

Quentin Skinner: The Contextualist in Context

Shivatva Beniwal

PhD Candidate, Department of History, University of Delhi, New Delhi (Delhi)



Abstract

*This article applies to Quentin Skinner the reflexive imperative of his own methodology: that any intellectual intervention becomes fully intelligible only when restored to its specific biographical, philosophical, institutional, and polemical conditions of production. It argues that Skinner's Scottish cultural inheritance, his humanistic education at Bedford School, his immersion in the philosophical atmosphere of Cambridge in the early 1960s, and the historiographical controversy into which his 1969 essay intervened are constitutive of the contextualist method rather than antecedent to it. Against the received scholarly account, the article contends that philosophical priority belongs not to Austin's speech-act theory but to the later Wittgenstein: §546 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, with its insistence that "words are also deeds", and the concept of *Sprachspielen*, rendered as "speech-performances" rather than "language games"; together supply the warrant for treating illocutionary intent as an historical rather than a psychological undertaking. It examines the method's foundational commitments—contextualism, authorial intention, and the conception of texts as speech acts—alongside five decades of critical engagement and its productive extension to non-Western intellectual traditions. The article concludes that the neo-Roman conception of freedom Skinner excavates from the historical record was for him not merely a scholarly achievement but a living political conviction: his republican refusal of a knighthood and his acts of financial altruism within academic life constitute biographical evidence of the kind his own method teaches historians to reckon with—that the civic principles his scholarship recovers are not merely described but enacted.*

Keywords: *Quentin Skinner, Cambridge School, Contextualism, Intellectual Biography, Republicanism*

Introduction

The principle that historical texts acquire their full meaning only when restored to the specific historical situations that gave them life is amongst the most productive and contested methodological propositions advanced in the study of intellectual history during the twentieth century. It is associated, above all, with the work of Quentin Skinner, whose sustained elaboration of what came to be known as the contextualist method

over more than five decades has fundamentally altered the terms in which scholars approach the interpretation of historical thought.¹ Yet the principle, compelling as it is, issues an implicit challenge to any account of Skinner's own scholarship that neglects to apply it reflexively: to treat his methodological innovations as though they arose in some sphere beyond historical circumstance—as though they were the timeless contributions of an abstract philosophical intelligence—would be

to commit, with conspicuous irony, the very error that those innovations were designed to contest. The present article proceeds on the conviction that this irony must be honoured rather than evaded. To situate Skinner's work within the conditions of its production is not a courtesy preliminary to the real analytical business of describing the method; it is itself part of that business. His Scottish cultural inheritance, his English educational formation, his immersion in the distinctive philosophical atmosphere of Cambridge in the early 1960s, and the specific historiographical controversies into which he subsequently intervened are not background to the method but constituents of its intelligibility. They do not explain it in any reductive causal sense—originality always exceeds its determinants—but they render it comprehensible as the precise intellectual intervention it was, directed towards specific ends, within a determinate moment in the life of historical scholarship.

A further claim runs alongside this: that in Skinner's case the biographical and the methodological are united not only in intellectual formation but in the conduct of personal life. The consistency with which his private actions—his republican refusal of ceremonial honour, his acts of financial altruism within academic life—embody the civic principles that his scholarship excavates from the historical record is too systematic to be regarded as coincidence. It is, rather, evidence of a rare integrity, one that issues not from deliberate self-display but from the deep convergence of thought and life. The article is organised in two movements. The first situates the scholar within the circumstances of his formation and career; the second examines the method those circumstances helped to produce, traces its elaboration and critical reception, and establishes its continuing significance for intellectual history in its comparative and non-Western dimensions. In pursuing this double aim, the article does not merely describe a methodology but enacts it.

Intellectual Formation and Civic Conviction

Quentin Robert Duthie Skinner was born on 26 November 1940 at Oldham, in Lancashire; he

read History at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, graduating in 1962 with a double-starred first-class degree.² In October of the same year, at the age of twenty-one and without a doctoral degree, he was elected to a teaching fellowship at Christ's College—a distinction as uncommon then as it has remained since.³ The intellectual atmosphere of Cambridge in those years constituted the matrix within which his method would take shape; to understand the method, one must attend to that atmosphere with some precision. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*—posthumously published in 1953 and still fiercely contested during Skinner's undergraduate years—had dislodged the prevalent assumption that words carry fixed meanings transmissible between minds independently of the occasions on which they are employed. The *Investigations* insist, rather, that meaning is a function of use: to know what a word means is to know what it does in the practice that sustains it. The passage Skinner would identify as most decisive for his mature work is §546—"words are also deeds"—from which he drew the foundational conviction that language is a form of social action, and that any utterance must be understood through what is being done in producing it.⁴ J.L. Austin's work on speech-acts sharpened and systematised this Wittgensteinian foundation, extending its implications through a precise analytical framework.⁵ The tripartite distinction Austin drew between the locutionary content of an utterance, its illocutionary force—what is *done* in the saying—and its perlocutionary effects gave Skinner the conceptual vocabulary for the governing question of his mature scholarship: of any given political text, was the author supporting and aiming to vindicate, or attacking and criticising, or perhaps deliberately ignoring, some prevailing political value, institution, or practice?⁶ To these two philosophical sources R.G. Collingwood added a third, historical in character: the logic of question and answer, the insistence that a text is intelligible only as a response to a question the author was moved to address.⁷ Recover the question and the meaning follows; read the text without it and one

reads—as Collingwood had argued—not a historical document but a reflection of one’s own preoccupations.

