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THE POINT OF INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Quentin Skinner (2002): Visions of Politics, Vol. 1: Regarding Method. Cambridge: CUP.

As Skinner informs his readers in the general preface to all three volumes of *Visions of Politics*, they are linked together by both theory and practice. In the philosophical and methodological Volume 1, he preaches the virtues of a particular approach. In volumes 2 and 3 he attempts to practice what he preaches. My task here is to review the first of these three volumes. Had I been asked to review all three, I would have declined, that is, I would have practiced what I have myself preached: if you have nothing to say it is better to remain silent. I am not an expert of Renaissance political philosophy, nor am I acquainted with the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, the themes of volumes 2 and 3 respectively. The idea of method, however, presupposes that it can be applied to many subject matters. Thus I will use this review as an opportunity to reflect on my own intellectual historical practice and as an occasion to re-think the approach I myself have recently preached (cf. Hyrkkänen 2002). I will note at the outset that my attitude towards theory is instrumental. A theory has to work in practice. From this it follows that I take theory seriously, and, accordingly, I place a great deal of value on theoretical reflection.

In the introduction, Skinner says that he has written the methodological and theoretical chapters of the volume under review “as a practicing historian”, urging, however, his practically minded fellow historians to listen to some of the most powerful voices in recent philosophy, which question the view that there are any indisputable facts to be acquired. In chapter 2 he considers the still familiar view that historians should first assemble all the facts about a given problem and recount them as objectively as possible. One of the most visible and aggressive proponents of this approach has been Sir Geoffrey Elton. Elton has in fact disparaged the numerous intellectual operations required by what has been deemed “good historical practice”. Skinner reminds us in that it is not the sole task of the historian to tell what *Quellen* wish to say. Or, as Reinhart Koselleck (Koselleck 1979, 206) once aptly formulated, *Quellen* forbid us to say what we please, yet they do not tell us what we can say. History should not be written, as R.G. Collingwood reminded us, “by copying out the testimony of the best sources, but by coming to your own conclusions” (Collingwood 1973, 260). Here, it is helpful to remember that the word *fact* is derived from the Latin *factum*, or something that is made. Similarly, the German concept *Tatsache* means *eine getane Sache*, a thing that is made or done, i.e. a thing made or done by the historian her/himself.

Skinner’s message seems to be that a good historian must also be a moderate constructionist. But in chapter 3 Skinner highlights that historians should also be moderate relativists. In order to be able to understand the beliefs of alien cultures or earlier societies, historians must be trained to avoid considering the truth of the beliefs under study. To assess the universal rationality of beliefs “is fatal to good historical practice” (p. 2), or at the very least strikes the historian “as strange” (p. 53). A clear case in point is the suggestion that we should read the classical texts as if they were written by our contemporaries, that it should be our task to examine what they have to tell us about perennial issues. This view is the target of chapter 4, the much abbreviated and extensively revised version of the now classical article “Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas”, published in 1969. The article has effectively questioned and discredited the efforts to search for and consider the perennial relevance of past thinkers. We can safely say that these efforts now belong to the history of intellectual history.

Drawing on the philosophies of language of W.V.O. Quine, Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, John Searle and H.P. Grice, Skinner advises historians to investigate the actual uses as opposed to the meanings of words and terms within various languages. Of particular value for Skinner are the speech act theories developed by Austin and Searle. They have persuaded us to see that “we are always doing something as well as saying something” (p. 2). The merits of the philosophies of language exploited by Skinner for his own purposes lie in their holism. Skinner summarises the practical consequences of the holistic view as follows: “I seek to elucidate concepts not by focusing on the supposed ‘meanings’ of the terms we use to express them, but rather by asking what can be done with them and by examining their relationship to each other and to broader networks of beliefs. I assume in turn that the question of what is rational to believe depends on in large measure on the nature of our other beliefs. I attempt to interpret specific beliefs by placing them in the context of other beliefs, to interpret systems of belief by placing them in wider intellectual frameworks, and to understand those broader frameworks by viewing them in the light of the *longue durée*” (pp. 4-5).

