hoped that this analysis can contribute to the debates on method by offering new arguments in favor of a soft contextualist approach.

Intention, reception and context

Quentin Skinner asserts that to understand texts one should understand the intentions of the authors in writing, that is to say what authors may have meant by what they wrote. His affirmation arises from speech acts theory on one hand, and on the other from an approach based on Collingwood's conception of history (Skinner 2001, 175-188. See also Collingwood 1956 and 1983). These two foundations entail a requirement to reconstruct the historical meaning of a text in order to understand it. However, he insists on the fact that all interpretation has the status of a hypothesis that is potentially confuted in light of new information or more subtle reading. Looking for what the author meant by what he wrote comes back to asserting what the author *may* have meant. Skinner also asserts that to reconstruct the author's intentions is not equivalent to wanting to place oneself in the author's mind.[6] The historical distance between historian and author can never be abolished. Nevertheless, he asserts that to understand a text by reconstituting authorial intentions is not a mysterious or emphatic process, since it is only a matter of placing it in an argumentative context that gives it sense (Skinner 2001, 181-186). This last assertion is particularly important. Implicitly, it refers to the dimension of reception in the recovering of intended meaning. However, it deserves further consideration.

Whenever historians undertake to reflect upon and analyze past thought, they actualize meanings that are conveyed by texts and compose the elements that are being questioned. Today, it is accepted that linguistic meaning is made up not only of the signifier and the signified, but also entails a referent. Concerning ideas, which are in fact sets of meanings, it is then more appropriate to speak not of a referent, but of the referential netting that makes up a context. In other words,

all text will inevitably have to be placed in a context in order to acquire meaning.[7] Historians aim to constitute the historical meaning of the text. As simple readers, their reading is first no different to that of any other reader who asks herself (implicitly) what the text means to her. As historians, in contrast, their procedure and the questions with which they approach the text are different. They are inevitably seeking to reconstitute meanings of a text for someone at a given moment in time. So, clearly they can seek to understand what an author meant by a text, thus attempting to recover the intended meaning of the text.[8] The Skinnerian approach grants hermeneutical priority to the intentions of the author in that all text is viewed as an expression of a willful communication and hence jointly a performative act. Received meaning is generally described only in terms of influence. One can be justified, however, in asking what insight historians gain in acknowledging an influence upon an author's ideas, if they fail to establish how they are integrated into the argument and why they are incorporated in the manner they are and not another.

The constitution of meaning through reception nevertheless has been the subject of a vast theoretical undertaking, particularly in German literary theory. The Constance School which is notably represented by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser is one of the most important schools involved in this movement. Constance School's reception theory gives hermeneutical priority to the reception by the reader, arguing that the meaning of a text, which is also considered part of a communication process, is solely accessible by the reader's actualization of the meaning. It is suggested here that the insights of Constance School's reception theory are quite beneficial to our purposes. Also, Jauss' approach experienced a certain interest in the field of history of ideas (For example Depkat 1998, 22-23). However, the Constance School theory is also based on speech acts theory. Thus, the criticisms I will highlight also apply to the foundations of reception theory. It is certainly one of the reasons why this theory seems to have lost some of its impact over the last 20 years, particularly when compared to the successes of post-structuralism. Furthermore, its sole focus on the reader's actualization of texts artificially ignores the author. This is all the more intriguing, for the reader (a critic, the public or a historian) automatically becomes an author herself, if there is any form of text that retraces the actualization of meaning.[9] Therefore, I assert that intended meaning has to be taken into account. Skinner's approach

and that of Jauss and Iser respectively grant complete hermeneutical priority either to the author or to the reader. Martyn P. Thompson demonstrates this particularly well. His article examines in depth the possible relationship between reception theory and the contextualist approach, pointing out the one-sidedness of both (Thompson 1993, 248-272). He recognizes the validity and value of reception theory in the history of political thought.[10] Yet the objective of this paper is quite different to Thompson's work. I consider the reception and the constitution of meaning to be inextricably part of the same process. The transmission of meaning based on the text does not need to be approached in the order represented by the communication model ('transmitter - message - receiver'). The complexity of the fictional, philosophical or other text and the complexity of the transmission of the meaning will probably naturally induce an analytical preference for one or other of the actors. My approach is to consider the author likewise as receptor, and vice-versa.[11]

The project of reconstructing the intention of the author is linked to the reconstruction of the context in which the author wrote. For Skinner, the context is *given* in the sense that it is conventional. The author has to draw on conventions. He must use the concepts at his disposition in order to be understood. " […] the appropriate methodology for the history of ideas must be concerned, first of all, to delineate the whole range of communication which could have been conventionally performed […] and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer" (Skinner 1988a, 63-64). This affirmation is based on Austin and Searle's speech acts theory (I refer summarily to Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Searle believes that "there is a systematic set of relationships between the meanings of the words and sentences we utter and the illocutionary acts we perform in the utterance of those words and sentences" (Searle 1979, 58). Consequently, the model of speech acts theory needs a clearly defined, conventional context.

However, one main criticism of the intentionalist project centers precisely on this conception of the bond between intended meaning and context. Jacques Derrida, who is certainly the most extreme critique of the intentionalist project, brings up the problem of how written language can be interpreted, if, because of temporal distance, the transmitter, the receiver and the code are not accessible anymore. For

Derrida, written communication must be repeatable to retain its function as writing (Derrida 1977, 179). According to him this is impossible because the conventional context and the code that make possible the understanding of the message are unstable. All signs can detach themselves from their original context and engender an infinite quantity of new contexts. The conventions have to be shared by the author and the receiver of the text, the instances of coding and decoding, so that one can talk about conventional context. If the conventional context is no longer given and the instances which share the conventions are no more, the context cannot, from the poststructuralist perspective, be reconstructed. Thus, Derrida supports the view that written language has the consequence of "the disruption, in the last analysis, of the authority of the code as finite system of rules; at the same time, the radical destruction of any context as the protocol of code" (Ibid, 180). Derrida concludes: "And this is the possibility on which I want to insist: the possibility of disengagement and citational graft which belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written [...] the possibility of its functioning being cut off, at a certain point, from its 'original' desire-to-say-what-one-means and from its participation in a saturable and constraining context. Every sign [...] can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illiminable" (Ibid, 185).