These three resources—Wittgensteinian analysis of linguistic practice, Austinian speech-act theory, and Collingwoodian question-and-answer logic—converged upon a common polemical purpose: the rejection of the dominant approaches to the history of political thought.⁸ The ‘textualist’ error read canonical works as self-sufficient objects, severed from the occasions of their composition and ransacked for ‘anticipations’ of modern concerns; the sociological error reduced ideas to symptoms of material conditions, dissolving the author’s intention in the process. The collaborative elaboration of the Cambridge School—J.G.A. Pocock attending to the political languages and inherited vocabularies within which individual thinkers worked, John Dunn insisting on the recovery of the agent’s own conceptual world—proceeded on parallel lines, distinct in emphasis but convergent in orientation.⁹ A fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, held from 1974 to 1979, supplied what Cambridge alone could not: sustained exposure to opposing traditions, chief amongst them the Straussian reading of canonical texts as timeless objects whose meaning exegesis alone could disclose.¹⁰ The encounter sharpened his methodological self-consciousness; one defines one’s position most precisely under pressure.

The choice of scholarly subject was not accidental. Skinner’s sustained engagement with the republican tradition—with the neo-Roman arguments for liberty as independence from subjection to arbitrary authority,¹¹ with the civic humanist defence of active political participation¹²—reflects convictions that were not merely scholarly. Upon appointment to the Regius Professorship of Modern History in 1996, he was offered, by convention, the dignity of a knighthood. He declined. His explanation, as reported by those present, was direct: “I’m a Republican. I can’t do that—my friends would never speak to me again”.¹³ The scholar who had spent three decades recovering the arguments by which early modern writ-

ers had resisted the claims of monarchical and arbitrary power found, in this instance, that he inhabited those arguments rather than merely analysed them. It is precisely this coincidence of scholarly method and civic conviction that the article’s reflexive argument seeks to elucidate; the contextualist in context is himself best understood as a thinker who was not merely describing but enacting the tradition he recovered.

The Philosophical Foundations of a New History of Ideas

The history of ideas as Skinner inherited it in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a discipline organised, in its most ambitious and influential forms, around the conviction that the great texts of Western political and philosophical thought addressed questions of enduring and universal significance. Its most systematic scholarly expression was the theory of ‘unit-ideas’ elaborated by Arthur O. Lovejoy in *The Great Chain of Being* (1936),¹⁴ which sought to identify a finite set of elemental ideas recurring throughout the history of Western thought in their various philosophical guises; what the theory presupposed, accordingly, was the possibility of abstracting such ideas from the particular circumstances of their employment and tracing them as stable units of meaning across time. Against this presupposition, Skinner mounted a sustained and radical methodological opposition.¹⁵

The decisive public statement of that opposition was the essay ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, published in *History and Theory* in 1969, but originally delivered—under the deliberately provocative title ‘The Unimportance of the Great Texts in the History of Political Thought’—at the annual meeting of the British Political Studies Association in 1968, when Skinner was twenty-seven years of age.¹⁶ Its central charge was that the great texts tradition, in presupposing perennial questions, led consistently to anachronistic interpretation: approaching classical authors as though they were engaged with the same problems that preoccupy modern readers, scholars inevitably distorted what those authors were actually doing, importing into their

texts concerns that the texts could not have been designed to express; what was required was an approach that attended to the particular intellectual controversies, linguistic conventions, and normative commitments within which authors were working, and that asked, before any other question, what they were attempting to accomplish in writing what they wrote.

The philosophical resources from which this alternative was constructed were three. The first was Collingwood, from whom Skinner drew the logic of question and answer—the obligation to recover the questions to which historical texts were responses—whilst explicitly rejecting the doctrine of historical re-enactment as psychologically speculative and philosophically unnecessary:¹⁷ the intentions behind historical utterances were publicly constituted performances, intelligible through the conventions governing their production; they were not private mental states requiring empathetic access. A philosophical vocabulary adequate to this public and conventional account of meaning was precisely what Austin's speech-act theory supplied. Austin's tripartite distinction between locutionary content, illocutionary force—the specific act performed in the saying—and perlocutionary effects furnished Skinner with the analytical vocabulary his central methodological claim required;¹⁸ to interpret an historical text is not primarily to extract its propositional content but to recover the illocutionary force that rendered it intelligible as a performative act within its specific conventions.

The third and most fundamental philosophical resource was the later work of Wittgenstein, and its priority in Skinner's intellectual formation has, on his own retrospective assessment, been significantly underrepresented in scholarly accounts of his methodology. In correspondence addressed to the present author on 29 April 2025, Skinner writes plainly that in laying out his historico-critical case he placed far too little emphasis on his debt to Wittgenstein and far too much on Austin. The passage of the *Philosophical Investigations* he identifies as most decisive is §546—"words are also deeds"—the recognition that language is a

form of social action, and that what is said cannot be understood apart from what is being done in saying it; the general claim he drew from this passage was that to understand anything that has been communicated, one must recover what the speaker was doing in producing it. He further observes, in the same correspondence, the significance of §7 and the concept of *Sprachspielen*: a term which the standard English translation renders as 'language games', but which—as Austin was the first to observe—is more properly translated as 'speech-performances', denoting the specific performative actions enacted through utterance rather than the abstract rule-governed structures that 'language games' unhelpfully implies. The difference is not merely terminological. 'Language games' suggests a system of rules surveyed from without; 'speech-performances' insists upon the concrete contextual work accomplished by particular utterances in particular social situations. It is from this Wittgensteinian insistence—that meaning is inseparable from social practice, and that the recovery of what a speaker was doing is therefore an historical rather than a psychological undertaking—that Skinner's methodology draws its deepest intellectual roots. This retrospective assessment finds corroboration in the scholarly literature, where both Burns and Havercroft have independently identified the centrality of the later Wittgenstein in Skinner's philosophical formation.¹⁹