Skinner illustrates, particularly in chapters 5 and 6, and partially in chapters 3, 4 and 7, how this programme is carried out. The core of Skinner’s argument is that if we want to practice intellectual history “in a genuinely historical spirit”, we must “situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts as enable us to make sense of what their authors were doing in writing them”. For Skinner, the philosophies of language serve as a legitimation and justification of “the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry”. By using this “technique” an historian can hope to grasp the concepts of past thinkers, “to follow their distinctions, to appreciate their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way” (p. 3).

One way of addressing the relationship between thought and action, or more specifically of understanding how understanding thought can help us to understand action, is to consider the rhetorical aspects of writing and speech, or the rhetorical techniques “concerned with exploiting the power of words to underpin or undermine the construction of our social world” (p. 5). In the concluding chapters, 8, 9 and 10, Skinner demonstrates the dependence of social action upon the normative descriptions available to historical

agents for legitimating their behaviour, presents some rhetorical strategies of how re-descriptions of the social world simultaneously re-evaluate it, and investigates in greater detail how these ideological tasks are performed by means of rhetorical techniques.

The chapters of the book summarised above are a juxtaposition of the intellectual history (or autobiography) of the intellectual historian Skinner and an updated version of his methodological views. Here, Skinner reveals his willingness and ability to use criticism as an occasion for discussing and clarifying his own work. He has worked hard at developing, i.e. more or less extensively revising, sometimes extending and at times abbreviating, his earlier texts. An alternative approach might have been to deliver the updated version, that is, to give a compact and systematic presentation of the philosophical foundations and the methodological insights derived from them. In this way, the methodological precepts might have been more understandable. For a reader acquainted with Skinner's career as a theorist of intellectual history it is hard to resist the temptation to compare the articles with the original texts. Initially, I attempted to do just that, although I came to the conclusion that it was best to avoid the temptation. It is the updated version of Skinner's methodological approach which merits evaluation. It would still be useful to trace the evolution of Skinner's views, not so much in order to illustrate and complain about the way in which Skinner constantly alters his views (he has had good reason for doing so) but instead to learn how the dialogue between theory and practice can work in a fruitful way. Skinner has convincingly illustrated how the stimulus provided by philosophers may turn "the working historian into a thinking historian" (Fogel and Elton 1983, 1).

The meaning of the texts Skinner wants to recover is the meaning in terms of an answer to the question of "what does a writer mean by what he or she says in a given text" (p. 93) in contrast to other meanings of the concept of meaning, that is, as answers to the questions of "what do the words mean, or what do certain specific words or sentences mean, in a given text" and "what does this text mean to me" (pp. 91-92). Only in the first sense of the meaning is it necessary, Skinner contends, to attempt to recover the intentions of the writer. These are so-called illocutionary intentions, and understanding them would be the equivalent of understanding the illocutionary

acts performed by the authors, such as promising, warning, entreating, informing and so on (pp. 98-99). Skinner's central contention is that in the case of writers' illocutionary intentions, that is "what they may have intended *in* writing in a certain way", their recovery requires "a separate form of study". To be able to characterise a work in terms of its intended illocutionary force is "equivalent to understanding what a writer may have *meant* by writing in that particular way" (pp. 99-100, Skinner's italics).