Searle responds directly to the passage quoted from Derrida by asserting that written utterances can be interpreted through the authorial intention which is maintained (Searle 1977, 202. See also Schulz 2001, 4 and 8). Nevertheless, if the intention of the author can only be reconstructed by the original context and the conventions of which it is constituted, how can we reconstitute the context? The problem, as pointed out by Derrida, is far from being resolved. Derrida arrives hence at the notion of dissemination. He takes up the idea of polysemy and deconstructs it (Derrida 1981, 262). If sense and referent of signifiers are not given, all fixed or even more or less stable meaning is impossible. All signs will constantly refer and defer to another sign and can never escape a state of pure intertextuality. Thus the texts have no seizable meaning and no interpretation can be validated.

Quentin Skinner addresses the issues raised by Derrida (Skinner 2001, 178-179. He refers to Derrida 1976, 6-73 and to Derrida 1978, 278-293). He points out that poststructuralist authors also tend to affirm

the validity of their arguments and complain that they are poorly understood.[12] He continues by saying that Derrida adopts also the position that the referential capacity of language is not entirely abolished, but that the author's intentions still cannot be reconstituted, in that one cannot say with certainty what it was that the author meant to say (Skinner 2001, 179). Skinner grants that assertions by the interpreter are hypothetical in character and always susceptible to revision in light of new information. For Skinner, however, meaning is nonetheless accessible, insofar as there is sufficient information. That does not mitigate the challenge posed by Derrida, who could then say that this information would equally have to be interpreted and would come up against the difficulty in establishing a referential signification.

Skinner's responses to Derrida are correct, but unsatisfactory. They do not show how a conventional context, that is not fundamentally different from a context that carries a code, can be reconstructed. By negating the possibility of a persistent conventional context, Derrida challenges the theoretical foundation of Skinners approach and thereby the approach as a whole.

Relevance theory and context

Even though all text may fit in a general context, this does not constitute the main referential system of the text. The main referential system is an active[13] construction, more or less voluntary or conditioned, resulting from selection of relevant elements in a general context. Thus, authors themselves constitute the reference system, given the fact that the authors are themselves receivers. The readers subsequently seek to reconstruct this system in order to get access to the meaning of the text. I base my argument on Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory.

Sperber and Wilson develop and deepen Paul Grice's ideal sketch of the communication process. For Grice, the communication process rests upon the principle of cooperation. He shows how communication can be realized in the absence of conventions or a code to express the intended message. Speaking of an utterance he says: "not merely must it have been 'uttered' with the intention of inducing a certain belief but also the utterer must have intended an 'audience' to recognize the intention behind the utterance" (Grice 1994, 25). Grice con-

cludes that cooperation is a principle of communication (Grice 1991, 307-309).[14] An utterance will thus be interpreted in accordance with its conformity to the principle of cooperation. A conclusion drawn simultaneously from the semantic content of the utterance and, in relation to it, from the assumption founded on the principle of cooperation is what Grice calls a *conversational implicature*. Levinson clearly defines this notion: "Implicatures are not semantic inferences, but rather inferences based on both semantic content of what has been said and some specific assumptions about the co-operative nature of ordinary verbal interaction" (Levinson 1983, 104). Therefore, Grice holds that in order to understand a speech act, the receiver needs to recognize the intended content and asserts that it can be recognized by inference processes. The question is how to arrive at the correct inferences, since different premises of the receiver can lead to different conclusions. If communication by inferences worked also on the basis of a code, it would be necessary for both the transmitter and the receiver to have exactly the same information available to them. This is not probable in the case of a complex utterance. We would have to explain, according to Sperber and Wilson, "how speaker and hearer can come to have not only a common language, but also common sets of premises, to which they apply identical inference rules in parallel ways" (Sperber/Wilson 1995, 15). In the case of the literary message, the temporal distance and the possible actualization of the utterance within different contexts would make an original utterance context, understood like a common set of information, impossible to reconstitute. To describe the principles and mechanisms by which possible inferences are selected, Sperber and Wilson's arguments are based on Paul Grice's principle of cooperation, albeit in a drastically reduced form. Their main thesis is that human thinking seeks the maximization of relevance of information. The information will always be integrated in a chosen context to obtain the largest effect with the smallest effort required to process the information (Sperber/Wilson 1987, 700).

Sperber and Wilson consider that communication does not directly influence the thought of the hearers, but rather their cognitive environment. The message is thus considered as an input into the cognitive environment and its effects can only partially be predicted (Ibid). What do they mean by cognitive environment? Different to mutual knowledge, which must be clearly defined, the cognitive environment is defined by Sperber and Wilson as a set of premises, of assumptions

that an individual is able to mentally represent and accept as true or probably true (Ibid, 699). The communication is not integrated in a clearly defined space of mutual knowledge, but in a cognitive environment where assumptions are mutually manifest. An assumption is mutually manifest when it is perceptible by the interlocutors or accessible by inference (Sperber/Wilson 1995, 39). The intention to modify the interlocutor's cognitive environment is what Sperber and Wilson call ostension. Communication, according to Sperber and Wilson, is always ostensive and inferential (Ibid, 63).

They describe the inference mechanism as a spontaneous, automatic and subconscious process where new information is integrated into the context of present information and produces new assumptions. The synthesis of old and new information is called contextual implications (Sperber/Wilson 1987, 702). Thus, the integrated information becomes assumptions which are different in force. This difference is measured in terms of contextual effects. Sperber and Wilson differentiate assumptions according to their relevance and explain why certain assumptions are more probable than others. They affirm that an assumption is relevant in a context only if it has a contextual effect on it. Then "an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in that context are large. […] an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in that context is small" (Ibid, 703). The interpretation of an utterance is directed by the presumption that the stimulus, that is to say the linguistic proposition, the gesture or other, was chosen to produce sufficient contextual effect, with small effort to process it. This makes up the principle of relevance: every act of ostensive communication conveys the assumption of its own optimal relevance. The utterance is relevant enough to be formulated and is the most germane when related to the capacity and the preferences of the interlocutor (Ibid, 704, also Sperber/Wilson 1995, 270). Sperber and Wilson assert that the principle of relevance is equally valid for written texts. The receivers can be specific individuals, or a defined group of individuals, but an utterance can also be directed at anyone who finds it relevant. Thus, transmitters communicate the presumption of relevance to everyone willing to pick it up (Ibid, 158).[15]

The problematic points I have raised, in referring to Derrida, are the absence of a concrete and immediate receiver, the loss of the initial utterance context and the absence of a common code. The code

is the set of conventions emanating from the context that determines fixed referents which are necessary for understanding. However, the principle of relevance is not based on a code and is not linked to a given and defined context.[16] Relevance theory proceeds from the fact that *the context is created by the process of interpretation*. Therefore, we can admit that the context is not determined in advance. Interpreters, assuming that the information is relevant (otherwise one would not look to interpret it), select for themselves a context that makes it become relevant. The interpreter therefore constitutes the meaning of an utterance by selecting a context from among the most accessible assumptions. These will allow her to confirm the relevance of the utterance and to draw conclusions. Those will have in the context the status of new assumptions.