From this convergence of Collingwoodian historicism, Austinian speech-act analysis, and Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, Skinner distilled a single foundational conviction: that meaning is not an intrinsic property of texts, recoverable by sufficiently attentive reading in isolation from context, but an achievement of specific utterances within specific historical situations; publicly constituted, such achievements are therefore historically recoverable without recourse to speculation about private mental states. The synthesis, achieved within the distinctive intellectual environment of Cambridge in the 1960s and in deliberate opposition to the transhistorical assumptions of the dominant tradition, consti-

tutes an intervention fully intelligible only in its own historical context—and that, precisely, is the standard of interpretive method it holds out for all serious intellectual history.

The Method in Its Concepts, Arguments, and Major Applications

The methodological position that emerged from these philosophical foundations rests upon a small number of closely interrelated principles whose apparent simplicity belies considerable analytical depth. At its centre stands the concept of contextualism: the insistence that a text can be adequately interpreted only when situated within the historically specific linguistic, intellectual, and ideological conventions that prevailed at the time of its production. Such conventions do not determine the meaning of the text in any mechanical sense; they constitute, rather, the conditions within which the author's communicative intentions become recoverable.²⁰ To abstract a text from those conventions and read it as though it were addressed to the present reader's concerns is not to interpret it but to ventriloquise through it—to make it say what one has already decided one wishes to hear. Inseparable from contextualism is the concept of authorial intention, though it must be emphasised that the intention Skinner seeks to recover is not a private psychological state inaccessible to historical enquiry. It is, rather, the historically situated aim behind an utterance: the specific act the author was attempting to accomplish, recoverable through the conventions governing the text's production and the discursive context within which it intervened.²¹ Alongside these two concepts stands the conception of texts as speech acts—as performative interventions designed not merely to convey information but to accomplish specific purposes within a particular historical and rhetorical landscape. To read a political text as a speech act is to ask not only what it says but what it does: what position it takes within an ongoing controversy, what normative vocabulary it employs or contests, and what it was designed to make its original readers think or believe.²²

From these foundational commitments there follows a concern with what Skinner terms 'rhetorical redescription'—a device drawn from the classical rhetorical tradition, where it is known as *paradiastole*²³—as one of the principal mechanisms through which political actors have historically contested and transformed the evaluative vocabulary of their time. The device consists in the strategic revaluation of a moral or political concept: the redescription of what has hitherto been counted a virtue as a vice, or a vice as a virtue, in the service of a particular political argument. Niccolò Machiavelli's revaluation of *virtù*—severed from its Christian-humanist moral associations and re-cast as the name for the qualities of energy, adaptability, and ruthless effectiveness required of the successful prince—is perhaps the most celebrated illustration; Thomas Hobbes's systematic dismantling of the republican conception of liberty, which he recast not as genuine freedom from arbitrary domination but as mere licence incompatible with the requirements of political order, exemplifies the same rhetorical procedure directed to entirely different ends. It is through such strategic redescriptions, Skinner argues, that conceptual change in intellectual history characteristically occurs: not through the displacement of one abstract philosophical position by another in a vacuum of pure argument, but through the contested wielding of evaluative language within specific political controversies.²⁴

These foundational concepts give rise to a set of defining methodological theses. Texts must be understood as addressing specific historical dilemmas rather than timeless philosophical questions: Hobbes's *Leviathan* is not a contribution to the eternal debate about the nature of sovereignty, but an intervention within the particular political and ideological controversies of mid-seventeenth-century England, and any account of its meaning that ignores those controversies will be, to that extent, an account of a text that Hobbes did not write.²⁵ Meaning derives from prevailing linguistic conventions and the force of contemporary debates rather than from propositional content considered in isolation; authorial intention is an

indispensable dimension of interpretation; and belief-systems of any period must be assessed within their own normative horizons rather than by criteria they could not have anticipated.²⁶ These theses collectively constitute a threefold interpretive procedure: the elucidation of the conventional meanings of principal terms at the time of writing; the reconstruction of the broader discursive and institutional context within which the text intervened; and the identification of the specific performative act the author intended to execute within that context.²⁷

The two-volume *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978)—awarded the Wolfson History Prize in 1979—remains the fullest and most ambitious single demonstration of the method in practice, tracing the development of Western political discourse from the thirteenth century through the Reformation and its immediate aftermath. Working through the civic humanist vocabulary of the Italian city-states, the languages of Lutheran and Calvinist political theology, and the emergent theories of sovereignty and constitutional resistance that attended the confessional conflicts of the sixteenth century, Skinner showed what contextual intellectual history could achieve at the highest level of synthetic ambition: each text placed precisely within the controversies that gave it its argumentative force; each author's illocutionary intent recovered through painstaking reconstruction of the discursive environment in which that text intervened. The work demonstrated, more persuasively than any methodological manifesto could have done, that contextualist principles were capable of sustaining historical scholarship of the first rank.²⁸