The point of emphasising the distinction of what historical agents were doing with their words, terms and concepts in contrast to what they themselves meant is to remind us of the "doing in" aspect as an indispensable element of good practice. The distinction does not, however, mean that understanding the meanings of the words, terms and concepts of texts should be neglected. Consider e.g. the much quoted example originally put forward by P.F. Strawson. A policeman sees a skater on a pond and says: "The ice over there is very thin". In order to understand this episode we need to know not only the meaning of the words but also what the policeman was doing in saying what he said. To understand that he was warning the skater presupposes the understanding of the meaning of the words, too. But to understand the meanings of the words alone can be very misleading. The consideration of the "doing in" aspect in the context of prevailing conventions saves us, for instance, from making false or inanely literal interpretations of ironical and satirical texts. In his *Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, Daniel Defoe clearly demands that religious dissent should be ranked among capital offences. But his illocutionary intention is that of ridiculing intolerance. (cf. pp. 80, 104-107, 112 and 133-134)

The recovery of intentions is possible if we "focus not merely on the particular text in which we are interested but on the prevailing conventions governing the treatment of the issues or themes with which the text is concerned". Because writers are normally engaged in an "intended act of communication", it follows that "whatever intentions a writer may have, they must be conventional in the strong sense that they must be recognisable as intentions to uphold some particular position in argument, to contribute to the treatment of some particular topic, and so on" (pp. 101-102). Understanding intentions also presupposes seeing them in the context of their con-

ceptual relation with beliefs. Thus the “intentional” chapters 5 and 6 should be read in connection with chapters 3 and 7, in which Skinner offers his useful precepts for the description and explanation of beliefs (pp. 40-56, and 140-142). What is rational in one culture is not rational in another, and in order to grasp the specific rationality the historian has to consider the specific beliefs of the culture in question. Understanding them in turn presupposes an understanding of the conceptual relations of the beliefs, or the consideration of the specific networks of beliefs of the people under study. Only in this way is it possible to detect deviations from the specific rationality of a culture and start to question the reasons for the appearance of dissident views. To insist on the need to recover the conceptual relation between beliefs and intentions is reminiscent of Collingwood’s logically analogical demand for the identification of the conceptual relation between a question and its presuppositions. Skinner reads the texts as expressions of intentions, and Collingwood as answers to questions. For Skinner, the Collingwoodian presuppositions of questions are beliefs (cf. pp. 115-116).

I doubt very seriously that anyone wants to question this moderate intentionalism, especially as Skinner explicitly notes that a given work may indeed have meanings which its author could not have intended. He is merely stressing that “*among* the interpreter’s task must be the recovery of author’s intentions *in* writing what he or she wrote”. Nor is he claiming that we should be prepared to accept whatever statements the authors make about their own intentions (p. 101, Skinner’s italics, see also pp. 110-111). Skinner does not deny the worth of the study of texts and their reception, but at the same time he also does not deny the possibility of considering the intentional activity of human beings with the help of their texts. Skinner is, however, not supposing that the meanings of texts could or should be identified with the intentions of their authors (pp. 113-114). Nor should we think that uncovering intentions presupposes certitude. Take an example delivered by Jacques Derrida, a fragment found among Nietzsche’s manuscripts, which reads “I have forgotten my umbrella”. It is very unlikely that we will ever be able to know for sure what Nietzsche may have intended to say with these words (p. 121). Uncertainty in uncertain sciences such as history simply must be accepted, but it is untenable to infer from this una-

voidable uncertainty that the recovery of intentions is altogether impossible. If this were the case, it would also follow “that we can never hope to establish that life is not a dream”. The moral here is that the sceptic is simply “insisting on too stringent an account of what it means to have reasons for our beliefs” (pp. 121-122).

In the light of the way in which Skinner emphasises the conceptual relations between beliefs and intentions, it seems strange that he so heavily stresses the difference between motives and intentions (pp. 135-138, see also pp. 97-99) – that he thinks a sharp line needs to be drawn between motives and intentions in action, that it is intentions in this sense, not motives, that we need to recover if we are to decode the meaning of social actions. Skinner describes the distinction as follows. To know about intentions is “to know what speech acts [writers] may have been performing in writing what they wrote”, but to know about motives “is to know what prompted those particular speech acts” (p. 96). Thus to speak of a writer’s motives “seems invariably to speak of a condition to, and contingently connected with, the appearance of their works”, that is, in the case of motives we seem “to be alluding to a contingent antecedent condition of the appearance of the work”. In the case of intentions, we seem “to be alluding to a feature of the work itself”, or more specifically, we seem “to be characterising it in terms of its embodiment of a particular aim or intention”. In some sense, the intentions seem to be somehow “inside”, and the motives “outside” their works (pp. 98-99).