Sperber and Wilson consider that the contexts are partially ordered in the sense that every context contains smaller contexts and is part of a bigger context. If there are many contexts or sub-contexts to reach, the effort of processing will be large and must accordingly be justified by contextual effects. The possible contexts are in principle infinite. However, the process of interpretation is limited by the principle of relevance. The interpretation is completed by attaining relevant meaning.

The utterances of a speaker, and even more so that of an author, are rarely simple pieces of factual information based on a descriptive language that would produce unique inferences. As Sperber and Wilson say: "utterances in which all the speaker wants to do is to inform the hearer of a simple fact are untypical of communication in general. Quite often, the speaker wants to communicate not a single atomic proposition, but a complex thought made up of many atomic thoughts, some of which are salient while others are not consciously spelled out in her mind. The speaker does not expect the hearer to entertain exactly the same complex thought. Rather, she intends him to entertain the propostion(s) most salient in her mind and *to construct around it (or them) a complex thought which merely bears some similarity to her own"* (Sperber/Wilson 1991, 541-542. Author's emphasis). Thus, in the case of complex thought, there is no little effort of inferring from the synthesis of the utterance and the most accessible context only. The interpreter will have to work through a number of sub-contexts in order to construct a complex thought.

Furthermore, Sperber and Wilson consider that every utterance of speakers or authors is an interpretative representation of their thought (Sperber/Wilson 1987, 707). In the case of texts, the reader can seek which amongst all the contextual implications of the received utterance are the ones the author meant to transmit. The thoughts that the reader will construct will then possibly resemble or be analogous to the author's in respect of the most relevant points (See also Reboul 1990, 45). The part that authors take in this process rests in the fact that they can furnish the text with signals and directives in order to construct the context. In reality, when reading, there is not one sole context, but a series of contexts that interact, are created, are being changed, are connected, are contained in larger contexts or divided into smaller ones. However, on the one hand the construction of contexts is to some degree directed and limited by the principle of relevance. On the other hand, it is likewise affected by the text itself, even if the author will not be able to control the effects the text produces on the reader.

Relevance theory and political thought

Relevance theory represents a complex model of interpretation processes that can also be applied to the interpretation of text. Nevertheless, it describes basically how interpretation always works, but it does not describe how different types of text or, since one can read the same text in a different manner, how different procedures of interpretation influence the results of this understanding. We must then turn to the specifics of the texts that express a political thought in order to answer the question if these types of texts demand a specific analytical approach. The special issue here is to determine what the specifics of this type of texts are within the scope of a historical approach.[17]

It appears that many types of texts, and particularly texts of political philosophy where the abstraction level is high, are deprived of a clearly determined and conventional referential situation. We have seen that relevance theory puts this problem into perspective, since it considers that the context is not given, but constructed by the interpreter, following directives, at least partially, given by the text. The nature of these directives depends on the type of text. Still, Sperber and Wilson describe the processes of interpretation as *automatic, spon-*

taneous and subconscious. This is true in the sense that one automatically seeks to give meaning to any utterance that appeals to us. But interpretation can also be a mindful and systematic endeavor. That is, the construction of a context can equally be an endeavor that *the interpreter conducts consciously*. The interpretation will notably be conducted by the specific questioning directed at the text.

Texts of political philosophy mostly are either argumentative in type or constructed around argumentative schemes and thus constructed in order to possess a maximum coherence.[18] Coherence is meant here as a textual criteria which is presupposed by the reader to identify internal referents guiding understanding. In this way the text of political philosophy can communicate the presumption of its own optimal relevance. That is to say that it communicates the presumption to be a text of political philosophy. Moreover, the author plays a particularly active role in the construction of the coherence.[19]

By taking over Sperber and Wilson's assertion that all utterance is an interpretative representation of the author's thought, I assert that the authors of texts of political philosophy constitute the meaning of those texts consciously in a coherent manner. It is a fact that those authors will be therein conditioned by their socio-cultural, linguistic, or 'intertextual' environment, basically by their cognitive environment. It is also a fact that the meanings of texts are not reducible to what may have been the intended meaning of the authors. However, that changes nothing of the active part they take in the constitution of a text's meaning. The text may be naturally placed in a general context, from which the principal issue of the text is constituted. In any case, what the author does is to express a complex thought that is made up of many ideas that is to say utterances of concepts endowed with referential nettings.

I thus consider that the procedure to give meaning to a proposition is not different to an interpretative procedure. The context or the sub-contexts that make up the referents of a proposition, and by doing so give it meaning, are not given, but rather selected by the author from the set of information available to her. Part of it can voluntarily have been sought to enlarge the amount of information available in respect of the author's aim. The referential system of a text is thus an autonomous construction, more or less voluntary or conditioned, created by selecting relevant elements of a general context. I said before that relevance theory proceeds from the fact that *the context is created*

by the process of interpretation. Now, if there is no essential difference between the interpreter-author and the interpreter-reader, *the context is created by the author in the process of writing*.[20] The referential system is constructed by the author and the reader subsequently looks to reconstruct this system in order to get access to the meaning of the text.

Using relevance to link intention and reception

The objective of the historians of ideas or of political thought is to establish historical meanings of ideas. They place them within the scope of the historical question. Therefore, they use texts, since they are the only means of accessing ideas, of which they seek to construct a historical actualization. This reconstruction task can only be partial for it is guided by the specific questioning of the researcher. For the researcher, the text thus appears inevitably as the result of a constitution of meanings. The attempt to access these meanings comes back to reconstitute them, that is to say, to actualize the constitution processes of the meanings.

