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Source: *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 62, No. 3, (Summer, 2000), pp. 531-561

Published by: Cambridge University Press for the University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1408207>

Accessed: 06/05/2008 16:49

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Theory in Practice: Quentin Skinner's Hobbes, Reconsidered

Michael Goodhart

Quentin Skinner's method for studying the history of political thought has been widely and heatedly debated for decades. This article takes a new tack, offering a critique of Skinner's approach on the grounds he has himself established: consideration of his historical work as exemplifying the theory in practice. Three central assumptions of Skinner's method are briefly reviewed; each is then evaluated in the context of his writings on Hobbes. The analysis reveals problems and ambiguities in the specification and implementation of the method and in its underlying philosophy. The essay concludes by examining the broader practical and philosophical implications of adopting this approach to the study of political ideas: the method operationalizes a set of philosophical commitments that transforms ideological choices into questions of proper method.

The issue of what practical difference it makes whether or not one adopts Skinner's methodological suggestions is an underdiscussed question relative to a rather high-flying debate which seeks to transform methodological presuppositions into philosophical conclusions.

—Richard Ashcraft¹

We cannot safely judge of men's intentions.

—Thomas Hobbes²

Quentin Skinner's approach to the study of political ideas has been controversial since its first articulation; the recent appearance of several major new works by Skinner has initiated a reprise of the old debates.³ I do not intend to join these debates directly but rather to raise a somewhat different question, one also occasioned by Skinner's new work on Hobbes: What is the *practical* significance of employing Skinner's method in the study of

The author thanks Perry Anderson, Blair Campbell, Susan Hoppe, Andrew Lister, John McCormick, Dan O'Neill, Carole Pateman, and the staff, editor, and referees at the *Review* for their help and encouragement.

1. Ashcraft, "The Radical Dimensions of Locke's Political Thought: A Dialogic Essay on Some Problems of Interpretation," *History of Political Thought* 13 (1992): 707.

2. Hobbes, *Behemoth, The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 11 vol., ed. Sir William Molesworth (London: 1839-1845) 6: 254.

3. See, most recently, Ted Miller and Tracy B. Strong, "Meanings and Contexts: Mr. Skinner's Hobbes and the English Mode of Political Theory," *Inquiry* 40 (1997).

political ideas? Given the continued dominance of the "Cambridge" approach to studying the history of ideas—as in the work of Skinner, Dunn, Pocock, Tully, and others—and the stalemated philosophical debate over that approach, this question seems particularly timely.

A strange and, surprisingly, unremarked feature of the dispute over Skinner's work is that even though his methodological writings are highly contentious, his historical efforts have gained widespread acclaim.⁴ There is something odd in this disjunction; after all, in historical methodology, as in cookery, the proof-in-the-pudding rule self-evidently applies.⁵ Skinner himself has always seen the closest relation between his historical and methodological writings, the histories having been intended mainly as examples of his approach to the study of political theory.⁶ The oddity arises because commentators on Skinner's historical work usually bracket his method, while the debate over his method emphasizes philosophy rather than history. In this article I attempt something different: a critique of the method based on an analysis of its implementation. I identify problems in Skinner's historical work on Hobbes and develop a critique of the method based on those problems.

I begin with a short overview of Skinner's approach, stressing its three central assumptions; each of the following three sections briefly elaborates one of these conceptual points and then surveys its deployment in Skinner's work on Hobbes. The analysis reveals problems and ambiguities in the method, its specification, and its underlying philosophy, as well as problems with Skinner's readings

4. "[Skinner's *Foundations*] is primarily of interest to philosophers not for its excellent account of European thought about the state but for the self-conscious philosophy that has gone into it" (Kenneth Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History: Quentin Skinner's *Foundations*," *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully and Quentin Skinner [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988], p. 176 [emphasis added]).

5. Skinner, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action"; "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *Meaning and Context*, pp. 97, 64, respectively). Cf. Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History," p. 177.

6. Skinner, "Some Problems," pp. 98-9. His recent work is no exception; see *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 7-8, 15; *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 101ff. Cf. James Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics," *Meaning and Context*, p. 16.

of Hobbes. I look at Skinner's early and recent writings to emphasize that these problems are recurring and to highlight inconsistencies in his application of the method. Much of the Cambridge school's stature comes from its perceived historical successes; by identifying problems in the primary historical work of the method's leading practitioner, this essay amounts to an indictment on the grounds Skinner himself has established: consideration of his historical work as a test of his theory in practice. I consider two possible objections to my argument and conclude with some broader reflections on the practical relation between Skinner's method and his political and philosophical commitments.

Theory in Practice

Simply put, Skinner holds that by studying the range of conventional uses of words and concepts available to an author we can figure out what she meant to do in writing. The social meanings of texts or utterances are equivalent with the author's intentions in writing ("illocutionary force") and can be fully explained by reconstructing the conventions surrounding a text's occurrence.⁷ Conventions, the "shared vocabulary, principles, assumptions, criteria for testing knowledge-claims, problems, conceptual distinctions and so on,"⁸ delimit the range of things that the author might have been doing in writing.

Two general rules about the recovery of intentions follow: first, we should "focus not just on the text to be interpreted but on the prevailing conventions governing the treatment of the issues or themes with which the text is concerned." Second, we should "focus on the writer's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs. This rule derives from the logical connection between our capacity to ascribe intentions to agents and our knowledge of their beliefs."⁹ These general rules translate into more specific methodological prescriptions:

7. Cf. Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics," *Meaning and Context*, pp. 267, 278.

8. Tully, "Pen is a Mighty Sword," p. 9. Cf. Skinner, "'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action," *Meaning and Context*, p. 94.

9. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and the Interpretation of Texts," *Meaning and Context*, pp. 77-8.

the appropriate methodology for the history of ideas must...delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance, and next...trace relations between the given utterance and this wider linguistic context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer.¹⁰

In effect, Skinner's method operationalizes the premise that "a knowledge of the author's intentions in writing...is not merely relevant to, but is actually *equivalent* to, a knowledge of the [meaning] of what he writes."¹¹ This faith in the explanatory power of intentions led Skinner to assert famously that no thinker can be said to have meant or done anything that she could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what she meant or did.¹²

As this brief summary shows, Skinner relies heavily on three central assumptions adapted from ordinary language philosophy: that texts of political theory can be treated as utterances or social actions within identifiable contexts, that reconstructing the ideological and linguistic conventions surrounding these acts allows the recovery of the author's intentions, and that the author's "mental world" of concepts, beliefs, and assumptions limits the range of his possible intentions. On this basis, Skinner concludes that the historical identity of a text is identical to the author's intentions in writing it.

Identifying Utterances and Contexts

Skinner conceptualizes texts as utterances or speech acts embodying two kinds of action. First, "the author is saying or writing something—putting forward words, sentences, arguments, theories, and so on with a certain 'locutionary' or 'propositional' meaning." Skinner finds this form of meaning unproblematic; discussing a passage from Defoe, he quips, "The meaning of what Defoe said is perfectly clear. What he said was that religious dissent should be ranked among capital offenses.

10. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," pp. 63-64.

11. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation," pp. 75-6. The term Skinner uses is *meaning*, which he distinguishes from the plain meaning of the words and "meaning for me."

12. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 48; cf. "Some Problems," p. 102.