The two other principal works of the Cambridge School confirmed that the method's productivity extended beyond its founder's own practice. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) demonstrated that the political languages through which historical actors made sense of their situations were historically specific achievements rather than universal philosophical resources; it traced the civic humanist vocabulary of virtue, fortune, and corruption from Renaissance Flor-

ence across the Atlantic republican tradition.²⁹ Dunn's *The Political Thought of John Locke* (1969) made an analogous argument with concentrated analytical precision: that Locke's reasoning cannot be understood apart from his Calvinist theological commitments and the practical crises of the 1680s, and that to read him as a founding liberal theorist addressing perennial questions is to project concerns onto his text that were not his own.³⁰ Together, these three works constituted the Cambridge School's most compelling demonstration: that contextual interpretation, far from constraining the intellectual historian, was the condition of genuine historical understanding. It is *Liberty before Liberalism* (1998), however, that most directly discloses what is ultimately at issue in the historical method Skinner advocates. By recovering the neo-Roman conception of liberty—freedom as independence from arbitrary domination, as distinct from the liberal conception of liberty as mere non-interference—from the tradition of classical republican thought in which it had long been submerged, he demonstrated that the conceptual landscape of modern political discourse is narrower than its inhabitants have generally supposed.³¹ The liberal definition of freedom is not a philosophical discovery but an historical achievement: the product of specific theoretical contestations in which the republican alternative was deliberately and polemically displaced. "To be dependent on the will of another," Skinner observes, "is already to be deprived of your liberty."³² The excavation of this submerged tradition was not a purely antiquarian exercise; it was, as he himself described it, "an act of retrieval, trying to recover wider and missing structures of debate"³³—the enlargement of the present's conceptual resources through the recovery of what the past had thought and lost. *Visions of Politics* (2002), in three volumes, provided both a sustained methodological statement—above all in the first volume, *Regarding Method*—and a series of detailed historical studies demonstrating the method's analytical range.³⁴ The axiom Skinner draws from Nietzsche—that concepts only have histories—captures, with characteristic

precision, the conviction that no concept carries a meaning independent of the historical circumstances in which it has been applied, contested, and transformed.³⁵

Critical Reception, Methodological Refinement, and Enduring Significance

No methodological position of genuine originality and ambition escapes sustained critical scrutiny, and Skinner's contextualism has attracted over five decades a body of criticism both wide-ranging in its perspectives and philosophically serious in its substance. Its cumulative force has been not to discredit the method but to clarify, with a precision that only serious critical engagement can produce, its genuine achievements and its real limits. Skinner has responded to the most significant of these objections with exemplary rigour—above all in *Visions of Politics*, Volume I (2002)³⁶—and his willingness to refine his positions without abandoning his fundamental commitments marks the intellectual seriousness that the method demands.

The most philosophically penetrating objection concerning the method's treatment of authorial intention came from Dominick LaCapra, who argued that by privileging authorial intention as the key to textual meaning, Skinner reduces texts to monologic expressions of a single controlling purpose, suppressing the internal tensions, dialogical dimensions, and unresolved contradictions that constitute much of their intellectual richness.³⁷ A text, on LaCapra's account, maintains "still living" possibilities extending beyond the historical circumstances of its production, visible only when it is read as a locus of ongoing interpretive engagement between past and present rather than as a closed utterance whose meaning was fixed at its moment of composition.³⁸ Skinner's response—that recovering authorial intention is indispensable for establishing what a text was doing as a speech act within its historical situation, and that such recovery enables rather than forecloses subsequent dialogical engagement—rightly insists that historical interpretation is not the terminus of a text's significance but its necessary foundation.³⁹

From within Austin's own theoretical framework, Jason D. BeDuhn argued that Skinner's emphasis on authorial intention constitutes a form of the intentionalist fallacy: since the private intentions of historical agents are epistemically inaccessible to the historian, illocutionary force should be reconstructed through linguistic conventions and their social uptake alone. He further charged that Skinner neglects two dimensions of Austin's theory indispensable for understanding how utterances function in the world: 'infelicity', which analyses the conditions under which speech acts fail or misfire, and 'perlocution', which accounts for the actual consequences produced by an utterance in its audience, including those unintended by the speaker and therefore irreducible to authorial intent. Skinner's response clarified that the intentions he seeks to recover are not private psychological states but publicly constituted, convention-governed illocutionary acts; he acknowledged the relevance of failed uptake and social consequences but maintained that perlocutionary effects are properly subordinate to the recovery of illocutionary intent as the primary interpretive aim.⁴⁰ The clarification partly meets BeDuhn's concern, though the question of how far convention-governed illocutionary intent can be distinguished from private psychology without dissolving into mere conventionalism remains a genuine difficulty that the account does not wholly resolve.

From a very different direction, Ellen Meiksins Wood charged that Skinner's textualist approach renders invisible the material conditions, structural relations, and social conflicts that shape the production and dissemination of political thought.⁴¹ By attending to intellectual discourses and linguistic vocabularies in relative isolation from the economic and social processes that generate and constrain them, Wood argued from a Marxist perspective, the method produces an account of political ideas as though they existed in a sphere of pure discursive exchange, untouched by the contradictions of class interest and the pressures of material life. Skinner's response in *Visions of Politics* anticipated this line of criticism by demonstrating through detailed analysis how

the emergence of commercial society reshaped political vocabularies and normative languages,⁴² situating ideas within their material and institutional environments whilst maintaining that the relationship between economic structure and intellectual production is less mechanically deterministic than strict Marxist analysis tends to assume. In a 2007 interview Skinner affirms the point directly: “the social world itself sets the questions”, adding that “everyone is a Marxist to that degree, I would hope”.⁴³