The processes of constituting meaning by an author (to give sense) are basically not different to the processes of constituting meaning by the reader (interpretation). While expressing an idea, the author selects and even consciously seeks to create the context or sub-contexts made up by sets of information and assumptions that together constitute the referential netting of a proposition necessary to infer meaning. Within the scope of political ideas, the most immediate information and assumptions that the author can select and seek in order to express relevant ideas are in (large) part of the same kind. They are political or related ideas. These are relevant ideas in respect of the author's question and thus result in one way or another from the reception of texts.

Authors of texts of political philosophy utter complex thought that is made up of a large number of ideas. These ideas are propositions of concepts endowed with referential tissues. By inference from the combination of propositions and referents, historians seek to understand what the authors meant in writing. It is evident that historians can never attain the exact meanings constituted at the time of writing. They will always assert something that may legitimately be admitted as what the author meant. For that, historians have to reconstruct the

referents to which the propositions refer. If these referents are ideas, and since ideas are only accessible as propositions of other texts, they need to do a reception study. For these very practical reasons, I thus consider that an approach that includes reception is necessary in the history of political thought. It imposes itself by the very nature of the historians' work and the nature of their object of research.

In order to get access to the meaning of a proposition in a text, historians must first reconstitute what the proposition refers to. They try to constitute a (historical) context in which the proposition acquires a relevant (historical) meaning, the context being all the external referents of that proposition. Like any interpreter, a historian will first seek the context most accessible with which to link the proposition. More than likely, the first context will be determined by the interpretation of previous propositions. Therefore, the historian, as well as the interpreter, will first seek to constitute the internal coherence of the text. For instance, if a person says 'I am sick […] I am staying home', the hearer will first establish a link of causality between both utterances. The utterance 'I am staying home' spoken in reference to 'I am sick', will thus take the meaning of 'I cannot come (over)'. The hearer will therefore understand the speaker's intention to inform that he will not be there. If he/she then relates that conclusion to prior information, existing outside of the utterance, for example a plan to meet for dinner, the hearer will probably conclude that the speaker is unable to attend and that dinner reservations need to be cancelled. In the case of a complex thought, however, the referents are many, interwoven and, up to a point, interdependent. The proposition probably has a general referent, a reality or an object, which can be material or ideological. However, in the case of an idea or a thought, the general referent alone does not allow us to grasp the proposition's entire meaning. The interpretation leads in this case to a whole series of implicatures.

The referential netting of complex thought expressed by a text will more than likely be made up of other texts. The expression of an idea needs the previous reception of other ideas, since an idea does not emanate from nothing. This does not explain, however, how the constitution of a meaning to be expressed is concretely linked to previous reception. Nor does it show the process by which reception gives way to production and especially, how that process can be reconstructed. I will attempt to tackle this issue by going back to the reception process. The objective is to determine how an author has read a text, why she

read it the way she did, and in order to shed light on her thinking, the manner in which that reading was translated in her thoughts, as those expressed by the text. The reception process can be characterized by the hermeneutic approach of posing a question to the text. A text issues meanings which enable readers to answer *themselves* the very question that they, themselves, pose. Through this process, reception of meaning and constitution of meaning are linked, and cannot be dissociated. The approach of the reader/author is characterized by a degree of expectation, or, relying on Gadamer, by previous knowledge or opinion (Gadamer 1990, 270-273). Readers approach a text in general with a question which can be described to represent the pointed and brief expression of their expectation. However, meanings emanating from a text through reading can lead to new questions, just as they can refine, broaden, validate or contradict the assumptions with which one approached the text. Through this process, new meanings can emerge, thus allowing the formulation of new responses to a question which might no longer coincide exactly with the original question.

I apply this process to the logic of relevance theory focusing on the expression of an idea by an author. An author, who seeks to express a complex idea in writing, selects the contexts which lend relevance to the idea. The intention itself to express said idea is part of a general context, which can be regarded as the original context of the idea. In the framework of the expression of complex ideas, the process must generate the constitution of additional contexts. These contexts can be made up of assumptions, information or ideas received from other texts. They may be steady ideas or information stemming from conclusions of prior interpretations. Or, they may be the result of the reading or re-reading of a text, which took place after the intention to express a specific idea. For the most part, constructing a complex idea is not automatic, unconscious or spontaneous. It is in itself a complex process. Through this process, propositions, concepts and information conveyed by text, are themselves interpreted or reinterpreted in their relation with assumptions from the idea one is seeking to express. This, however, does not generate an infinite series of interpretations. Indeed, the propositions and concepts emanating from received texts are interpreted solely in reference to the original assumptions and within their particular general context. This is therefore a phenomenon of circular inference where the interpretation of the concepts and propositions from the received texts produces the conclusions which

are in fact the idea expressed. The proposition of the idea expressed in the text has therefore as referent the assumptions and concepts from the received texts. In the *question-and-answer process*, the original idea expresses itself by a question addressed to a text. In turn, the text supplies the elements needed to formulate the answer to that question.

Historical interpretation

For historians who approach a text, part of the process of constituting the meaning will be lost, unless it is explicitly outlined in the text itself. Historians can only apprehend the thought of an author insofar as that thought is expressed by the text. They can, however, aim to reconstruct the meaning of the propositions in the text. From there, they can attempt to reconstruct what the author intended to express with those propositions. Using the internal coherence of the text and the indications provided, a possible approach might then be to identify the texts in reference to which the propositions acquire a relevant meaning. By their questions, historians approach the text concentrating on its very nature as a thing from the past. Thus, they approach it as a document from the past, in terms of its difference from the present. This is the activity of historicizing (Thompson 1993, 262). For historians, the text conveys potentialities of historical meaning. The meaning they aim at is the meaning constituted by someone else in the past. Historians, who historically interpret the text, construct a historical referential system around the text. It is true to say that they were before and are at the same time ordinary readers. The obvious differentiation between the interpreting historian and the ordinary reader is not always pointed out. However, the apprehension of meaning is a very complex process. Interlinked strata of meaning are created, completed or corrected, before they are reduced in function to a specific question and presented as an analytical result. But the interlinking between the ordinary reading and the historical interpretation does not put the latter into perspective. Interpretation is itself progressive. The contexts and sub-contexts are constantly and progressively constructed in relation to the propositions and thus lead to conclusions. The historical interpretation goes through the conscious construction of historical contexts and the acquired conclusions are constantly confronted to the initial historical question.