On the basis of this distinction Skinner concludes that motives can function as causes, but there can also be non-causal explanations of action. An illocutionary re-description will explain the point of a social action, and grasping the point means removing the inherent puzzlement, which in turn means providing an explanation. To supply this re-descriptive form of explanation is to supply something other than a causal explanation. The attempt to uncover what the policeman meant in saying that “the ice over there is very thin”, i.e. understanding not just what his utterance meant, “but what his act of issuing that utterance meant in the circumstances”, is supplied by decoding the conventions governing the illocutionary force attached to the utterance. This is not a causal explanation because the explanation requires that we focus on a feature of the policeman’s action, “not on an independently specifiable condition in the way

that causal explanation requires". What Skinner urges us to do is that before asking about someone's motives, or – as he adds ironically – "any deeper causes of their behaviour", it is appropriate to ask whether the performance of their action itself bears any conventional element of illocutionary meaning or force (pp.137-38). The point seems to be that if the distinction between motives and intentions (and between them and reasons and purposes as well) is not made, an important, even necessary stage in the process of explanation is elided. Skinner proceeds by admitting that causal explanations are also possible, even necessary. After decoding the intentions, the interpreter might enter the next stage: that of providing a causal explanation in terms of motives, and yet a further stage might "be to provide an explanation in terms of the grounds for the agent's possession of just those motives" (p. 139).

I agree with Skinner that it is indeed necessary to recover the illocutionary meanings of utterances. By applying the "naturalist" theory of causation, he has succeeded in showing that there are non-causal explanations of actions. But he has perhaps succeeded in aim at an excessively high price. His adoption of the "naturalist" theory of causation forces him to accept the ontological commitments of this theory. What actually troubles me is why, in the realm of thought, it should be reasonable to draw such a sharp line between contingent and non-contingent dimensions of thought, or actually, if we re-describe the distinction of motives and intentions in terms of their contingency grade, I must wonder if such a distinction is even possible.

As intellectual history is concerned with the realm of thought, it is reasonable to see the dimensions of thought as holistically internally or logically connected as possible. Explanations, at least in intellectual history, should be (in the "naturalist" sense of the concept of cause) as "non-causal" as possible. If an explanation is left on a non-conceptual level, it remains incomplete. A satisfactory explanation has been reached when we have traced all conceptual relations. Motives would also belong to this "total" network of conceptions, and as such would remain within the reach of our holistic view. Elsewhere Skinner seems to admit the conceptual relation between intentions, beliefs and motives. Not only do intentions depend on beliefs, but they are "always closely connected with our motives", too. This connection has significant explanatory value in that it "pro-

vides a vital means of corroborating any hypothesis to the effect that a speaker or writer may have intended a certain utterance to bear a particular illocutionary force" (p. 119). I am not urging intellectual historians to search for the correct definitions of intention, motive or belief. I merely think it useful to construct a working conceptual relation between these dimensions of thought, a combination that facilitates our arrival at valid interpretations of thought, and accordingly, also of action.