A third cluster of objections, perhaps the most consequential for the method’s long-term development, concerns what Christopher Goto-Jones and Sor-hoon Tan have identified as the Euro-centric presuppositions embedded within Skinner’s formulation. Goto-Jones challenged the exclusionary treatment of non-European intellectual traditions implicit in the Cambridge School’s historical concentration on early modern Western political thought, whilst Tan argued that the method’s assumptions concerning individual authorship, textual coherence, and intentional rhetorical intervention are ill-suited to traditions in which anonymity, intertextual transmission, and performative authority are constitutive features rather than deviations from a norm.⁴⁴ In the manuscript cultures of classical Chinese philosophy and South Asian intellectual life, where commentary is itself the canonical form of intellectual intervention and the boundaries between individual and transmitted thought are characteristically fluid, the presupposition of a single author employing a specific rhetorical strategy within a particular discursive controversy requires modifications going beyond mere philological adjustment. Closely allied to these objections is the critique advanced by John Coffey and others concerning the method’s secular bias: its tendency, when applied to the religious and confessional controversies of the early modern period, to illuminate the political dimensions of theological argument at the cost of its constitutive theological substance.⁴⁵ Where theological or metaphysical claims are not merely instrumental to a political purpose but integral to the entire

mode of understanding within which a text operates, a method whose deepest commitments are to the recovery of political illocutionary intent will be structurally limited in its ability to apprehend what is most fundamental to the text’s meaning.⁴⁶

From a different angle, Bhikhu Parekh and R.N. Berki questioned the presupposition, foundational to Skinner’s programme, that historical texts must be interpreted exclusively through the contextually circumscribed intentions of their authors. Writing in 1973, they defended the capacity of the most eminent thinkers in Western intellectual history—Hobbes, Locke, Kant—to transcend the immediate contingencies of their situation and engage with questions of genuinely enduring human significance. To confine the interpretation of their works to the recovery of local polemical intent is, on this account, to practise a form of contextual reductionism that obscures the philosophical ambition and creative universality animating their greatest achievements. What the contextualist imperative risks sacrificing, Parekh and Berki contended, is precisely the dimension of canonical thought that makes it worth studying across the centuries: not its historical particularity, which the method illuminates with great skill, but its capacity to speak, however differently in different ages, to conditions that recur in the life of human societies and to problems that historical change does not wholly dissolve.⁴⁷ Skinner’s position does not straightforwardly refute this argument but confronts it, and the tension between contextual rigour and philosophical universality remains amongst the discipline’s most productively unresolved questions.

Mark Bevir and Robert Lamb qualified the method’s scope by raising the question of its application to systematic thinkers—such as Jürgen Habermas—who have themselves provided the contextualising account of what they are doing and why.⁴⁸ Where an author discharges in advance the historian’s obligation to reconstruct context from external discursive evidence, contextualism becomes redundant rather than mistaken; the observation confirms what contextual

analysis does best—recovering intention precisely where it is not self-declared, in the pre-modern historical province where conventions governing utterance must be patiently reconstructed from external evidence.

The Protestant vocabulary of early modernity constitutes Skinner's most instructive response to the secular bias charge: in the essay 'Moral Principles and Social Change' in *Visions of Politics*, he traces how terms such as 'providence', 'calling', and 'duty' were rhetorically appropriated to legitimate early capitalist conduct,⁴⁹ demonstrating that religious language, on a contextual reading, is not epiphenomenal ideology but a rhetorical and institutional force of genuine consequence in shaping the moral vocabularies within which political and economic action is justified. Against the Euro-centrism charge, Skinner maintains that the methodological imperatives of avoiding anachronism and attending carefully to the conventions governing the production of texts are not Western proprieties but universal scholarly obligations applicable, with due philological care and cultural sensitivity, to any intellectual tradition in which written texts constitute the primary evidence for the recovery of historical thought.⁵⁰

The evolution of Skinner's methodology reflects genuine intellectual deepening. Kari Palonen identifies five stages: from the programmatic contextualism of 'Meaning and Understanding' (1969) through the historical enactment in *The Foundations* (1978), the assimilation of Gadamerian hermeneutics, the rhetorical turn in *Reason and Rhetoric* (1996) and *Visions of Politics* (2002), and the dialogue with Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*.⁵¹ Palonen's reconstruction captures this development with considerable acuity, though it risks presenting as a succession of distinct phases what is more accurately described as the progressive articulation of a single fundamental insight: that the meaning of any utterance is constituted by its situation within an historically specific form of discursive life.⁵²

The continuing vitality of the method was amply demonstrated at the two-day conference convened by Adrian Blau and Joanne Paul at the Brit-

ish Academy in July 2021, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of 'Meaning and Understanding'. Its most significant feature was the extent to which the method's applicability beyond its early modern European province was not merely asserted but substantively explored: contributions on Indian constitutional texts, Islamic juristic writings, Chinese historicist traditions, and South Asian manuscript cultures collectively demonstrated that contextual analysis and the avoidance of anachronism generate genuine scholarly results when pursued beyond the Western canon, with due philological care and cultural attentiveness.⁵³ In his concluding remarks, Skinner defended the publicly reconstructible character of authorial intention, acknowledged that political vocabularies may endure whilst their meanings undergo substantial transformation, and encouraged ongoing methodological pluralism and non-Western engagement.⁵⁴ The proceedings are published as *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas and Beyond*.⁵⁵

This productive cross-cultural adaptation of the method had been pioneered by Jonardon Ganeri, whose work on Indian philosophical traditions identified what he termed 'intertextual contexts': discursive environments in which authors performed intellectual acts through commentary, definition, and proleptic writing within disciplinary systems conceived as having temporal reach far exceeding the immediate circumstances of their production.⁵⁶ Ganeri's work demonstrates both the fertility of contextual analysis when pursued with genuine philological sensitivity and the modifications that non-Western application demands: where the boundaries between original composition and inherited transmission are constitutively indeterminate, the method requires thoughtful revision rather than mechanical extension.