What this means is that religious dissent should be ranked among capital offenses."¹³ Skinner's method and philosophy focus on a second kind of action: authors "will be *doing something* in speaking or writing..."¹⁴ Thus, to understand Defoe, we need to recover his intentions, what he was *doing in* writing (questioning and ridiculing religious intolerance).¹⁵ This "illocutionary force" must be established, according to Skinner, by situating texts within their "ideological" context. We initiate the interpretive process by ascertaining the plain or "locutionary" meanings of utterances, and thus their subject matter, and next, "[turning] to the context of their occurrence in order to determine how exactly they connect with, or relate to, other utterances concerned with the same subject matter."¹⁶ In other words, defining the utterance and establishing its subject matter is the first step in applying the method.

In Skinner's writings on Hobbes, we find three problems related to the claim that texts can be treated as speech acts. The first is evident in his earliest works, which link Hobbes to the Engagement controversy.¹⁷ According to Skinner, the debate over the legitimacy of the Commonwealth government was mired in questions of divine ordination and the origins of government;¹⁸ he argues that Hobbes's unique and brilliant innovation was to strip his argument of religious foundations and create a *de facto* theory of government based on the political nature of man.¹⁹ Hobbes's emphasis on the mutual relation between protection and obedience is unique to *Leviathan*, Skinner claims; he altered his views to bring them into line with other *de facto* theories.²⁰ In a later essay, Skinner revised his assessment of Hobbes's role, arguing that his "novel and dramatic intervention in the [Engagement] debate" was his deployment of a "distinctive

13. Skinner, "Reply," pp. 284-85.

14. Tully, "Pen is a Mighty Sword," pp. 8-9.

15. Skinner, "A Reply," p. 271.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

17. The Engagement controversy (1650-54) was a dispute over the oath of loyalty or "Engagement" required by the Commonwealth government; it quickly blossomed into a debate on the legitimacy of the government itself.

18. Skinner, "Conquest and Consent: Thomas Hobbes and the Engagement Controversy," *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement 1646-1660*, ed. G.E. Aylmer (London: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 79-93.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

analysis of liberty" in which conquest and consent are compatible.²¹ "Hobbes's view of political obligation in *Leviathan* has sometimes been assimilated to that of [the] defenders of *de facto* powers," he writes. "While there are important similarities, however, this interpretation overlooks the fact that, in the basic premises of his political theory, Hobbes stands much closer" to the enemies of the Rump.²² "The best evidence [that Hobbes intended his theory of liberty as a contribution to debates about the Commonwealth government] lies in the fact that his conclusions are based not just on a clarification but a revision of his earlier arguments."²³

The problem is, how we define an utterance makes a crucial difference in determining its subject matter and context, and thus the author's intentions. In these essays, Skinner asserts that Hobbes revised key passages in *Leviathan*—the same passages—to bring them into line with two markedly different contemporary theories. A careful comparison of the footnotes shows that the "subject utterance" changes in the later essays, incorporating additional passages specifically addressing the relation between liberty and consent. Skinner's methodological writings offer little guidance on how to identify or limit an utterance; he writes as if one begins with the utterance "in hand." A historian might well change his mind upon uncovering new evidence or simply upon further reflection; the point of this criticism is not that Skinner contradicts himself but rather that he provides no rules or method for determining which of the utterances underlying these two interpretations is more accurate, representative, or authentic.

A second problem, also clear in the early essays, is how we identify a social action or utterance and its proper context. Skinner explains that at the height of the Engagement controversy, Hobbes published—for the first time in England and for the first time in English—his major works on political obligation. As soon as these works appeared, Skinner writes, the "other lay defenders of *de*

21. Skinner, "Thomas Hobbes on the Proper Signification of Liberty," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, no. 40 [1990], p. 150.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 145. Only in a footnote does Skinner acknowledge that he first articulated the *de facto* interpretation, downplaying his role almost to the point of disingenuity (*ibid.*, n. 155).

23. *Ibid.*, p. 149. The claim that Hobbes's view of political obligation changes significantly in *Leviathan* could be strongly disputed.

facto powers" recognized them "as giving the most authoritative presentation" of their view of political obligation. After highlighting several similarities between *Leviathan* and the Engagement tracts, Skinner concludes that "there can be no doubt" that characterizing these works as a "contribution" to the defense of Engagement "gives an accurate reflection of Hobbes's intentions in writing these works."²⁴

Recent research shows, however, that Hobbes was not responsible for the publication of *The Elements* or *De Cive* during this period.²⁵ Skinner himself now finds it "impossible to believe" that the original 1651 edition of *De Cive* was "wholly or even partly" Hobbes's own work,²⁶ but he never expressly reconsiders whether this evidence—not to mention that concerning *The Elements*—casts any shadows over his earlier conclusions (though he has abandoned this interpretation). Skinner conflated two social actions, uttering (or writing) and publishing; his account makes it unclear in which action he is interested. *The Elements* and *De Cive* were written almost a decade before Engagement, so that debate can tell us nothing about Hobbes's intentions in *writing* (versus *publishing*) them. That Hobbes was not responsible for the appearance of either work in 1651 makes the idea of his intention in *publishing* them nonsensical. In fact, Hobbes had completed 37 chapters of *Leviathan* by May 1650, meaning that even the passages on obligation in that work could not, strictly speaking, have been intended as a contribution to the Engagement debate (save passages in the Review and Conclusion).²⁷ Skinner suggests that we situate utterances in the "context of their occurrence"; he does not differentiate between the context of *inception* and the context of *reception*. He focuses on the context of publication in trying to understand Hobbes's works on political

24. Skinner, "Conquest and Consent," pp. 94-96.

25. M. M. Goldsmith, "Hobbes's Ambiguous Politics," *History of Political Thought* 9 (1990): 640-41; Philip Milton, "Did Hobbes Translate *De Cive*?" *History of Political Thought* 9 (1990); Richard Tuck, "Introduction," Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

26. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. xvi.

27. Glenn Burgess, "Contexts for the Writing and Publication of Hobbes's *Leviathan*," *History of Political Thought* 9 (1990), pp. 676-77; cf. Richard Tuck, *Hobbes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 27, on the writing schedule.

obligation, overlooking the importance of that issue in the 1630s and 1640s, even though that seems a much more likely context for the formation and development of Hobbes's ideas—especially in the cases of *The Elements* and *De Cive*.²⁸

The third difficulty with utterances is clearest in Skinner's recent work on Hobbes. In *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Skinner adopts something like a "collage" approach to utterances; sentences, even fragments of sentences, from many of Hobbes's works are patched together to establish his views on eloquence and civil science. Take this example:

Hobbes proclaims in chapter V [of *Leviathan*] that "the Light of humane minds is Perspicuous Words," adding that his own argument is laid out "orderly and perspicuously," with the result that his treatise is "clear" and "not obscure." He makes a similar boast at several points in his controversy with Bramhall, in which he criticises his opponent for failing to write "plain and perspicuous English," and insists by contrast that "I have endeavored all I can to be perspicuous," and that "in the examination of truth, I search rather for perspicuity than elegance."²⁹

Skinner cites fragments from *An Answer to a Book Published by Dr. Bramhall* [published posthumously, 1682] and from *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* [1656 reprint, with additions, of a 1645 exchange with Bramhall] as well as from *Leviathan* in making his point about Hobbes's views on perspicuity. This patchwork approach is common throughout *Reason and Rhetoric*.³⁰

This approach radically destabilizes the notion of utterances and of intentions in uttering. I am not suggesting that Hobbes had nothing to say about perspicuity or that Skinner gets Hobbes wrong on this or other points. The problem is that the idea that an intention can reveal meaning depends on treating utterances as social actions. Statements dating from three decades, extracted from varied works, cannot in principle be part of one utterance or social action. Skinner devotes large portions of *Reason and Rhetoric* to piecing together Hobbes's views on eloquence in this way, but it is hard to see how a study that lumps them together—whatever its other potential merits—can tell us much about intentions. It