I am also slightly dissatisfied with Skinner's treatment of the influence model (pp. 74-76). It seems that he has not yet uncovered a tenable means of treating the model from a satisfactory non-causal (causal in the "naturalist" sense) perspective. First he stressed the impossibility of making the model work (Skinner 1966, 203-215), then he stressed that the concept of influence is "extremely elusive (if it is to be distinguished from a cause)", albeit not completely devoid of explanatory force (Skinner 1969, 25). In the updated version the remark on the elusiveness and the allusion to causality has been deleted, and his criticism has now been diminished to the conclusion that he does not suggest "that the concept of influence is devoid of explanatory force". In the footnote (p. 75, n. 106), Skinner even admits that not only is the concept of influence capable of being fruitfully used but that he also sometimes uses it himself (as he indeed does and has done). Now the requirements, which have to be met if the model is to be used, can be read as recommendations for the fruitful use of the influence model. To maintain that a given writer B has been influenced by an earlier writer A the following three conditions must be met: 1) that B is known to have studied A's work, 2) that B could not have found the relevant doctrine in the work of any other writer than A, and 3) that B could not have arrived at the relevant doctrines independently (for a more sophisticated treatment of conditions for influence, see Hermerén 1975, 156-262).

Whether or not a satisfactory explanation can be reached in this way, however, remains questionable. The mere identification of an influence is not yet an explanation of thought. The fact that somebody has adopted an influence must also be explained. Although adopting influence is in itself an indisputable fact, it is still necessary to decide why somebody should have been influenced by somebody

else (or something). Adopting influence entails the reflection on alternatives, in other words thought. Invoking influence as an explanation of thought means ignoring thought, the fact that choices are made. One way to proceed would be to view an adopted influence as an answer to a question, and this in turn leads to the consideration of the presuppositions of the question, that is, beliefs. This in turn means that the explanation has to include the interpretation of the conceptual relation of intentions and beliefs in order for the interpreter himself to be able to decide why one influence has been adopted over many other possible influences. In other words, the process of influence is more or less determined by thought, or more or less dependent on the conceptual network of both beliefs and intentions. As is the case with motives, it is useful in practice to treat influence not as a cause (in the “naturalist” sense), but as an alternative that is chosen more or less consciously. Here, as elsewhere, an explanation should be as “non-causal” or conceptual as possible.

Apart from the distinction between motives and intentions, I think Skinner has succeeded very well in justifying the need to study thought. Skinner’s discussion of the rhetorical techniques of how the power of words is exploited in order to underpin or undermine the construction of the social world (chapters 8, 9 and 10) is a further justification of the need to take thought seriously. Skinner shows (pp. 147-157), among other things, that referring to professed ideals helps us to understand behaviour, even in cases where historical agents do not believe in any of their professed principles. Skinner illustrates his recommendation with the example provided by Max Weber. Entrepreneurs in early-modern Europe either profited or expected to profit from their large-scale commercial undertakings, but in the light of the social and religious standards of their age or culture their conduct was liable to appear morally and even legally dubious. In this hostile atmosphere, the entrepreneurs tried to describe their behaviour in such a way as to override the widespread accusation that they were behaving avariciously and dishonestly. The task the entrepreneurs were faced with was a hard and rhetorical one, the same task faced by all innovative ideologists: “Their goal is to legitimise questionable forms of social behaviour. Their aim must therefore be to show that a number of favourable terms can somehow be applied to their seemingly questionable actions” (p. 149).

Skinner elucidates numerous rhetorical tactics and strategies of how to apply a prevailing moral vocabulary to legitimise a questionable way of life. The most significant of them seems to consist of “manipulating the criteria for applying an existing set of commendatory terms”. The aim is to insist that in spite of contrary appearances, strategically important favourable terms “can be applied as apt descriptions” of an apparently questionable behaviour (p. 153). So e.g. the meaning of the word *religious* soon became stretched and confused, denoting interest in punctuality and exactitude in order to be recognised and commended as a genuinely *religious* form of commitment. So a British professor might say that “I attend my departmental meetings religiously” (p. 167). This might apply to their everyday life, too. *Harrap’s Easy English Dictionary* – which, as the editor P.H. Collin assures the users in the preface, aims “to list the most commonly used English words and phrases with simple definitions and examples of usage” – defines *religiously* as “regularly/at a fixed time of day”, with the example as promised: “He religiously washes his car every Saturday morning”.