I have argued that the combination of historical context and text allows the researcher to construct historical meaning by inference. But this context is not itself historical. It is constructed by the historians and is made up of propositions that are present for them, as is the analyzed text. What then allows us to assert the historicity of the context? It is the fact that historians construct a *closed system*. They seek to reconstitute the meaning of a text to a person from the past. They seek for example to reconstitute what an author may have meant by a text. In doing this they constitute historical meaning. They can only reconstruct the context that the authors themselves could have constituted as a referential system. Hence they create a context in respect of which the text acquires historical relevance and that therefore constitutes a historical referential system of the text. Historians thus seek to reconstruct a part of what could have been the author's cognitive environment. The reconstructed context will not have to be contextualized itself since the authors would have selected and (re-)interpreted the information and assumptions of the context only in respect of what they intended to utter. The process of giving meaning is a circular phenomenon, but not an infinite one. In other words, since proposition and referent, or context, are interactive, interdependent and can not be dissociated, they are historicized in the same process.[21] Historians reconstitute the meanings of a text for someone identifiable in time and, through inference processes, constitute historical meanings.

I shall try to illustrate my claims by briefly discussing elements of a noteworthy article by Charles Ramond on Spinoza's notion of sovereignty (Ramond 2001, 127-140). Ramond tackles Spinoza's notion of sovereignty in his *Tractatus Politicus* (1677) by discussing the problems of translating into French the terms *summa potestas, summae potestates, jus summae potestatis, potentia*, and *imperium*. Relying on internal, mostly grammatical logic he explains why he translates *summa potestas* and *summae potestates* in some cases as *le souverain*, the sovereign, and in other cases as *souveraineté*, sovereignty. He also shows that *imperium* can mean either state or sovereignty. Ramond's translations seem to be problematic. I do not intend to offer here an analysis of Spinoza's notion of sovereignty. However, the problem of translation within an analysis of political thought seems to illustrate quite well the questions at issue. The first obvious question that arises simply deals with the difference between the terms used. Spinoza's

frequent use of the plural *summae potestates*, for example, that would best translate as supreme authorities (and in French by *autorités*), already anticipates chap. VII, 14: Therefore, the fewer counsellors there are, and the more powerful they consequently are, the more the King is in danger that they would transfer the rule (*imperium*) to another person […] Moreover, if the whole authority has been transferred absolutely to one person, it can then be more easily transferred from one person to another (*Quo igitur consiliarii numero pauciores, et consequenter potentiores sunt, eo regi majus ab ipsi periculum est, ne imperium in alium transferant […] Huc accedit, si omnis potestas in unum absolute translata fuerit, quae tum longe facilius ex uno in alium transferri potest*). The quotation gives several insights into Spinoza's conceptions of sovereignty and power. However, these conceptions can hardly be understood if intra- and extra-textual referents are ignored. In any case, it would not make sense to translate *imperium* as sovereignty. This would mean that the counsellors of the King would transfer the Kings sovereignty to another. In fact, the sentence is a continuation of Spinoza's critique of an absolute monarchy that he carries out the most clearly in chap. VI, 4 and 5 of the *Tractatus Politicus*. This critique is embedded in a vast discussion of Hobbes. In the chapters 3 and 4 Spinoza relies so much on *his own interpretation* of Hobbes' arguments that it can be considered as a précis of Hobbes' ideas on sovereignty. Spinoza is discussing the relationship between *jus* and *potentia*, fear and peace, natural right and liberty, the law and the just, the will of all and the multitude. However, all the discussion of the supreme authority in Hobbes' terms leads to his fundamental critique when it comes to put that authority into execution. Spinoza actually says in a letter designed to be the preface of the *Tractatus* that he inquires in the sixth chapter "how a monarchy should be ordered, so as not to lapse into a tyranny" (Spinoza 1883, Editors preface). The question of whether Spinoza's interpretation of Hobbes seems to us correct or mistaken is, historically, not important at all. All that matters for our purposes is to identify the possible referents, in this case partly external, of the ideas that Spinoza expresses in order to infer their possible meaning. It is of course possible to choose other external referents within our cognitive environment, for example contemporary theories of democracy, and make sense of Spinoza's ideas. However, this would not be the historical analysis of what Spinoza may have meant. Turning to the use of *imperium*, it is noticeable that, especially when Ramond

chooses to translate the term as sovereignty, it is confronted with *potestas* within the context of the transfer, the delegation or usurpation of power. This becomes particularly clear in TP IV, 3 concerning the *imperium* of the ministers. In fact, the use of *imperium* refers to the problem of the powers of the magistrate and to the whole tradition of debate following Azo's quarrel with Lothair on the *merum imperium*. The quarrel has known various interpretations over the centuries, but was notably actualised by the most important theorists of (French) monarchy, Dumoulin, Bodin and Loyseau. Actually, Spinoza solves the problem by eluding it, while implicitly referring to it. Like Grotius (see van Gelderen 2002, 203), he avoids concepts like *summum imperium* or *maiestas* and of course neither would he use the papal concept of *plenitudo potestatis*. For Spinoza, *summa potestas* is sovereignty understood as the supreme authority of a commonwealth. *Imperium*, when used in the context of delegation (or usurpation) refers to the execution of that authority, the rule or the power to command. For Spinoza, the whole question of the well ordered state in opposition to the tyranny does not lie so much within the question of the *summa potestas* but within the *imperium*.

For a further illustration, I will briefly discuss a text passage in Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws* that has generated much debate over two centuries. In book XI, chap. 6, Montesquieu says: "It is possible that the law, which is at the same time clear-sighted and blind, might, in some cases, be too severe. But as we have observed, the national judges are only the mouth that pronounces the words of the law, mere inanimate beings, incapable of moderating either its force or rigour. That part, therefore, of the legislative body, which we have just now observed to be a necessary tribunal on another occasion, is also a necessary tribunal in this; it belongs to its supreme authority to moderate the law in favour of the law itself, in stating with less rigour." This idea of the judge being only the mouth of the law has been frequently discussed out of context or within the sole context of the book XI, leading, even most recently in the *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* (see Claus 2005, 419-451), to the conclusion that Montesquieu did not understand that the judge, especially in the English common law system, makes the law by interpreting it.[22] Consequentially, an essentialist conception of the separation of powers remains at times attributed to Montesquieu. It is true that the law-making activity of the judge is an important issue in present legal theory. Furthermore,