28. Jonathan M. Wiener, "Quentin Skinner's Hobbes," *Political Theory* 2 (1974): 256; cf. Burgess, "Contexts."

29. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 361.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 291, 350, 354, and 362 for some other examples.

might establish something about Hobbes's beliefs, but those beliefs cannot, on Skinner's own view, represent a social act or embody any single intention. (I defer until later the question of what establishing an author's beliefs can tell us about intentions.) Skinner criticizes scholars who paste together an author's scattered remarks to determine her "doctrine" on some subject, yet he seems dangerously close to such a "mythology of doctrines" himself.³¹

These examples demonstrate several disanalogies between texts and "speech acts." First, political texts are highly complex; unlike the simple examples favored by philosophers (policemen warning skaters about thin ice) it is not clear where theoretical utterances begin or end. Second, "utterances" of political philosophy do not simply trip off the tongue; they are formed over years, even decades, making it tremendously difficult to isolate a "context of occurrence." Third, a speech act is, as the name indicates, *an act*. In cases like the assembled fragments on perspicuity or the "series of works" on obligation it is hard to see that we are dealing with a text, an utterance, or anything Hobbes could recognize as "something he said or did" at all. It is equally hard to fathom what he could have possibly intended in "uttering" it. This confusion about utterances is linked to several interpretive problems in Skinner's work on Hobbes, which seems to obscure more than it clarifies about how the concept of utterances should be deployed.

Context and Intentions

Assuming that authors intend to be understood, Skinner conjectures that this intention entails working within preexisting conventions, even when authors hope to alter them. By comparing the text in which we are interested with other texts addressing the same subject, we can learn about the relevant conventions and then, by studying how the author uses or manipulates them, we can determine her intentions.³² Skinner is keen to rebuff charges of an "insuperable circularity" in his method, asserting that "there is surely no difficulty about seeing where to start." We first

31. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 34ff; cf. Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History," pp. 179-80.

32. Skinner, "Some Problems," pp. 103, 107.

elucidate the subject matter of utterances and then study the context of their occurrence to learn how they relate to other utterances concerned with the same subject matter.³³ We have already seen some difficulties involved with identifying utterances, their subject matter, and context. In Skinner's writings on Hobbes, the question of the relation between a text and its context turns out to be quite problematic as well, complicating our conclusions about intentions.

The first problem is that contexts are quite numerous and quite complex, making it difficult to establish them reliably. *Reason and Rhetoric* presents a masterly account of the teaching of Roman rhetoric in Tudor grammar schools—and thus of Hobbes's own probable studies. Skinner's scope is much broader than English school-books, however; he delves into classical debates on fine points of style and composition, the appropriate uses of rhetoric, and the political ideals those uses embody. For the student of rhetoric, this history is probably most welcome; for the student of Hobbes, it raises unwelcome interpretive difficulties. The first results directly from the breadth of scope. The thrust of Skinner's argument is that Hobbes abandons the humanist position on the relation between reason and rhetoric for a faith in the persuasive sufficiency of science, only to change his mind again and accept that eloquence is indispensable in civil science. But because Skinner so exhaustively catalogues the great diversity of opinion among the various authorities within the tradition, he undermines his own case for Hobbes's reversals.

For instance, after explaining that Hobbes's "abandonment" of *ornatus* in his scientific works puts him in the company of Tacitus and Bacon, Skinner must assure us that Hobbes "carries the repudiation very much further" than they do—though this position too has precedents.³⁴ The universe of humanism or classical eloquence is so vast that one can find almost any constellation of viewpoints among its luminaries. This means there is no clear standard or referent by which to assess Hobbes's alleged rejection of and reconciliation with "the tradition" (and maybe that there is effectively no "tradition" at all). Hobbes may have meant any number of things by taking the positions he did. Given

33. Skinner, "A Reply," p. 275.

34. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, pp. 271, 274.

the lack of consensus or orthodoxy on the use of *ornatus*, it is hard to tell if he meant to take any position at all with respect to it, at least one that reflects anything about his wider views on humanism and civil science. We might be able to see how Hobbes used various conventions, but the context is too diverse to support any conclusions about what he might have intended in doing so.

The second interpretive difficulty is closely related to the first. In *Reason and Rhetoric*, Skinner overlooks or ignores dozens of historically sensible contexts.³⁵ Even the context of Renaissance rhetoric is much more complex than Skinner's account indicates. As Miller and Strong observe, Skinner never explains his focus on the Roman rather than Greek style of rhetoric; both were in vogue in Hobbes's day.³⁶ This is especially troubling given Hobbes's avowed appreciation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and its special emphasis on persuasion through logical proof or demonstration rather than eloquence. As Walker notes, Skinner jumps from a description of Tudor grammar school rhetoric to claims about English Renaissance culture; but, beginning with the curriculum of Elizabethan universities, one could just as easily conclude that Renaissance culture was Aristotelian.³⁷

Another, and arguably crucial, aspect of rhetoric Skinner ignores is the practice of sacred rhetoric and preaching.³⁸ The twin aims of sacred rhetoric were to teach church dogma and to use eloquence to stir the passions of the congregation, thereby transcending or circumventing reason.³⁹ Hobbes consistently and continuously objected to such uses of eloquence, from his first writings on Aristotle and Thucydides right through to *Behemoth*. He always detested dogma and textual authority and always worried about the nefarious potential of eloquence detached from reason and wisdom. *Pace* Skinner, Hobbes never viewed eloquence

35. Dan Herzog, "Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes," *Political Theory* 25 (1997): 895.

36. Miller and Strong, "Meanings and Contexts," p. 343; cf. Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

37. William Walker, "Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes," *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997): 206.

38. Skinner devotes three paragraphs and a few footnotes to the subject (*Reason and Rhetoric*, pp. 66-67).

39. Deborah Shuger, "Sacred Rhetoric in the Renaissance," *Renaissance-Rhetoric*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), pp. 123, 152-53.

as *inherently* seditious; it was the use of eloquence by unwise or evil men in dividing, deceiving, and confusing citizens that drew his ire.⁴⁰

The most notable change in Hobbes's works on civil science from *The Elements* to *Leviathan* is the growing concern with religion and religious doctrine; his explicit worries about the use and abuse of sacred rhetoric certainly seem relevant to understanding this development. Skinner acknowledges that Hobbes's change of mind about eloquence stemmed from his analysis of the effects of Presbyterian preaching before and during the Civil War, but this context—like the scientific context to which Hobbes's first *volte face* is attributed—receives scant attention.

We cannot of course fault Skinner for not studying what we might have studied. We can, however, ask how the choices were made, since the method purports to generate historically valid interpretations, to reveal the "historical identity" of texts. Skinner argues that we recover intentions by studying conventions; we learn which conventions to study by placing the text in its proper context. If we get the context wrong, we shall get the intentions wrong as well. Skinner cannot plead that only the historian's interests can determine what he studies. The claim to validity creates a need for a reliable determination about which context is the correct one. Skinner offers precious little advice on this crucial matter, suggesting merely that we look for similarity in the subject matter of the texts themselves.

