POLITICAL THOUGHT AS TRADITIONARY ACTION: THE CRITICAL RESPONSE TO SKINNER AND POCOCK

PETER L. JANSSEN

Nimium altercando veritas amittitur—in excessive disputation truth is lost. The current debate within political theory over the methodological and historiographical work of Quentin Skinner and J. G. A Pocock sadly demonstrates the wisdom of this aphorism. In order to defend their own philosophical positions, critics ascribe to Skinner and Pocock the already well-identified errors of established positions, in violation of the wider intentions and spirit of Skinner's and Pocock's work.[1]

A central concern for Skinner and Pocock over the past twenty years or so has been to define more clearly the way in which the history of political thought should be understood if its claim to represent actual historical processes of transmission, development, or change is to be taken seriously. Skinner, in particular, has produced a detailed critique of the various styles of the history of political thought prevalent until recently and still reflected in the textbooks prescribed for courses on the history of political ideas taught to undergraduates.[2] He has proposed a subtler understanding of a text as a speech act whose "point" is recoverable only by situating the author's intentions in writing within a context of "conventions." Pocock's approach also relies upon linguistic terminology, except that where Skinner takes as his starting point authorial intentions, Pocock begins more capaciously in taking as his primary category a "political language" and its transmission and transformation over time. Combining their concerns and extending them for purposes of my own, I argue for a refinement in the concept of "tradition" (which vexes everyone working in the history of ideas), and an emphasis instead upon what, at some risk of being thought to be indulging an affectation, I call "traditionary action."

1 In this paper I treat the ideas of Skinner and Pocock as kindred and the researches in which they are engaged as closely complementary. This is a position which could, in the appropriate place, be supported both with regard to their self-conscious, methodological writings and their historical publications Notwithstanding this, I do not wish to imply that there are no important differences between them. Some of these differences have been commented upon by Pocock and Skinner themselves; for example Q Skinner, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action," *Political Theory* 2 (1974), 288 and J. G. A Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time. Essays on Political Thought and History* (London, 1973), 25.

2. Q. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 3–53.

In this paper I suggest that the critical response to Skinner and Pocock has largely misinterpreted what may be called, *ad Skinnerum*, their "point," that is, the particular context of historiographical, philosophical, and epistemological conventions within which they intended their works to be read. In doing this I hope it is clear that the nature of this argument is highly self-reflective. For this paper is not only an interpretation of a set of critics' interpretations of Skinner's and Pocock's interpretation of interpretation! It shares with any debate *about* interpretation the characteristics of self-disclosure, in that it is an embodiment of the interpretative mode it is ostensibly about. Just as Skinner and Pocock recommend a sensitivity to the conventions within which particular discursive acts are to be interpreted, so do I attempt to re-interpret Skinner and Pocock by suggesting alternative "conventions" within which it makes sense to read them as against the context within which they have been read, wrongly, by their critics. One may still disagree with those interpretative recommendations, but at least it will be clearer what one is disagreeing with.

I propose to discuss this critical response and to show how its polemicism and an associated reductionism has inhibited an appreciation of the true potential of Skinner's and Pocock's historiographical discussions for the practice of political theory. An analysis of this critique reveals that it is complex and multilayered. In the first section I discuss the discursive "layer" constituted through the influence of a "history-philosophy" polarity. The second section is concerned with the debate over the autonomy of texts versus ideas as expressions of social relations. In the third section I discuss how this polarization has slipped into another "layer," where voluntarism and determinism are set against each other and, fourth, how this in turn opens into a further problem which has to do with the character of language as either restrictive or as instrumental. The fifth section is central, for it concerns the debate over tradition upon which many of the other disputes are projected. In the sixth section I develop some of the epistemological assumptions which underpin the debate before arguing, in the next section, for a particular interpretation of Skinner and Pocock. At the same time I advance some criticisms and suggestions of my own.

I

The familiar distinction between historical and philosophical modes of writing "histories" of political thought, associated with a division between the aim of historical veracity and the aim of contemporary relevance, has bifurcated the entire field of discussion. Skinner and Pocock are criticized by advocates of each position: by one group for sacrificing present concerns in a spurious search for historical meanings and by another for abandoning that selfsame quest for historical veracity.