Montesquieu's conception of the interpreting judge would need a much more detailed study. However, this is not the main question Montesquieu was addressing here. First, Montesquieu discusses the cases where a part of the legislative body has to assume judicial competences. In the quoted passage Montesquieu is quite vague on the nature of the cases. Yet the exceptions have to be based on the interest of the defendant. Also, it is likely that an example of those cases would be an accusation of *crimen lesae maiestatis*, a subject on which he puts much emphasis in book XII. Second, the expression "as we have observed" refers to his description of the power to judge a few pages earlier. The sentence must be read within the context of the independence – not the complete separation – of the power to judge from the executive and the legislative powers and the nuance of this independence. The judges, however independent from those powers, are not therefore independent from the law. Several elements would indicate that Montesquieu is referring to Bodin's 'Method for the easy comprehension of history' (For example Bodin 1941, 160), especially because of a striking similarity of the expressions used. However, it is certain that the text passage is part of the thread drawn through the whole *Spirit of Laws* struggling with the judiciary competences of the king. It refers to a key issue of the constitutional debates in 16th and 17th century France and England. It raises the question whether the king is *supra aut infra legem*, above or under the law, in other words whether he is *legibus solutus*, not bound by the laws. Since Bodin, the question is linked increasingly to the legislative competences of the sovereign, but it would be artificial, even in Bodin, to detach them from its source that lies in the judiciary. Anyway, for Montesquieu the judiciary is definitely a core issue. The debate can be summarized by the two maxims that Montesquieu seizes: First he refers to the Ciceronian expression *magistratus est lex loquens* (*De legibus* 3.1.2). Second he refers to the Aristotelian expression of the judge being *dikaion empsychon or justum animatum* (*Nichomachean ethics* 1132a), the living Just. On one hand, those two maxims do refer to different traditions of debate around the jurisdictional supremacy of the emperor or the kings. On the other hand, they refer also to precise texts that were not only well known to Montesquieu, but were also highly relevant within his present issue. Concerning the first maxim, he must, for example, have been familiar with the debate between James I and Sir Edward Coke whether the king or the judge is the mouth of the law. This was also

an issue in France in times of the *Fronde*, also called the revolt of the judges. The second maxim is even more important. Within the *Corpus Juris Civilis* the maxim becomes *imperator est lex animata* (Nov. 105). In the French constitutional debate it will then be the king who is *lex animata*, or the living law. Accordingly, the expression is to be found in Dumoulin and Bodin. In England, James I puts himself in the tradition of Aquinas and Giles' of Rome reasoning on Aristotle's expression in his speech to parliament of 1607 to prove that the King is above the law. If we then read the quoted text passage from Montesquieu in relation to chapter 5 of book VI "In What Governments the Sovereign May Be Judge", it achieves a meaning that goes way beyond the sole problem of the law-interpreting judge. It is not the king but the judge who is the mouth of the law. The sovereign can not be judge, except in a despotic government. Furthermore, in reversing Aristotle's expression, Montesquieu states that no one can claim to be the living law and thus to be above the law. The judge is inanimate, meaning that he is only animated by the law. This reasoning takes part in a much broader concern of Montesquieu. It starts with book VI, it continues with his severe critique of the emperor Justinian, especially his administration of justice, and the inadequate reception of the Corpus Juris Civilis, and ends with his discussion of the jurisdiction of the Lords and the critique of the Abbé Dubos' thesis that the French monarchy was the heir of the Roman Empire. The reasoning then takes part in Montesquieu's broad attempt to confront every ideological justification of the royal justice. Precisely in this respect it is all-to coherent that Montesquieu relies on the English system to claim that, for the exceptional cases in which ordinary courts are not appropriate, it is part of the legislative that has to judge.

In choosing these examples, I do not seek to illustrate an utterly new approach. However, I sought to demonstrate that texts partially provide signals for the construction of sufficiently analogical referential nettings that allow the inference of relevant historical meaning. I also sought to show that this practice can be theoretically confirmed. The practice of research entails that the researcher's analysis will have a preferential character in respect of other possible meanings. Furthermore, the procedure to constitute sub-contexts involves undoing the netting of interlinked and interdependent referents, thus carving out privileged referents depending on the perspective of the researcher. Thus, a number of received texts are privileged in respect of the re-

searcher's perspective. The study then represents one amongst other possible historical inquiries. It is true that the historians' present interests cannot be ignored and in part dictate their purpose. However, the meanings that historians construct are privileged historical meanings in respect of other possible historical meanings. Since historians seek to constitute meanings of a text as they could have been for an individual or group in the past, the subject-matter they construct is intrinsically historical. Even if their question can be motivated by present interests, for example related to their academic context, it still remains that the specifically historical question generates a specifically historical approach. Historians construct meanings from propositions of the text and the meanings of the past are lost as meanings actually constituted in the past. However, the meanings that historians construct are limited by them to being meanings as they could have been constructed in the past. Interpreting Gadamer's concept differently, I would therefore consider that the fusion of horizons is nothing but historical practice, the fact of making things of the present a document of the past. The present horizon of the interpreting historian is dependant on past horizons, which generate her interest in past meanings, even if the past horizon only manifests itself in vestiges, in textual propositions in the present. The fusion is then simply the reconstruction of a past horizon within the present horizon, which results in the historical horizon.

The fact that the historical interpretation cannot be detached from the historian's present context, however, has generated conclusions concerning the conception of the history of political thought which amount to denying the specific character of historical analysis. Yet the central issue here is more precisely the assertion of the specific historical character of a contextualist approach. Thus, in order to help to clarify my position, I must approach these positions summarily. I will illustrate these using the extreme anti-contextualist conception of Yves Charles Zarka (Zarka 2001, 31-38). Zarka conceives the history of political thought as a philosophical analysis of texts of political philosophy in simply respecting, as he formulates, criteria of historical exactitude. Zarka emphasizes the importance of the nature of the analyzed text. For him, to apply a purely historical interpretation to a philosophical text, or other, would deny its specific character.