This hints at a more profound difficulty: How do we establish a connection between an author's work and a context? Hobbes's style and use of rhetorical devices establish little about linguistic or ideological conventions. This is especially true considering that Skinner must portray Tudor rhetorical training as extremely effective to establish his claim that Hobbes "imbibed" humanist values as a matter of course—wouldn't one then expect stylish discourse full of tropes and figures in all educated writing? Wouldn't everyone be a humanist by default? Likewise, the arguments about Hobbes's career choice reflect very little when we consider the options open to educated commoners. Most importantly, subject matter is also ambiguous; one subject may be relevant to many debates. The use and abuse of rhetoric is the subject matter of religious doctrine and

40. Victoria Silver, "Hobbes on Rhetoric," *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, ed. Tom Sorel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 338.

political calculation as well as of humanist studies of eloquence. Besides, Skinner advances some questionable interpretations of Hobbes's statements on eloquence (more below).

We see similar problems with context in Skinner's earlier works on Hobbes. The claim that *Leviathan* should be understood in the context of Engagement rests mainly on its publication history and on observations about the book's critical reception, Hobbes's alleged popularity, and similarities between *Leviathan* and some Engagement pamphlets.⁴¹ While popularity and critical reception certainly reveal something about the broad social context of a work, they bear only slightly on ideological and linguistic conventions. It turns out, anyway, that most of this information is contradictory or anachronistic.⁴² This leaves the arguments based on similarity. Here, Skinner appears to have a much stronger case; not only does Hobbes share a *de facto* theory of obligation with many Engagers, he is also sometimes cited by them.

There are undeniable similarities between Hobbes and the Engagers and *de facto* theorists; what these say about Hobbes's intentions is less obvious. Some Engagers do cite Hobbes, but citation is consistent with a wide range of uses of a text. "Usage indicates a relationship between writers without carrying the presuppositional infections of more portentous terms....[It] is an unspecific term, referring not so much to a distinctive relationship (the purport of influence) but to virtually any evidential relationship between writers." All that use indicates for certain is that "one writer has found another germane to his own enterprises."⁴³ Simply, citation suggests that Engagers found something useful in Hobbes's theory, but does not necessarily indicate anything about Hobbes's own intentions.

41. Skinner, "Ideological Context," pp. 293-94, 303-12; "Conquest and Consent," pp. 81-93; "Context of Hobbes's Theory," pp. 110-14.

42. Parliament considered Hobbes's work on blasphemy charges in 1657 and 1666. Skinner's claim that these charges hurt Hobbes's image and discouraged citation of his work, thus concealing its true influence and relation to the Engagement debate, is anachronistic. Besides, it is difficult to square Skinner's reports of Hobbes's "notoriety" and "unspeakably dangerous" doctrines with his claim that Hobbes was popular and well-respected at home. Skinner cites Eachard, who wrote 28 years after the controversy, on Hobbes's popularity; all the authors cited there wrote after 1665, making their views irrelevant to Hobbes's stature in the early 1650s.

43. Conal Condren, *The Status and Appraisal of Classic Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 138-39.

I have already noted that Hobbes's political theory was probably worked out during the 1630s and 1640s, a context Skinner slights in focusing on *Leviathan's* "occurrence" in 1651. Burgess concurs, noting that "Hobbes, after 1649, was alarmed to discover that his political theory had changed sides on him"; he became an Engager in spite of himself.⁴⁴ As Goldsmith suggests, Ward and others may have wanted to co-opt the argument of a "notorious royalist" in arguing for the Engagement. "Initially Hobbes's ideas were used by defenders of Engagement," Burgess argues, "not because they read him as a fellow-traveler of the new republic, but because they saw him as a Royalist whose ideas could be used for un-Royalist purposes."⁴⁵ Skinner misses this point when he argues that "every one of Hobbes's contemporary critics would have had to be wrong, and in precisely the same way" if Hobbes did not intend *Leviathan* as a contribution to the debate over Engagement.⁴⁶ The Engagers might have been strategic and opportunistic in "misusing" Hobbes, perhaps knowing full well that they were wrong about his intentions (all in the same way); royalists would have to attack the version of Hobbes the Engagers were promoting.

Similarity of subject matter can be revealing and politically important, but it cannot establish intentions as Skinner hopes. Contexts are too numerous and too internally diverse to provide the kind of specificity required to "read off" intentions. The difficulties are multiplied because texts can be interpreted and used in ways their authors would eschew. That Hobbes was universally understood as a theorist who located the origin of obedience in protection and self-interest seems only to reveal that his "locutionary" meaning was properly understood—by Bramhall and other clerical critics as well as by Engagers.⁴⁷ It tells

44. Burgess, "Contexts," pp. 679-95. Publication of *Leviathan* in 1651 caused confusion and misunderstanding of Hobbes's intentions. Until then, Hobbes was always seen as a good (if clever) royalist. "*Leviathan* was at best extremely tepid in its allegiance to Engagement theory, and any links between Hobbes and the Engagers were made contrary to his will, and to his embarrassment" (*ibid.*).

45. Goldsmith, "Hobbes's Politics," pp. 640-41; Burgess, "Contexts," p. 696.

46. Skinner, "Context of Hobbes's Theory," pp. 137-38.

47. Bramhall attacks Hobbes's theory as "dog's play"—always taking the side of the stronger. "It seemeth T.H. did 'take' his sovereign 'for better' but not 'for worse'" (John Bramhall, *Castigations of Mr. Hobbes* [New York: Garland, 1977], pp. 557-58). Bramhall blasts Hobbes's theology, politics, and timing but never challenges his royalist *bona fides*.

us, on its own, nothing about Hobbes's intentions in putting forward such claims.⁴⁸ Machiavelli's *Prince* might serve to legitimate a vicious ruler, but it does not follow that doing so was Machiavelli's political point in writing it. Tully claims that Skinner has always kept these questions separate,⁴⁹ but this seems doubtful in his work on Hobbes.

Skinner's concern with intentions reflects the profound influence of Collingwood, who was deeply concerned with the subjectivity of actors in history—and thus with the mental world of the historical actor.⁵⁰ He takes his belief that conventions can reveal meaning from Austin and, less directly, Wittgenstein, who hold that all meaning is public and intersubjective. Skinner is well aware that we cannot "get inside the heads" of past actors to discover their mental states; he hopes that by applying speech act theory to historical texts, we will nonetheless be able to recover their author's intentions, which "can be inferred from an understanding of the significance of the act itself."⁵¹

Skinner does not see the tension here: conventions can reveal meaning only in a public sense; they are inadequate for uncovering interior or private meanings.⁵² As we have seen, texts may have a public significance that their authors never imagined, much less intended. Unless we could find a way to show that a similarity was itself intended, which would seem to require access to the

48. By focusing on how *Leviathan* was received and used, rather than on the ideological context which allegedly shaped it, Skinner may overstate the theoretical importance of Engagement altogether (Lotte Mulligan, Judith Richards, and John Graham, "Intentions and Conventions: A Critique of Quentin Skinner's Method for the Study of the History of Ideas," *Political Studies* 27 [1979]: 95). According to Wallace, the Engagement was not particularly shocking, coming in the wake of the Solemn League and Covenant (See Maurice Ashley, *The English Civil War*, rev. ed. [Gloucester, 1990], p. 89); those who took the oath did so with the understanding that the illegal government was temporary. Most people took the pledge and most would not have hesitated to break it if the opportunity arose (John M. Wallace, "The Engagement Controversy 1649-53: An Annotated List of Pamphlets," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 68 [1964]: 385-89). Even Bramhall recognized that, as a practical matter, loyalists should submit (Bramhall, *Castigations*, pp. 543-44).

49. Tully, "Pen is a Mighty Sword," p. 12.

50. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 65; "Some Problems," p. 103; "A Reply," pp. 274-75.