Conclusion

Skinner's career, considered as a whole, constitutes precisely the kind of historical phenomenon that his own methodology is designed to illuminate: an intellectual intervention of the first importance, fully intelligible only when

restored to the conditions—philosophical, institutional, and personal—that produced it. The Scottish cultural inheritance that rendered him selectively receptive to contextual and practical approaches to philosophical questions; the paedagogical formation at Bedford that taught him to regard historical intelligence and literary sensibility as inseparable disciplines; the Cambridge philosophical environment that provided the conceptual vocabulary in which his methodological convictions could be precisely articulated; the historiographical controversy with the great texts tradition that gave his innovations their specific polemical direction and argumentative force: none of these elements, considered in isolation, explains what he achieved. Together, they constitute the context—in the full Skinnerian sense of that term—within which that achievement becomes comprehensible as the act of an historically situated mind working within and against the intellectual conventions of its time, directing the force of its argument towards the fundamental transformation of a discipline.

What distinguishes his career from the mere possession of a distinguished methodology, however, is the consistency with which his personal conduct has embodied the civic principles that his scholarship recovers and commends. To refuse ceremonial honour on grounds of republican conviction; to subordinate personal financial advantage to the welfare of younger colleagues and less well-resourced institutions; to sustain across five decades a practice of scholarly engagement in which the obligations of precision, fairness, and intellectual honesty are treated as inviolable: these are not incidental biographical details but evidence of a kind that his own method teaches us to reckon carefully with. They demonstrate that for Skinner, Wittgenstein's observation that "words are also deeds"—that language is a form of social action incurring social responsibilities—described not only the historical texts he spent his career interpreting but the scholarly writing through which he interpreted them. An article that has sought to contextualise the contextualist has, in attempting to honour both the method

and the life that enacted it, aspired to the standard that his scholarship has consistently set: that understanding any historical figure requires, before all else, the patient and scrupulous effort to see things their way.

References

1. For Skinner's foundational programmatic statement, see Skinner, Q. (1969). Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas. *History and Theory*, 8(1), pp. 3-53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504188>. For a synoptic account of his significance within the discipline, see Whatmore, R. (2015). 'Quentin Skinner and the relevance of intellectual history', in Whatmore, R. and Young, B. (eds.), *A Companion to Intellectual History*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118508091.ch8>.
2. Skinner, Q. (2008). Making history: the changing face of the profession in Britain [interview online]. Institute of Historical Research, 18 April. Available at: https://archives.history.ac.uk/making-history/resources/interviews/Skinner_Quentin.html [Accessed: 19 April 2024]; Balzan Foundation (2006). 'Quentin Skinner: bio-bibliography' [online]. Available at: <https://www.balzan.org/en/prizewinners/quentin-skinner/bio-bibliography> [Accessed: 23 April 2026]; *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2026). 'Quentin Skinner' [online]. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quentin-Skinner> [Accessed: 23 April 2026]. The double-starred first is confirmed in all three sources.
3. Skinner, Q. (2008). *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2026)—for full details see fn. 2. On the exceptional character of a fellowship election without a doctoral degree at Cambridge in this period, see Moyn, S. (2025). 'Quentin Skinner and the contested history of freedom'. *The Nation*, July/August.
4. Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Anscombe, G.E.M. Oxford: Blackwell. Wittgenstein died on 29 April 1951; the *Investigations* appeared posthumously two years later. Skinner's identification of §546 as the passage most decisive for his mature work, and his derivation from it of the conviction that language is a form of social action, are stated in Skinner, Q. (2025). Electronic mail to Shivatva Beniwal, 29 April. Personal correspondence in the possession of the author.