Essentially, historical texts do not exist. There are diplomatic texts, newspaper articles, masterworks of literature, major philosophical

texts, etc. that can be analyzed historically. It is not the specific character of a text that demands a historical approach or not. Criteria of historical exactitude, however, are simply the results of a historical construction that are considered valid. Thus, a philosophical interpretation does not become a historical interpretation only by reference to criteria of historical exactitude, for example by avoiding anachronisms. Certainly, nothing prevents us from seeking a historical meaning of a text and to confront it with a meaning constructed in reference to a present issue. This assumes, however, that there are three distinct approaches: a historical approach, a distinct analytical approach that is dependant on the issue which directs the non-historical question and finally, a comparative approach. In reality, Zarka's approach is not historical. Its results may be valid, relevant or fruitful. They simply will not be the result of a historical study.

Conclusion

My aim has been to show how to constitute the historical meaning of a text through its reference to concepts and ideas received from other texts. This participates in establishing what an author may have meant by the text. By applying the findings of relevance theory, I emphasize the active and directing part the author plays in the constitution of the meaning of the text. The authors, who seek to express an idea, select and constitute contexts through which the concepts they use acquire relevance. Those contexts manifest themselves as multiple referential sets interacting with one another. Within the scope of texts of political philosophy those referential sets are, partially at least, constituted by utterances from other texts to which authors give meaning in reference to the idea they aim to express. This is an act of reception that is included within a process of constitution of meaning.

Historians who are seeking to reconstitute the intended authorial meaning of a text have to select concepts and propositions from the information that could have been at the author's disposal to reconstitute the possible referential sets of the text. Therefore, they are reconstituting the process of constitution of meaning. They place the text in a general historical context, but equally in the context of their specific question. They seek to identify the signals that the text sends out by reconstructing the internal textual coherence through the directives

within the text in order to establish the external referents of the text. It is true that the meaning of a text surpasses its linguistic content, since the text is not only a set of concepts, but also a set of ideas that are expressed and thus are performative. However, in the effective research practice, meaning can only be inferred from the text. Insofar as the established referents are concepts and propositions that can be attached to other texts, the historian must assume that the utterances are the expressed conclusions of the interpretation of propositions and concepts. Those utterances are equally the expression of what the author may have meant to utter.

Thus, historians must seek to reconstitute the information, assumptions and concepts at the author's disposal as completely as possible, but only if they are relevant for the text. Historians can seek to establish the contexts likely to ensure the relevance of the utterances. First, authors themselves select the most accessible contexts by which their ideas achieve maximum relevance. Second, this selection is partially conscious and voluntary. Therefore, historians can define, following the principle of relevance, the most accessible reference texts, not only within written documents contemporary to the author, but also within works that the author must have considered 'classical'. They finally must establish if those reference texts are part of a tradition or movement of thought.

Historians address a specific question to the text that guides their study. Therefore, their analysis can only be selective and partial. A set of meanings is thus privileged in respect of other possible meanings, even if the affirmative presentation of the results does not account for its selective character. Only the confrontation with other studies, whether historical or not, constitutes the achievements of the research. Still, the history of ideas in continental Europe is mainly directed to a social history of ideas. What then is the relevancy of an approach that insists on the individual interpreter and author? Is the importance of a work not measured by its social impact at a given moment in time? Since reception and application cannot be dissociated, the question of the social impact of given works gives rise to the question of what thoughts, convictions and ideas a group of individuals shared through the reception of those works. However, any study concerned with thought, ideas and convictions can only approach them through texts. Practical analysis will entail different methodical tools. Yet, the theoretical foundations I emphasized remain the same whether one is

concerned with pamphlets, press articles or philosophical texts, and even if the type of texts or the corpus differs.

An approach that questions the intended meaning of a given text and its interaction with other texts seems indispensable, insofar as it is not exclusive. Clearly, certain works, notably works of political philosophy, are known to have become particularly important within their context of creation or through their reception in a posterior context. For example, this is the case through print run or other indicators. The aim of reconstructing what an author may have meant by a work implies recreating what the work could possibly have meant to contemporary readers. If, however, historians can rely on texts from individual contemporary or posterior readers that treat that original work, they have to reconstruct the intended meaning of the readers' texts. Furthermore, I sought to show that thought expressed by a text is not constituted only in reference to social realities, but also in relation to other thought or texts. Movements of thought can not be seized without the study of the interaction of texts. In this regard contextualists cannot ignore reception, neither theoretically nor in historical practice.

NOTES

1. I am most grateful to Quentin Skinner and Alexis Keller for their helpful advice and thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this article.

2. In opposition to hard linguistic contextualism (Pocock).The fundamental dissensions between Pocock and Skinner are often overlooked in continental Europe. (For an analytical and critical compendium of Pocock's and Skinner's approaches see: Bevir 1992, 276-298. See also Bevir 2002, 159-208). For J.G.A. Pocock, given languages, or a whole set of possible linguistic contexts paradigmatically prescribe what an author can say and how she can say it, and hence give her the intentions she can have. In opposition to Pocock, I argue that an author's intentions are certainly conditioned, but are therefore not determined by historically given languages. Furthermore, historians can only examine the role, formation and interaction of languages within a given epoch by texts. The unit of analysis can only be the text. To show how it is shaped by and shape languages would lead again to a 'Skinnerian' approach (See Pocock 1971, 5. See also Pocock 1964, 183-202, in particular 194, and Pocock 1985, 4-5).

3. I consider Derrida's criticism to be particularly powerful and use it exemplarily. The critics of the recovery of authorial intentions and/or contextualism are to numerous to be fully discussed (On the 'intentional fallacy' as used by New Critics: Wimsatt/Beardsley, 1954, 3-18. For an answer to New Critics see for example Bevir 2000, 385-403 and Skinner 1988b, 68-78. For the "impossibility" of methodological contextualism Preston King is most interesting. For example: King 2000, 213-227). For the debate between Searle and Derrida, see below.

4. The works of Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, F. R. Ankersmit and John Toews for example, hold much of value for the historians of ideas, especially LaCapra's thoughts on context and his claims on methodological openness and theoretical awareness. More generally, the insights of Ricoeur and Foucault remain fundamental and Gadamer deserves new consideration.

5. To give only one other of countless possible examples, Quentin Skinner emphasizes in the preface to his work 'The Foundations of Modern Political Thought', and as one main result of applying his methodology, the extent to which the political theorists of renaissance Italy were influenced by stoic values and beliefs (Skinner 1978, I, xiv). But Quentin Skinner is also highly skeptical about the explanatory way in which the concept of influence is often used and accordingly points out the danger of misleading explanations (Skinner 1969, 24-27. This article has been reedited with others from Quentin Skinner's theoretical writings by Tully 1988a).