51. Skinner, "A Reply," pp. 274-75.

52. Skinner's discussion of the possibility of warning someone unintentionally (Skinner, "A Reply," pp. 264-65) makes this slippage clear.

author's subjectivity, we cannot conclude much about intentions.⁵³ There is a missing link between similarity and use, which are publicly observable facts available to the historian, and an author's intentions, which are not available in the same way. This problem is mitigated somewhat in ordinary language philosophy because it is assumed that the context of occurrence is known or observed; knowing that the similarity is (presumptively) intended makes it plausible to infer intentions from conventions. It is precisely because the intended context of the historical speech act is unknown that we cannot reliably infer intentions from it. This ambiguity points to another disanalogy between historical texts and speech acts: the historian always encounters works "adrift."⁵⁴

Beliefs, Motives, and Intentions

Skinner encourages interpreters to focus on the empirical beliefs of authors, their mental worlds, because he sees a logical connection between knowing that an author held certain beliefs and ascribing intentions to her.⁵⁵ Evidence of corroborating beliefs or motives can bolster our credence in an interpretation.⁵⁶ Except in limited cases, however, inquiries into the author's beliefs or motives will be ancillary to the process of determining intentions.⁵⁷ This must be the case, because Skinner shows that intentions need not reflect sincerely held beliefs or principles.⁵⁸ He maintains that even in cases where an agent never believes any of the principles he espouses, we can still identify intentions.⁵⁹ Motives stand "outside" an author's works and are irrelevant to understanding their meaning.⁶⁰

53. I take up this problem of certainty below. Thanks to Perry Anderson and to referees at the *Review* for help on these points.

54. Conal Condren, *The Language of Politics in Seventeenth Century England* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 10-11.

55. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation," p. 78.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78; cf. "A Reply," 278.

57. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation," pp. 77-78. The exceptional cases are those involving ritual actions (Skinner, "'Social Meaning,'" pp. 93-94).

58. Skinner, "The Principles and Practice of Opposition; The Case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole," *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J.H. Plumb*, ed. Neil McKendrick (London: Europa, 1974), pp. 108-29, esp. 124ff.

59. Skinner, "Some Problems," p. 108.

60. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation," p. 73.

We have seen that Skinner initially interpreted Hobbes as a lay defender of Engagement, basing this claim on the publication record of Hobbes's texts, on *Leviathan's* critical reception, and on the similarities between Hobbes's arguments and those of the Engagers. Following Skinner's own critique of Macpherson, we can posit that if Hobbes intended *Leviathan* as a lay defense of Engagement, his mental world must have included at least the beliefs that Engagement was in need of a defense, that his theory of obligation could provide such a defense, and that it was appropriate for him to devote himself to accomplishing precisely this task.⁶¹ Hobbes might have held the first belief, in the sense of finding defenses of Engagement wanting, though he certainly did not feel Engagement merited defense—he considered its imposition “a great crime.”⁶² As for the second belief, it is not even clear that Hobbes realized his argument could be used as the Engagers used it. With respect to the third, it hardly seems possible that Hobbes could have felt it appropriate to devote himself to defending Engagement.

How do we know? Hobbes was a committed royalist and had life-long ties to the monarchy—ties that continued, it should be stressed, after the Restoration.⁶³ His clear preference for a monarch and his ringing criticism of rebellion are unequivocally hostile toward the Rump. Hobbes did claim, in the *Considerations*, that the Review and Conclusion was a defense of the right of royalists to protect their property by submitting, but he never mentions the usurpers. Besides, had Hobbes seen anything harmful to the king in his project of “framing the minds” of royalist gentlemen, he would hardly have boasted about it in a defense against charges of disloyalty. Perhaps most telling is the matter of Hobbes's

61. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

62. Hobbes, *Considerations Upon the Reputation, Loyalty, Manners, and Religion of Thomas Hobbes in English Works*, 4: 418.

63. Hobbes spent most of his life in the service of the staunchly royalist Cavendish family. He helped collect the Forced Loan and stood for Parliament at Newcastle's behest in 1640. In 1646, he became the mathematics tutor of the Prince of Wales (later Charles II). After the Restoration in 1660, the king received Hobbes warmly at court, even granting him for a time the substantial salary of £100. Charles also helped Hobbes quash atheism charges in Parliament in 1666 (Tuck, *Hobbes*, p. 25; Arnold Rogow, *Thomas Hobbes: Radical in the Service of Reaction* [New York: W.W. Norton, 1986], p. 206ff.; Noel Malcolm, “A Summary Biography of Hobbes,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, p. 36).

presentation of a manuscript copy of *Leviathan* to Charles II in 1651. Could we square the portrait of Hobbes as Engager with any possible motive Hobbes could have had for making this gift? Skinner might have no trouble suggesting Hobbes's possible *intentions*: to anger, to mock, to defy or persuade, even to win scorn at court. But knowing what we do about Hobbes's royalist beliefs and his ties to the monarchy and to Charles II personally, what could have motivated him to do any of these things? He could have intended the book simply as a gift, but what motive could Hobbes have had for giving a gift sure to insult and offend? Why, without any evidence, should we assume that Hobbes was contravening the norms of gift giving? To suggest that Hobbes could not know his gift would offend would mean he did not understand his own book or his own intentions in writing it.⁶⁴

The idea of the gift does accord with the view that Hobbes saw his book as a strong defense of monarchy. Although Hobbes's politics were steadfastly royalist, his theory is stubbornly deaf to appeals to loyalty or tradition that could have shown citizens why, after the execution of Charles I, they owed obedience to his son and heir. Hobbes's cognitivist theory has no room for such affective ties. By publishing an overstated royalist account showing that those who abandoned Charles I before his execution did so too soon, Hobbes inadvertently strengthened the case for obedience to the Commonwealth⁶⁵—explaining Bramhall's exasperation with the "blunderer."⁶⁶ In short, it is unlikely that Hobbes would have ever agreed, in principle, that he intended *Leviathan* to be a defense of Engagement, to lend support to the Commonwealth government, or to justify its title to rule.

One possibility is that Skinner simply fails to consider how his interpretation fits with Hobbes's beliefs; that is, maybe Skinner fails to follow his own method. Yet he is undoubtedly aware of Hobbes's beliefs, although he concentrates more on his views about the relation between defense and obligation and between liberty and consent. Perhaps an author's "empirical beliefs" do not include personal views, allegiances, and emotional ties. This

64. Cf. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation," p. 77.

65. I am grateful to a referee at the *Review* for help on this point.

66. "Blunderers, whilst they think to mend one imaginary hole, make two or three real ones" (Bramhall, *Castigations*, p. 544).

question points to a thornier problem: if the views or intentions an author puts forward in some work need not reflect sincerely held principles or beliefs, and if we can determine intentions even when all of the author's statements are insincere, what exactly is the logical connection between beliefs and intentions to which Skinner refers? Skinner offers no guidance on how we might determine when intentions are "sincere," except to imply, in an essay on Bolingbroke, that the author's biography can help. Even that is questionable, though, because there seems to be no way to determine which of an author's actions, statements, or writings constitute the baseline of sincere or actually held beliefs by which the others can be measured.

These confusions are related to similar difficulties in Skinner's most recent interpretation of Hobbes. He argues in *Reason and Rhetoric* that Hobbes's major political works—especially *Leviathan*—should be understood as contributions to a debate on the place of classical eloquence in civil science. He presents an elaborate periodization scheme that establishes three distinct phases in Hobbes's beliefs on this subject: an early humanism, a rejection of eloquence and articulation of a science of politics, and a reconsideration of eloquence. Unlike his earlier interpretations, this one seems to rely on inferring intentions primarily from beliefs rather than from context.