The crucial conclusion to be drawn here is that the innovative ideologists can never themselves set the terms that they hope to apply in order to legitimise their behaviour. The question of what terms are available to be applied innovatively depends on the prevailing morality of their society, and their applicability is in turn a question of the meaning and use of the terms involved. The application cannot be stretched indefinitely. The terms must be applied with a certain amount of plausibility, determined by the moral vocabulary, the ordinary and legitimate meanings and uses of the terms. The entrepreneur cannot, for instance, “hope to describe *any* actions he may choose to perform as being ‘religious’ in character” (p. 173, Skinner’s italics). In this way, the study of the principles they invoke is indeed the study of one of “the key determinants of their behaviour” (p. 156).

The important point to notice here is that the moral vocabulary of Protestantism not only contributed to the legitimisation of the rise of capitalism, but also helped to channel it towards an ethic of industriousness (p. 157). The next chapter can be read as a generalisation of this case. Skinner closes his critical assessment of the key word studies of Raymond Williams by posing the “vertiginous question”

(p. 172) of the nature of the role played by our appraisive vocabulary in the explanation of social change. The image of language as a mirror of social reality implies that the process of social change is the primary cause of developments in vocabulary. The metaphor is, however, misleading in that it “encourages us to assume that we are dealing with two distinct and contingently related domains: that of social world itself, and that of the language we then apply in our attempts to delineate its character” (p. 172). The normative language is not “an epiphenomenon” of social agents’ projects but one of the “determinants of their behaviour” (p. 174).

A more general conclusion that can be drawn here is that the social vocabulary and the social world “mutually prop each other up” (p. 174). The most general lesson is that it is not only language that is simultaneously a constraint and a resource. This also applies to the social world, or the “mind-independent world” (p. 46). In interpreting thought and action both language and the social world, with their constraining and resourceful dimensions, have to be considered. How things proceed, or what happens in history, at present or in the future, is always dependent on thought. Thinking and acting people themselves decide how they react to these constraints and use the available resources, in other words how they make history. Thus it follows that understanding history presupposes the consideration of more than just the conceptual relations between intentions, motives and beliefs. In addition to the intentions, beliefs and motives of historical agents, the “total” network of dimensions of thought must include their conceptions of both their social world and of the ideas and ideologies of their age or culture. In this sense, all history must be the history of thought.

Skinner’s description of the aims of intellectual history quoted above – that the intellectual historian’s aspiration is to grasp historical agents’ concepts, “to follow their distinctions, to recover their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way” (p. vii, 3 and 47) – is also an apt rhetorical re-description of Collingwood’s re-enactment thesis. Collingwood’s “unfortunate phrase” (p. 120) of re-enacting the thoughts of historical agents does not oblige the historian to enter the heads of historical agents. The re-description helps the historian to grasp that re-enactment is not a method but an end or objective, something that he or she has to reach with the help of

methods. When the historian has succeeded in seeing things from the perspective of the historical agents, he or she is able to consider the alternatives pondered by the people of the past, in other words the future of the past. If historians succeed in arriving at valid interpretations (which sometimes seems to happen), they have simultaneously succeeded in understanding past actions, and, indeed, history itself.

The volume ends with a typically Skinnerian, i.e. modest statement. He compares his own approach with “the vastly more ambitious programme” pursued by Reinhart Koselleck. In Skinner’s view, the Koselleckian *Begriffsgeschichte* is interested in the entire process of conceptual change, whereas Skinner himself is – referring to his analysis of rhetorical technics and strategies – chiefly interested “in one of the technics by which it takes place”. These programmes are not, as Skinner appropriately notes, incompatible, and therefore he hopes that “both of them will continue to flourish as they deserve” (pp. 186-187), a view which Koselleck also shares (see e.g. Koselleck 1996, 62-65). Skinner’s comparative remark on *Begriffsgeschichte* is a very mild reaction to Melvin Richter’s efforts to re-approach and even to fuse the German *Begriffsgeschichte* and Anglo-American history of political languages. Richter’s – no doubt well-meaning – proposal can also be interpreted as intrusive, and, accordingly, has the potential to lead to fairly irrational outbursts. John Pocock for instance, has declared that he is as unwilling to learn German as he is to seek to seek advice from a “*deutschsprechende*” community of historians. Pocock’s own history of discourse is not in a “state of crisis” that would urgently call “for innovative rescue or assistance”. Pocock is apparently tolerant enough to alleviate his outburst by concluding that he sees no reason why the two approaches “should not reinforce, stimulate, challenge, and enrich one another” (Pocock 1996, 47-48 and 58). His conclusion can also be interpreted as a warning or demand: “Please, leave us alone”.