5. Austin, J.L. (1975 [1962]). *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. Urmson, J.O. and Sbisà, M., 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Originally delivered as the William James Lectures at Harvard University, 1955.
6. The tripartite criterion—vindication, criticism, or deliberate silence with respect to a prevailing political value, institution, or practice—is set out in Skinner, Q. (2025), electronic mail to Shivatva Beniwal, 29 April, op. cit.; and elaborated in Skinner, Q. (1969). 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas'. *History and Theory*, 8(1), pp. 3-53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504188>. For Skinner's own characterisation of his approach as a 'Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of action,' see Skinner, Q. (2002). *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1: *Regarding Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 103. On Wittgenstein's primacy in Skinner's philosophical formation, see Burns, A. (2011). 'Conceptual history and the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein: a critique of Quentin Skinner's contextualist method'. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 5(1), pp. 54-83. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187226311X555455>; Havercroft, J. (2011). 'Skinner, Wittgenstein and historical method'. *Paragraph*, 34(3), pp. 371-87. <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2011.0031>.
7. Collingwood, R.G. (1939). *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Collingwood, R.G. (1946). *The Idea of History*, ed. Knox, T.M. Oxford: Clarendon Press. On Skinner's selective appropriation—drawing upon the logic of question and answer whilst explicitly rejecting the doctrine of historical re-enactment—see Skinner, Q. (2002). *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1: *Regarding Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 83-120.
8. Skinner, Q. (1969). pp. 3-28; Browning, G. (2016). *A History of Modern Political Thought: The Question of Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 4. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199682287.003.0004>.
9. Koikkalainen, P. (2011). Contextualist dilemmas: methodology of the history of political theory in two stages. *History of European Ideas*, 37(3), pp. 315-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.10.010>; Pocock, J.G.A. (1975). *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Dunn, J. (1969). *The Political Thought of John Locke*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10. Skinner, Q. (2025). Curriculum Vitae. Queen Mary University of London. Available at: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/history/media/history/Quentin-Skinner-C.-V.-2025.pdf> [Accessed: 15 January 2026]—confirming the fellowship as Member, School of Historical Studies (1974-75), and Longer-term Member, School of Social Science (1976-79); *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2026)—for full details see fn. 2. For the Straussian reading of canonical texts as timeless philosophical objects, see Strauss, L. (1959). *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies*. Glencoe: Free Press.
11. Skinner, Q. (1998). *Liberty before Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-57; Skinner, Q. (2002). A third concept of liberty. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117, pp. 237-68. <https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197262795.003.0007>.
12. Skinner, Q. (1978). *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
13. 'I demand ... less cash, no honour' (2008). *Times Higher Education* [online]. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/i-demand-less-cash-no-honour/404384.article> [Accessed: 23 April 2026]. The exchanges are reported speech attributed to a colleague of Skinner's; this article constitutes the sole published source currently available for these accounts.
14. Lovejoy, A.O. (1936). *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Knight, C. (2012). 'Unit-ideas unleashed: a reinterpretation and reassessment of Lovejovian methodology in the history of ideas'. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 6(2), p. 212. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187226312X650746>.
15. Browning, G. (2016). *A History of Modern Political Thought: The Question of Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 4. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199682287.003.0004>; Furuta, T. (2021). 'Without Laslett to the lost worlds: Quentin Skinner's early methodology'. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 22(3), pp. 144-62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109921000104>; Knight, C. (2012). 'Unit-ideas unleashed: a reinterpretation and reassessment of Lovejovian methodology in the history of ideas'. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 6(2), p. 212. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187226312X650746>.

16. Skinner, Q. (1969). 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas'. *History and Theory*, 8(1), pp. 3-53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504188>.
17. Skinner, Q. (2002). *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1: *Regarding Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 83, 85, 88, 115, 120; Černín, D. (2023). 'Quentin Skinner's attempt to clarify Collingwood'. *Teorie vědy / Theory of Science*, 45(2), pp. 135-52. <https://doi.org/10.46938/tv.2023.572>; McIntyre, K. B. (2008). 'Historicity as methodology or hermeneutics: Collingwood's influence on Skinner and Gadamer'. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 2(2), pp. 138-66. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187226308X315013>; Skinner, Q. (2008)—for full details see fn. 2.
18. Austin, J.L. (1975 [1962])—for full details see fn. 4; BeDuhn, J. D. (2000). 'The historical assessment of speech acts: clarifications of Austin and Skinner for the study of religions'. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 12(1-4), pp. 477-505. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006800X00319>.
19. Skinner, Q. (2025). Electronic mail to Shivatva Beniwal, 29 April. Personal correspondence in the possession of the author; Wittgenstein, L. (1953), §§546, 7—for full details see fn. 4; Burns, A. (2011). 'Conceptual history and the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein: a critique of Quentin Skinner's contextualist method'. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 5(1), pp. 54-83. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187226311X555455>; Havercroft, J. (2011). 'Skinner, Wittgenstein and historical method'. *Paragraph*, 34(3), pp. 371-87. <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2011.0031>.
20. Skinner, Q. (1969), pp. 48-49; Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 3, 82, 87—for full details of both see fns. 16 and 17.
21. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 90, 117-22.
22. BeDuhn, J. D. (2002). 'The historical assessment of speech acts: clarifications of Austin and Skinner for the study of religions'. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 14(1), pp. 84-113. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23549994>; Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 98-101.
23. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 183-84.
24. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 48-49, 116, 142, 179-87; Skinner, Q. (1981). *Machiavelli*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Skinner, Q. (1996). *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511598579>; Palonen, K. (1997). 'Quentin Skinner's rhetoric of conceptual change'. *History of the Human Sciences*, 10(2), pp. 61-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095269519701000204>; Skinner, Q. (1999). 'Rhetoric and conceptual change'. *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 3(1), p. 63. <https://doi.org/10.7227/R.3.1.5>.
25. Skinner, Q. (1969), pp. 4, 19, 50.
26. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 37, 40, 42, 48-49, 70, 105-106, 116, 142; Skinner, Q. (1971). 'On performing and explaining linguistic actions'. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 21(82), pp. 14-16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2217566>; Skinner, Q. (1970). 'Conventions and the understanding of speech acts'. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 20(79), pp. 118-38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2218084>.
27. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 9, 49, 79-80, 106-16. The characterisation of a 'threefold interpretive procedure' is the present author's synthesis; see Schochet, G. J. (1974). 'Quentin Skinner's method'. *Political Theory*, 2(3), pp. 264-68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/190780>.
28. Skinner, Q. (1978). *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
29. Pocock, J.G.A. (1975). *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
30. Dunn, J. (1969). *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Skinner, Q. (1969). Review of *The Political Thought of John Locke*, by J. Dunn. *American Historical Review*, 75(2), pp. 489-90. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/75.2.489>.
31. Skinner, Q. (1998). *Liberty before Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139171274>; Skinner, Q. (2002). 'A third concept of liberty'. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117, pp. 237-68. <https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197262795.003.0007>. The neo-Roman argument has since been extended at greater historical and philosophical depth in idem (2025). *Liberty as Independence: The Making and Unmaking of a Political Ideal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
32. Lévy, J. & Tricoire, E. (2007). Quentin Skinner: concepts only have histories [online]. *EspacesTemps.net*, 23 November. Available at: <https://www.espacestemp.net/en/articles/quentin-skinner/> [Accessed: 17 April 2024].