The argument for Hobbes's early humanism consists mainly in the documentation of the Renaissance culture Hobbes must have "imbibed" as a lad.⁶⁷ Other evidence includes Hobbes's literary style, his career as an advisor and teacher of rhetoric, and his purchase of books for his employers. Skinner argues that Hobbes's translations of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Thucydides' *History* demonstrate his devotion to the curricula of the *studia humanitatis* and represent important contributions to those studies.⁶⁸ "The early part of Hobbes's career," Skinner continues, "culminated in the production of two major treatises of civil philosophy"—*The Elements* and *De Cive*—which fulfilled the final element in the humanist curricula.⁶⁹ Then, Hobbes became fascinated with the methods of science. "During the 1630s, Hobbes

67. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 11.

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 217ff., 221ff., 226ff., 238–40, 244ff.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 242–43.

not only turned away from the *studia humanitatis*, he also turned against the humanist disciplines and above all against the idea of an art of eloquence." His first misgivings, Skinner argues, are evident in his translation of the *Rhetoric*,⁷⁰ but Hobbes's most "sweeping attack" on humanist values is his argument about the intrinsic connection between eloquence and sedition.⁷¹ In Skinner's view, the use of tropes or *ornatus* in *Leviathan* proves that Hobbes again changed his mind and reconciled with his humanist roots, marking another major development in his political philosophy and his conception of civil science.

Skinner argues that one of Hobbes's "principal aims in *The Elements* and *De Cive* is to discredit and replace the Renaissance ideal of a union between reason and rhetoric, and hence between science and eloquence"; in *Leviathan*, Hobbes intends to show that only when science is allied with rhetoric can it hope to persuade.⁷² The hypothesized connection between Hobbes's changing beliefs and his purported intentions is straightforward: it is unlikely that Hobbes would have had these intentions if he had not changed his mind in the ways that Skinner describes, and Skinner accordingly devotes much of his argument to establishing that Hobbes did actually hold these beliefs.

What can we infer about Hobbes's intentions in writing from this account? Again, the crucial question is the nature of the "logical connection" between beliefs and intentions. Showing that an author held some belief is not equivalent with showing that she intended to do anything with regard to that belief in any particular text. It seems likely that an author will hold a great number of beliefs incidental or irrelevant to her intentions in writing any particular work. But suppose Skinner is right about Hobbes's beliefs on eloquence and civil science and that those beliefs did shape what Hobbes wrote in his major texts on the subject (the best case for Skinner); it still does not follow that Hobbes's intention in writing these texts was to contribute to a debate on this subject, even if, as we have seen, they were related to or useful in that debate. Unless we know that some belief or set of beliefs motivated the author in writing a text, we are stuck in

70. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.

72. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

the quandaries about sincerity and multiple, overlapping contexts and subject matter discussed above. And as Skinner admits, recovery of motives is perhaps impossible (it is certainly beyond the scope of his method). Because intentions may be unrelated to beliefs, it is impossible to make any connection between them without independent evidence for doing so—if such evidence is even possible on Skinner's view. This makes Skinner's neglect of Hobbes's royalism and his ties to the monarchy in the early essays particularly difficult to understand; they seem to be our best hope for such confirmation.

As a practical matter, these are moot points because the evidence does not support Skinner's account of Hobbes's beliefs about reason and eloquence in the first place. To begin with, Skinner's neat periodization scheme is badly flawed. Though *The Elements* is Hobbes's first work on civil science, Skinner asserts that it represents a radical break with his earlier views on the subject. This in itself is odd; the only evidence we have about Hobbes's earlier views is circumstantial, derived from the assumption that Hobbes must have "imbibed" a humanist politics along with his grammar lessons. It is also odd because Skinner presents Hobbes's writing of *The Elements* and *De Cive* as the "culmination" of his early humanist career, but then goes on to claim that in those very works he repudiates humanism.⁷³ Likewise, the translation of Aristotle, one of the main achievements of Hobbes's humanism, is said to be the earliest example of Hobbes's "misgivings" about eloquence, and the only citation given for Hobbes's "sweeping attack" on the intrinsic link between rhetoric and sedition refers to Hobbes's "Life of Thucydides," written in 1629, well before the supposed about-face, and also described as a defining achievement of Hobbes's humanist career. This rather tortured account gives little support to the thesis that Hobbes's thinking changed dramatically and suggests a bizarre interpretation of his intentions: these works would appear to have been meant as contributions to the *studia humanitatis* and simultaneously as rejections of humanist ideals.

Moreover, once we look at the content of those works, the claim that Hobbes twice reverses himself seems tenuous at best. Hobbes said that he translated Thucydides to show the English

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-326.

the dangers of flatterers and wicked, foolish men who used eloquence to arouse the passions of assemblies and lead them into folly.⁷⁴ Skinner neglects to mention, when documenting this "sweeping attack" on eloquence, Hobbes's emphasis on lack of judgment, stating merely that Hobbes equates eloquence with sedition. But Hobbes consistently held throughout his career that it was eloquence *joined with* lack of judgment or wisdom that fomented sedition. He expresses this view in *The Elements*, warning, in a passage notable for its eloquence and classical allusions, that "when eloquence and want of judgment go together, want of judgment, like the daughters of Pelias, consenteth, through eloquence, which is the witchcraft of Medea, to cut the commonwealth in pieces."⁷⁵ Hobbes stresses in *De Cive* that eloquence devoted to truth is almost always linked to wisdom, while eloquence aiming at victory rarely is. Each form has its use; the former in deliberation, the latter in exhortation; the danger is precisely that foolish or wicked men will use exhortation, rather than deliberation, in counsel and in assemblies, a concern obvious throughout *Leviathan*.⁷⁶

Most of the alleged shifts in Hobbes's views, along with his "attacks" and "rejections" of various parts of the rhetorical tradition, are products of Skinnerian gloss rather than Hobbesian declaration.⁷⁷ For instance, Skinner frequently invokes Hobbes's statement that the sciences are small power: "'The Sciences are small power,' [Hobbes] now concedes, 'but Eloquence is Power,' and is indeed to be numbered among the most eminent faculties of the human mind."⁷⁸ These lines come from Hobbes's discussion of power, which he defines as the ability to acquire riches, friends, reputation, or good luck; persuasion is never mentioned. Eloquence numbers among the "eminent" powers, those which are readily visible or apparent to others, along with physical strength, liberality, and good looks ("Forme is Power; because

74. Hobbes, "On the Life and History of Thucydides," *Hobbes's Thucydides*, ed. Richard Schlatter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1975), pp. 12-13.

75. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies, 2ed. (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1969), p. 178; cf. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 300ff.

76. Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 139.

77. Martinich, "Reason and Rhetoric," p. 150 documents this "tendentious" proclivity.

78. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 351; cf. p. 4.

being a promise of Good, it recommendeth men to the favor of women and strangers"). "The Sciences," Hobbes writes further down a longish list, "are small Power; *because not eminent*; and therefore not acknowledged in any man."⁷⁹ In other words, science is less useful than good looks or eloquence in acquiring friends, riches, and reputation because it is not an outwardly identifiable trait. Skinner makes it seem as though Hobbes has declared that science is weak, compared with eloquence, in persuading people of the truth, a view Hobbes never even implies. Such "spin" on Hobbes's statements is typical in Skinner's book.