I am fairly sure that Skinner might consider learning German, and perhaps even staying in Germany for a while, in order to learn how the two programmes could indeed reinforce and stimulate each other, to see how they could be each other’s *Hilfswissenschaften*. In order for this to happen, it would be useful to see that Koselleck’s views are somewhat inappropriately identified with the lexical form

of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1972-1992), in which concepts are indeed presented and analysed separately. We should (even for a moment) forget the lexical form of this *Lexikon* and keep in mind that, according to Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichte* deals with concepts in the sense that experiences and expectations are stored in concepts. Thus the history of concepts could be more properly defined as conceptual history, which helps to understand how people have perceived and conceived of concepts and ideas as well as their social world. In this interpretation, the primary object of research is not a specific concept but the way people conceptualise their world. Similarly, intelligent intellectual history is not a social history of ideas, because ideas are not a mere reflection of the social world. Nor is intellectual history the history of autonomous ideas, as ideas are not making history. The true historical agents are human beings, who conceive of ideas and circumstances in their own peculiar way. The dichotomous question of whether concepts are indicators or factors of reality and social change deserves to be answered only in the affirmative. At least I cannot see why it is logically inconsistent to see concepts both as the indicators and factors of something. Skinner is only consistent with regard to his own theory of intellectual history when he affirms that there is “a genealogy of all our evaluative concepts to be traced, and in tracing their changing applications we shall find ourselves looking not merely at the *reflections* but at one of the *engines* of social change” (p. 178, italics mine).

It is a great achievement to explain or understand how conceptual changes take place. To maintain that his contribution is vastly less ambitious or more modest than Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* is an understatement. Modesty can also be interpreted in another way, denoting a conception of what historians can hope to achieve. In order to arrive at reasonable and valuable historical knowledge one must avoid giving the impression of having achieved more than is possible for an historian to achieve. In an interview, Skinner has criticised the history of mentalities precisely for the fact that it has not been modest enough. It allows us to understand the treatment of “the whole *Weltanschauung* of people at different periods”. He contrasts his own “much more modest enterprise” to the history of mentalities by saying that “I have never had the confidence to work on that kind of broad canvas, have never asked myself about the mental

world of the Renaissance, and, in fact, if I found a book with that title I am not sure I would want to read it". So he would advise his students to be modest: he would not "recommend a student to study a *mentalité*", because "to ask about an entire ensemble of beliefs is, for me, the wrong type of unit to take" (Pallares-Burke 2002, 231-232). Similarly, both the history of concepts and the history of ideas could be understood in an equally totalitarian way, assuming or presupposing a concept or an idea as being embraced in the same sense by every single human being of an epoch. In order to avoid this misunderstanding, it is indeed reasonable to demand that historians be as modest as they can possibly be.