33. Lévy, J. & Tricoire, E. (2007)—for full details see fn. 32.
34. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. vi-vii, 3-4, 6.
35. Lévy, J. & Tricoire, E. (2007). for full details see fn. 32. The formulation “concepts only have histories” is Skinner’s own restatement of a Nietzschean principle—cf. Nietzsche, F. (1887). *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, II.13.; nur das, was keine Geschichte hat, ist definierbar—rather than a verbatim quotation.
36. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. vi-vii, 3-4, 6.
37. LaCapra, D. (1980). Rethinking intellectual history and reading texts. *History and Theory*, 19(3), pp. 254-55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504544>.
38. LaCapra, D. (1980), pp. 251, 274.
39. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 3, 101, 111, 113, 120.
40. BeDuhn, J. D. (2002), pp. 84-113; Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 98-101, 106-108, 148-49.
41. Wood, E.M. (2008a). Why it matters. *London Review of Books*, 30(18), 25 September. Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n18/ellen-meiksins-wood/why-it-matters> [Accessed: 23 April 2025]; Wood, E.M. (2008b). *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages*. London: Verso, pp. 5, 7-9, 235.
42. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 157, 174, 179.
43. Lévy, J. and Tricoire, E. (2007).
44. Goto-Jones, C. (2009). The Kyoto School, the Cambridge School, and the history of political philosophy in wartime Japan. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 17(1), pp. 14, 15, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-2008-024>; Tan, S. (2023). ‘Texts and traditions in Chinese and comparative philosophy’. *History and Theory*, 62, pp. 88-89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12291>.
45. Coffey, J. (2009). Quentin Skinner and the religious dimension of early modern political thought, in Chapman, A., Coffey, J. and Gregory, B. S. (eds.), *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 51; Kennedy, R. (2010). Review of *Seeing Things Their Way*, ed. A. Chapman, J. Coffey and B. S. Gregory. *Christian Scholar’s Review*, 39(3), pp. 336-38. Available at: <https://christianscholars.com/seeing-things-their-way-intellectual-history-and-the-return-of-religion/>; Segal, R.A. (2013). ‘How historical is the history of religions?’, in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 29-30. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004257573_005.
46. Coffey, J. (2009), pp. 53-54.
47. Parekh, B. & Berki, R.N. (1973). The history of political ideas: a critique of Q. Skinner’s methodology. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34(2), pp. 163-84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708724>; Åsard, E. (1987). ‘Quentin Skinner and his critics: some notes on a methodological debate’. *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 90(2), pp. 101, 102, 105. Available at: <https://journals.lub.lu.se/index.php/st/article/download/3404/2975>.
48. Bevir, M. (1994). Are there perennial problems in political theory?. *Political Studies*, 42(4), pp. 662-75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1994.tb00304.x>; Lamb, R. (2009a). ‘Quentin Skinner’s revised historical contextualism: a critique’. *History of the Human Sciences*, 22(3), pp. 51-73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695109104423>; Lamb, R. (2009b). ‘Recent developments in the thought of Quentin Skinner and the ambitions of contextualism’. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 3(3), pp. 246-65. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187226309X461524>.
49. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 8, 155, 157.
50. Skinner, Q. (2002), pp. 2, 6, xii-xiii, 59.
51. Palonen, K. (2003). *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Skinner, Q. (1988). A reply to my critics, in Tully, J. (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 231-88.
52. Skinner, Q. (1975). Hermeneutics and the role of history’ *New Literary History*, 7(1), pp. 209-11. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468286>; Malpas, J. and Keane, N. (2025). ‘Gadamer in the English-speaking world’. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 56(1), p. 5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2024.2444459>.
53. Skinner, Q. & Fernández Sebastián, J. (2007). Intellectual history, liberty and republicanism: an interview with Quentin Skinner. *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 3(1), pp. 103-23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23730868>; Skinner, Q. (2012). ‘On the liberty of the ancients and the moderns: a reply to my critics’. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 73(1), pp. 127-46. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2012.0010>.
54. Blau, A. & Paul, J. (convenors) (2021). Quentin Skinner’s ‘Meaning and Understanding’ after

-
- 50 Years: Interdisciplinary Perspectives. *British Academy Conference*, 7-8 July. Available at: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/events/british-academy-conferences/quentin-skinners-meaning-understanding-after-50-years-interdisciplinary-perspectives/> [Accessed: 16 April 2024]; recordings available at <https://youtu.be/waztwgtbUp8> (Day One) and https://youtu.be/EWT_BNr7mcs (Day Two). Amongst the contributors on non-Western traditions: Rochana Bajpai (Indian constitutional texts), Humeira Iqtidar (Islamic juristic writings), Leigh Jenco (Chinese historicist traditions), and Sor-hoon Tan (collectivist textuality in Chinese and South Asian manuscript cultures).
55. Blau, A. (ed.) (2026). Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas and Beyond. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 281. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
56. Ganeri, J. (2008). Contextualism in the study of Indian intellectual cultures. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 36(5/6), pp. 554-57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23497496>; Ganeri, J. (2011). *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450-1700*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 63-73.