Skinner is wrong about Hobbes's beliefs on rhetoric and civil science. Indeed, as Johnston shows quite persuasively, Hobbes's views on these matters remain consistent throughout all of his major works on civil science.⁸⁰ Whatever one's position on the relation between beliefs and intentions, this leaves Skinner's argument about Hobbes's intentions in disarray.

Theory in Practice?

Skinner has always held that good method will produce good history. Judging from his historical writings on Hobbes, however, his application of the method is quite varied, sometimes conflicting, frequently unpersuasive or problematic, and often difficult to reconcile with his theoretical writings. The key concepts of utterances, conventions, and intentions are poorly specified and inconsistently applied.

I have taken at face value Skinner's invitation to read his historical works as exemplary of his method—and thus assumed that there is a method to be exemplified. Some critics deny that Skinner actually sets out a method at all, arguing that he really advances "a claim about what [he believes] takes place, or should take place, in performing interpretations."⁸¹ Even if this claim

79. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 151

80. David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 61.

81. John G. Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, 1979), p. 102; cf. Charles D. Tarlton, "Historicity, Meaning, and Revisionism in the Study of Political Thought," *History and Theory* 12 (1973): 312.

provides sound advice or accurately depicts what takes place in interpretation, these critics allege, it is not a method but a prescription for successful understanding—a philosophical reconstruction of the process of interpretation.⁸² Based on our reading of his works on Hobbes, a case study of the theory in practice, the conclusion that Skinner does not really set out a method at all seems plausible; it is certainly clear that more specific attention to practical problems of application is needed. This might take the form of concrete guidelines for identifying utterances, selecting among contexts, and linking beliefs with intentions. The difficulties we have uncovered with the theory in practice, including the bad history that sometimes results, give the sobering impression that it may be impossible to do good history solely on the basis of Skinner's extant methodological suggestions

In concluding our discussion of the theory in practice, I want to consider two possible objections to my argument. The first is that I impute a certainty to Skinner's aims that he explicitly rejects. In his methodological writings, Skinner characterizes his approach as one providing a range of plausible intentions.⁸³ He recognizes that any utterance may have almost infinite meanings, and thus that the number of contexts within which the author might have been working is potentially vast. Suggesting that the method aims at or is capable of determining an author's intentions therefore mischaracterizes Skinner's position, ignoring his own explicit recognition that absolute certitude is impossible.⁸⁴

Skinner does sometimes argue that his method at best provides a range of plausible intentions, though just as often he describes his aim as determining what an author was doing in writing, and he insists that certainty is at least in principle possible.⁸⁵ Further, a claim to historical validity seems to imply and depend upon at least a strong measure of certainty. In the works on Hobbes that we have surveyed, moreover, Skinner seems happy to advance definitive claims; in fact, he rarely fails to tell us exactly what Hobbes was up to. Skinner wrote that there could "be no doubt" that Hobbes intended to contribute to the lay defense of Engagement and that

82. Gunnell, *Political Theory*, pp. 102, 122.

83. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 64; cf. "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation," p. 77.

84. Skinner, "A Reply," p. 280.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

this discovery provided "a new test of plausibility" for interpretations of Hobbes.⁸⁶ Some of his defenders dismiss such bold statements as "youthful indiscretions," but in *Reason and Rhetoric* Skinner is equally bold, stating that there is "no prospect of understanding [Hobbes's] thought unless we treat this wider discourse [of Renaissance humanism] as the primary object of our research."⁸⁷ These examples might only indicate that Skinner's enthusiasm sometimes carries him away—though that indispensable contexts come and go with some frequency is itself disturbing. Regardless, they raise serious doubts about whether the method is in fact seen by its inventor as limited with respect to certainty.

Second, it might be objected that I overemphasize the role of conventions in Skinner's work. As my own argument demonstrates, rather than excluding other information, Skinner often depends upon it. The objector would argue that Skinner intends his approach to supplement, not to supplant, other practices. As one early critic of this article argued, by using historical evidence to demonstrate errors in Skinner's work on Hobbes, I actually confirm the value of contextualist approaches and thereby vindicate Skinner's theory, if not his own application of it.

No one can seriously claim as "his method" the use of any and all historical evidence—and Skinner of course has never done so. Necessarily, even contextual methods establish evidentiary standards and rules for using that evidence. The question is not one of *more* contextual evidence, but of *what kind*. On this point Skinner is quite clear: in "Meaning and Understanding," he attacks contextualist approaches as eagerly and uncompromisingly as he does textualist ones. Broader context might tell us something about how the relevant forms of words and arguments were used,⁸⁸ he says, but the "fundamental assumption of the contextual methodology, that the ideas of a given text should be understood in terms of its social context, can be shown to be mistaken and to serve...as the source of further very prevalent confusions in the history of ideas."⁸⁹ The "appropriate focus of the study is," Skinner writes, "essentially linguistic" and this fact dictates that other

86. Skinner, "Ideological Context," p. 313.

87. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 8 (emphasis added). See also "Social Meaning," p. 95; "Some Problems," p. 104.

88. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," pp. 57-9.

89. *Ibid.*

aspects of social context must be located within the “linguistic enterprise” of interpretation.⁹⁰ “[Context] needs...to be treated as an ultimate framework for helping to decide what conventionally recognizable meanings, in a society of *that* kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate.”⁹¹

Skinner’s method hinges on the interpretive sufficiency of conventions for recovering intentions; it purports to be a science for the recovery of the actual historical meanings of texts. Conventions limit and define what an author might possibly mean; only by reconstructing them can we determine an author’s intentions. Other evidence might be useful for other purposes, but it is *logically unconnected to the process of recovering intentions*:

It can hardly be a relevant criticism to observe that we may approach a text with many other questions in mind besides the one I have singled out. I do not *arbitrarily* exclude these other questions: I exclude them on the grounds that they are unconnected with—and must not be confused with—the hermeneutic enterprise in which I am alone interested.⁹²

Skinner is not just an exponent of a contextualism with an idiosyncratic interest in words; if he were, decades of impassioned debate could be dismissed as a tempest in a teapot.

The Practice of Theory

Skinner concluded his scathing 1964 review of Hood’s book on *Leviathan* by exclaiming: “If there is to be any prospect of clearing up the confusions into which the study of Hobbes’s work has fallen, it is less philosophy, and more history, which is needed.”⁹³ There is something deeply ironic about this statement, given the immense philosophical machinery Skinner has assembled in his pursuit of better historical understanding. So

90. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

92. Skinner, “A Reply,” p. 232.

93. Skinner, “Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” *Historical Journal* 7 (1964): 333. For Skinner’s complaints with the contemporary Hobbes scholarship see “The Context of Hobbes’s Theory of Political Obligation,” *Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Maurice Cranston and Richard S. Peters (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972).

far I have concentrated on this machinery and its operation; now, I want to consider briefly the connection between the machinery and the product it generates—between Skinner's methodological suggestions, the philosophical commitments from which they follow, and the kind of history they turn out.

Skinner began his famous sweep through the Augean stables of political theory because he felt that neither of the dominant approaches, textualist or contextualist, was a "sufficient or even appropriate means of achieving a proper understanding of any given literary or philosophical work. Both methodologies," he felt, "commit philosophical mistakes in the assumptions they make about the conditions necessary for the understanding of utterances."⁹⁴ Skinner's method is designed to eliminate these mistakes; his criticism of the leading approaches to political thought assumes from the outset the validity of his own understanding of interpretation as requiring the recovery of intentions through the use of a modified form of speech act theory. Gunnell is thus right that what is at stake in the debate over Skinner's method is what constitutes historical interpretation.⁹⁵ The "philosophical mistakes" Skinner attacks are really only philosophical *differences*; textualists and contextualists are "mistaken" not because their methods prevent them from reaching the kind of conclusion in which they are interested but because they are interested in what Skinner thinks is the wrong kind of conclusion.