Skinner's approach is not only a demonstration of the connection of thought and action and of the need to take this connection seriously. It is also a legitimization or justification of ordinary historical practice. Practice minded historians are used to reading texts in their intellectual, cultural and social contexts. Skinner has in his own way explained why this practice has worked so well, and the point of his theory of intellectual history is to make the practice work better. A good theory helps us, as the etymology of the word theory indicates, to *see* possible contexts, and the ensuing careful research will sort out the most probable and illuminating. Historians rarely come to think of how much they have to actually think in carrying out their work. Historians have, perhaps even more rarely, come to imagine how much they have to imagine in their work. Imagination is a necessary aspect in the search for (and at times in the construction of) proper contexts. A proper context is determined by the aims of interpretation. The proper or "very precise context of presuppositions and other beliefs" cannot be known in advance. One has to be able to find, identify or construct "whatever intellectual context that makes best sense of them". A relevant context, that is, a means of solving a problem at hand, need not be inherently immediate. Writers may be responding to problems which may have been posed in a remote period or culture. In order to recover a relevant context, "we may need to engage in extremely wide-ranging as well as detailed historical research" (p. 42 and 116). A relevant context is, in other words, in itself an outcome of research. Imagination, accompanied, aided and controlled by historical knowledge and reasoning, is also required in identifying possible illocutionary forces or in considering

the resources of language, as well as in attempting to recover the illocutionary acts or ways in which agents exploit these resources in communication (cf. p. 109).

Skinner has, in his own albeit simultaneously exemplary way, derived various insights from relevant philosophies, tailored or hammered them skilfully and at his own risk into shapes and forms that are suited to his own purposes. Here he is cherishing the best traditions of the nineteenth century *Historismus*, conducting his work in the spirit of one of his most esteemed “masters”, R.G. Collingwood. Collingwood reminded us that history is a special form of thought. From this it follows that questions about the nature, object, method, and value of this form of thought must be answered by people possessing two specific qualifications. First, they must have experience with that form of thought: they must be historians. Second, in addition to possessing the experience of historical thinking, they must be able to reflect upon that experience: they must also be philosophers. This is also the ranking of the qualifications, because “experience comes first, and reflection on that experience second” (Collingwood 1973, 7-9).

Skinner has, in his own manner, kept historical agents alive, rescued them from the grip of the once influential version of the history of ideas, in which ideas were considered agents of historical change, as well as from the grip of the opposing version of the social history of ideas, in which ideas were seen only as indicators of social change, and finally, or recently, from a textual version of history in which texts alone were supposed to make history. He has, in his own peculiar manner, contributed to the re-inclusion of human agency into the sphere of history. This is a trend that is once again becoming fashionable, even in global history (see e.g. Adas 1998). I hope this time it will also remain in fashion, that it remains acknowledged as an indispensable dimension of the historical explanation. From this perspective it is also possible to convincingly pose and answer the question of the point or relevance of historical studies. Historians must not fail to ask and answer this question. It has to be answered in a way that obliges both historians and their audience, that is, reminds both of their own responsibility. Skinner, the historian of political thought, sees the relevance of his own studies as follows: “The alien character of the beliefs we uncover constitutes their ‘relevance’.

Reflecting on such alternative possibilities, we provide ourselves with one of the best means of preventing our current moral and political theories from degenerating too easily into uncritically accepted ideologies. At the same time, we equip ourselves with a new means of looking critically at our own beliefs in the light of the enlarged sense of possibility we acquire" (p. 126, see also pp. 6-7, 26, 50, 54-55, 87-89).

By reading, and especially by doing good intellectual history we may learn to better think about what we think; we may even learn to think better. We may also learn from history if we are equally well informed about both the past circumstances, from which the lessons are derived, and the present circumstances, to which they are applied. Self-understanding presupposes the avoidance of anachronisms, and vice versa. Avoiding anachronisms seems to be a rather antiquarian enterprise; it seems to reduce "the study of history of thought to nothing more edifying than a conducted tour of a graveyard". This objection only embodies "a depressingly philistine failure to appreciate" the possibility to learn from a serious study of history (p. 125). But if we use the opportunity to learn, historical study "might have the power to transform us, to help us think more effectively about our own society and its possible need for reform and reformation" (p. 26). The relevance of history depends on us ourselves, on our will and capacity to think historically.

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