6. In this regard I agree with the fact that interpreters recognize meanings as present in the text, "whether or not the author intended to put them there." However, I have strong reservations about Passmore's conclusion, which Skinner points out, that in-

tentionalist interpretation seeks to arrive at an understanding of past texts and their writers in a sense in which they did not understand themselves (Skinner 2001, 181-182). Passmore's formulation is too easily linked to Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's aim to understand an author better than he did himself (See Schleiermacher 1995, 56. Dilthey 1990, V, 331). Passmore's phrase has, in my opinion, the awkward but frequent consequence to induce interpreters to assertions like: one author misread, misappropriated or misapplied another author.

7. At this stage there is no need to distinguish between linguistic, social or other context.

8. Quentin Skinner rightly distinguishes 'linguistic meaning' and 'intended meaning' (Skinner 2001, 182). This distinction though is not fundamental. The 'intended meaning' is always linked with the 'linguistic meaning' since the only way to get access to the 'intended meaning' is to infer it from the 'linguistic meaning'.

9. See an overview on reception theory in Grimm 1977, especially 10-31. See also Jauss 1982. The produced effect and its reception constitute the two distinct but interactive elements of what the Constance School calls the aesthetic of reception. Thus the theory of the 'produced effect' studies how the text releases a potential of effects whose structures give the impulse and up to a certain point control the reception processes (Iser 1985, 5. Also Iser 1976, x. More generally Iser 1970). Wolfgang Iser bases his theories on the work of Austin and Searle. However, for Iser, the conventional situation that guarantees understanding in the course of spoken communication is not given in the case of literary communication. Thus, it is the readers who must construct the context on the base of the indications given to them by the text. Iser offers an important lead in arguing that it is the reader who constitutes such a context. Nevertheless, he fails to theoretically seize the mechanisms by which the reader can discover the underlying code to the text or by which to constitute the context. Wolfgang Iser also totally and artificially ignores the part of the author in the constitution of the indications or textual data. (See Schulz 2001, 9. Schulz is concerned with possible achievements of the relevance theory in literature)

10. I share Thompson's conception. However, the way he analyses the conception of history of the Constance School is not quite correct. (Thompson 1993, 261). Jauss claims that the interpreting historian shall be aware of his position as a reader, since only the consciousness of the self permits recognition of the otherness. He seeks in so doing to overcome 'traditionalism' in history, which is a reference to classical historicism. (Jauss 1994, 311).

11. Skinner's approach is fundamentally opposed to that of Jauss and Iser. It is true, however, that they share a number of common elements in respect of their first objectives, their theoretical foundation and even certain methodological conclusions, but their respective methodological requirements forbid any reconciliation. However, even

if their theoretical and methodological arguments justify their choices, the choice to approach the text from one point of view rather than another ultimately depends on the interests of and the questions asked by the researcher. As Reinhart Koselleck says, scientific research is in a way like a look trough the lens of a camera (Koselleck 2002, 33).

12. Derrida states that Searle has misunderstood him (Skinner 2001, 177-178).

13. The problem of actual or assumed autonomous agency is not of fundamental importance in this regard.

14. Grice analyzes cooperation as involving the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner.

15. Sperber and Wilson want to show how communication and the interpretation of (complex) utterances work. Of course they use simple instances of face to face conversation to exemplify their theory, but their concern is clearly complex communication, expandable to written communication.

16. Sperber and Wilson are well aware of the fact that part (for them only the smallest part) of verbal communication is working on the base of a code, through encoding and decoding. However, they consider that decoding is not part of the process of understanding, but that it provides the main input to the process of understanding. Sperber and Wilson assert that the intended content of an utterance is seldom completely given by linguistic elements. The receiver of an utterance enriches it before interpreting it. He assigns referents or, if necessary, eliminates ambiguities. It is only then, after having in a way completed the utterance that interpretation starts by inference from the completed utterance. According to Sperber and Wilson, the code is thus nothing more than a common language.

17. Another question is that of the difference between fictional and non-fictional text. It raises the problems of the specificity of fiction, of the relationship between imagination and fiction and the most difficult question of the aesthetic function of a text. This article is not the place to address those questions. Therefore, I choose here to distinguish ideally between descriptive, narrative and argumentative texts or schemes within the text. I do not call the specificity of literature into question and consider it to be in many respects fundamental. However, I rather suggest that the distinction between literary works and works of political philosophy does not have to be absolute (In this context see Iser 1976, Searle 1979, Sutrop 2000. For literature and relevance theory, see for example Reboul 1990. Quentin Skinner also points out the literary character of early modern works of political philosophy: Skinner 1996, 14-15).

18. Beaugrande and Dressler consider that text is a communicative act and can be characterized by textual criteria. These criteria are cohesion, coherence, acceptability, situationality and intertexuality (Beaugrande/Dressler 1981. See also Beaugrande 1984). Coherence is made up by the internal coherence, for example causal or temporal coherence, identifiable references and all that makes the authorial intention emerge, for example argumentative schemes.

19. This doesn't have to apply to a literary text. Incoherence can be a poetical effect, but could hence at the same time be an indication that gives away the intention of the author, for example, to break with dominant aesthetic conventions. I do not exclude literary schemes, conventions or effects by stressing the argumentative character of the philosophical text. Quentin Skinner, it is true to say, attacks vehemently the 'myth of coherence' (Skinner 1988a, 38-43). Joining his criticism, I do not mean that there can be no contradiction between ideas within a text, and all the less within an entire opus. However, as textual criteria, one can hardly imagine a philosopher who completely sets coherence aside to develop an idea.

20. This standpoint is also corroborated philosophically by one principal conclusion which Gadamer arrives at trough his reflection on hermeneutics. For Gadamer, application is an inherent part of the hermeneutic process. Thus, for him, the hermeneutical process is characterized by the internal mergence of understanding, explanatory interpretation and application (Gadamer1990, 313). Within the hermeneutic process, so understood, there is no need to differentiate between author and reader.

21. What Preston King calls methodological contextualism is thus not an impossibility (King 2000, 213-221). If historians can only make sense of a text by placing it in an historical context, this context can only be considered as historical if it is historicized. This means placing the text in a historical context. This is, according to Preston King an infinite undertaking. I have sought to show above that this is not the case.

22. This is not the place to show that Montesquieu did perfectly well understand the English judicial system. For this, see for example Pensée 1963.

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