In other words, as Minogue charges (and Skinner accepts), Skinner is a "philosophical imperialist."⁹⁶ This imperialism derives from his "fundamental assumption as an intellectual historian": that "the history of thought should be viewed not as a series of attempts to answer a canonical set of questions, but as a sequence of episodes in which the questions as well as the answers have frequently changed."⁹⁷ Skinner's method must be understood in these terms: to limit our study of historical meaning to what an author might have intended is to put this assumption into practice, to make it impossible to find that old texts might be concerned with the same questions that concern us. Skinner has recently tried

94. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 29.

95. Gunnell, *Political Theory*, p. 103.

96. Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History," 178; cf. Skinner, "A Reply," p. 234.

97. Skinner, "A Reply," p. 234.

to conceal the iron fist of his imperialism in the velvet glove of methodological pluralism, acknowledging that there are many reasons for doing history and many ways of doing it.⁹⁸ His stance is further softened by his repeated insistence that there are several kinds of meaning (plain or locutionary meaning and "meaning for me" as well as illocutionary meaning) and that intentions are not equivalent with the sum total of meaning a text might contain or acquire.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, he never wavers in maintaining that knowledge of intentions is *equivalent with* illocutionary meaning and that this meaning alone defines the historical identity of a text.¹⁰⁰ This largely uncontested claim to historical validity is a powerful weapon, and Skinner has never relaxed his grip on it.

Skinner is often criticized on the grounds that his method reduces the study of political theory to a dusty antiquarianism, stripping it of any modern relevance.¹⁰¹ Too often this charge is leveled at Skinner as if it were an unforeseen or unintended consequence of his interest in intentions; on the contrary, his focus on intentions is meant to operationalize precisely such a separation between past and present. He frequently denounces as "depressingly philistine" the view that political thought is irrelevant to contemporary readers when restricted to its historical context. To him, the role of the intellectual historian is "to provide...readers with information relevant to the making of judgments about their current values and beliefs," which are often inherited and frequently unexamined. The historian exposes readers to neglected and forgotten ideas and then "[leaves] them to ruminate" on their judgments. His method, by showing how old texts relate to the context of their occurrence, provides the key to "self-awareness," helping us see what is necessary and what is contingent in our world and giving us a broader, more objective, tolerant, and self-critical perspective on our own political values and arrangements.¹⁰²

98. Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, pp. 108-9; "A Reply," p. 232.

99. Skinner, "Some Problems," p. 102; "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation," p. 70; "Reply," p. 272. Skinner ridicules the idea of "meaning for me" as a "consumer-oriented study of 'reader response'" (*ibid.*).

100. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation," p. 70.

101. Skinner "A Reply," p. 286, summarizes these charges.

102. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 67; "A Reply," p. 287; cf. *Liberty Before Liberalism*, p. 107; *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 15.

The charge that Skinner's method leads to antiquarianism misses the mark, but it points to a more fundamental tension in his philosophical enterprise. He contends that only by establishing an author's intentions can we understand that he was concerned with his own questions rather than with ours. But as we have seen, the separation between past and present, which the focus on intentions reflects, is Skinner's "fundamental assumption," the philosophical starting point from which his method is derived rather than a conclusion that it yields. The tension arises because if we accept this assumption, there is no need to do intellectual history to attain historical self-awareness; we know as a matter of principle that our own ideas are contingent, that our questions are our own, and that the past holds no solutions to them.

Skinner "emphatically [reserves]" his admiration "for those historians who consciously hold themselves aloof from enthusiasm and indignation" when considering the past.¹⁰³ The overleaf of *Liberty Before Liberalism*, however, describes Skinner's effort "to excavate, and to vindicate, the neo-Roman theory of free citizens and free states." In his review, Crick dryly observes that the book's cover is more forthcoming than its author about the argument it contains.¹⁰⁴ Skinner is, to borrow a phrase, "maddeningly coy" about his political commitments.¹⁰⁵ Yet for all this, he has throughout his long career been concerned with excavating and vindicating a particular point of view: republican humanism or, now, "neo-Romanism."¹⁰⁶

We have seen that Skinner's project of historicizing political theory consciously follows from his convictions about the separation between past and present—a typically republican or humanist conception of historical consciousness. Skinner sees modern political thought as comprising a dominant ideology (liberalism) and a subordinate counter-ideology (republican humanism).¹⁰⁷ When the intellectual historian contrasts our

103. Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, p. 117-8.

104. Bernard Crick, "Liberty Before Liberalism," *Political Quarterly* 69 (1998): 326.

105. Herzog, "Reason and Rhetoric," p. 895.

106. Cf. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 16. Skinner hopes to convey "something of the attractions of [humanism's] ... accounts of rationality and moral argument" and to raise "anew the question of which [philosophical] style is more deserving of our intellectual allegiances." This is largely a rhetorical question.

107. Tully, "Pen is a Mighty Sword," p. 17.

present beliefs with neglected or forgotten ones, he is essentially resurrecting this republican-humanist counter-ideology. This is clear when we consider that the views of this subordinate ideology are forgotten and neglected because they were at some point rejected or abandoned in favor of other (mainly liberal) views. Thus, to reconsider our present beliefs in light of forgotten ones is to renew the ideological contest between the dominant and the subordinate ideologies of liberalism and republicanism on historical rather than overtly ideological grounds. It is revealing in this respect that all of the leading practitioners of the Cambridge school—despite their methodological differences—are advocates of some brand of republican humanism and critics of liberalism.

It is difficult to understand how the historian can engage in this process of challenging contemporary values and judgments by reviving long-vanquished or abandoned ideological alternatives without taking at least a tacit position on the relative merits of the ideas themselves. The practical effect of resituating a figure like Hobbes in the context of humanist debates is to undermine the very foundations of much of contemporary liberal thought. Recall Skinner's various conclusions on Hobbes: he is identified with the defenders of Engagement (Commonwealthmen), he reaches a partial reconciliation with the Renaissance humanist view of eloquence, he is implicitly but clearly criticized (in *Liberty Before Liberalism*) for failing to see the attractions of the neo-Roman view of liberty. These conclusions challenge the accepted views of Hobbes as natural law theorist, as exponent of a rational or scientific or typically Enlightenment view of political obligation, and as liberal theorist of rights and contract.¹⁰⁸ In effect, past ideological questions are revived and transformed into problems of method; sweeping challenges to the foundations of modern thinking about rights, liberty, political obligation, and the very nature of civil science become questions of historical validity.¹⁰⁹

It is difficult not to conjecture that there *is* a connection between Skinner's particular view of the relation between past and present, the method he derives from that view, and the

108. Skinner and other Cambridge school theorists have similarly reinterpreted Machiavelli, Locke, Harrington, and others.

109. This is not to take any position on whether these views do in fact require reexamination.

republican history that results. Paradoxically, such a connection would imply that past thinkers and past ideas might hold answers to our present political problems and that these problems are not after all so distant and different from those of the past. We began with Ashcraft's recommendation to consider the practical effects of Skinner's method *rather than* the "high-flying debate which seeks to transform methodological presuppositions into philosophical conclusions." We considered a number of the practical issues that arise in Skinner's implementation of his method in his work on Hobbes. Yet it might be that the philosophical commitment to a humanist conception of history that informs the method and the republican ideology it resurrects and promotes are the most important practical considerations raised in its use. I leave it for the reader to ruminate.