One critic speaks of an alleged tendency to view the history of ideas as "an antiseptic search for the historical meaning of classic texts" and the danger, arising from Skinner's and Pocock's revisions, of "unreflective antiquari-

anism."[3] Another maintains that they formulate their objectives in terms which ultimately remove political theory from "the present concerns of political life."[4] Attributed to Skinner is the view that "historical understanding itself is (or should be) purely 'objective' and that the very notion of an informed dialogue with the past is absurd or at least non-historical."[5] Skinner and Pocock are accused of being "revisionists" who espouse the view that "past thought must be completely dissolved into its precise context (culture, situation and so forth), and that it possesses no capacity for independent life."[6] Against Skinner it is asserted that the study of political texts should be "unencumbered by any historical considerations whatever," for "to consign them to their contemporary milieu, with whatever honours, is to bury them."[7]

On the other hand, there are the criticisms of those who believe that the words by Pocock and Skinner lack proper historical reference. Pocock has been called a structuralist for writing about universal, timeless structures rather than real historical entities[8] and accused of writing ideology rather than history.[9] Skinner is criticized for basing his claims on vague and ill-defined philosophical and linguistic terms which are difficult to validate historically,[10] and his method is said to suffer from the same tension between historical and philosophical truth as does the method of the historians he criticizes because he, like them, imposes his own cultural preconceptions upon the past through employing twentieth-century theories of intention and meaning.[11]

How may one account for this remarkable incompatibility? Two explanations (which are not mutually exclusive) are possible: that there are inherent inconsistencies in Pocock's and Skinner's approach itself; or that there is something about the critics' formulation of a dichotomy between contemporary relevance and historical veracity which causes them to opt for "either/or" interpretations. While not wishing to exclude the former possibility—indeed, it would be interesting to see a systematic comparison of the modes of writing

3 J G Gunnell, *Political Theory. Tradition and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 24, 126

4 R Ashcraft, "On the Problem of Methodology and the Nature of Political Theory," *Political Theory* 3 (1975), 19

5. D LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," *History and Theory* 19 (1980), 265.

6. J Femia, "An Historicist Critique of 'Revisionist' Methods for Studying the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 20 (1981), 115

7 H Warrender, "Political Theory and Historiography A Reply to Professor Skinner on Hobbes," *Historical Journal* 22 (1979), 939

8 J Geerken, "Pocock and Machiavelli: Structuralist Explanation in History," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979), 309–318

9 C. Vasoli, "The Machiavellian Moment A Grand Ideological Synthesis" (Review), *Journal of Modern History* 49 (1977), *passim*

10 C Tarlton, "Historicity, Meaning and Revisionism in the Study of Political Thought," *History and Theory* 12 (1973), 311; B Parekh and R Berki, "The History of Political Ideas A Critique of Q Skinner's Methodology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34 (1973), 167

11 G Schochet, "Quentin Skinner's Method," *Political Theory* 2 (1974), 270.

recommended in Skinner's and Pocock's methodological writings with the modes actually employed in their major historical studies—it is with the latter suggestion that I think a large part of the explanation will be found. A closer examination of some of the above criticisms will reveal the kind of unnecessary bifurcation to which I allude.

The attack by Skinner and Pocock upon that approach to the history of political thought which has defined as its object "perennial questions" of political life has been taken as an attempt to deny all contemporary applicability to the classics, and has therefore provoked many critics' attacks. Gunnell has been particularly outspoken. Gunnell argues that the aim of historical reconstruction goes directly against what is needed at present. Eastonian and behavioralist attacks on historians of political theory in the 1950s and 1960s were premised upon the decline of the Great Tradition of Political Theory and its supplantation by mere antiquarian historicist analyses in modern times. In fact, Gunnell says, most practitioners in the history of political theory were concerned with explaining and evaluating contemporary politics and shared Easton's uneasiness about the decline of theory; for them it was not in fact a question of recovery of past contexts and concerns, but always a matter of addressing what they perceived to be a contemporary crisis. They disagreed with their behavioralist critics about the place of historical awareness in theory and they may have been unclear about exactly how historical study contributes to such a project, but historians of political theory never abandoned the theorist's role of critique for mere historical reconstruction. Moreover, according to Gunnell, the "tradition" of political theory which these historians of political theory were studying was "metaphorical" despite sometimes being regarded as a concrete historical reality. Thus, the Skinner-Pocock revision takes off from the wrong ground in attacking the older approach for its lack of historicity and in advocating a refinement of historical interpretation, for it misrepresents the intentions of the older historians as "historical" and misses the point that these "historians" were really theorists with completely contemporary concerns.[12] The Skinnerian attack on these "histories" for lacking historicity occurred because "arguments about the tradition were masquerading as historical theses."[13] The new history of Skinner and Pocock, contends Gunnell, is the result of "an increasing detachment from the practical concerns that had generated much of the previous literature."[14] In an oblique reference to Skinner and Pocock, Gunnell concludes that "the charge of unreflective antiquarianism that Easton and others incorrectly levelled against earlier scholars may now be valid."[15]

There are two things which should be noted in passing. In the first place, Gunnell's distinction between historical reconstruction and political theory is an application of Oakeshott's distinction between historical and practical un-

12 Gunnell, 4-27
13 *Ibid*, 96
14. *Idem*
15 *Ibid*, 126

derstanding.[16] It may be argued that Oakeshott tended to overdo the distinction between rigorous historical understanding and political theory in his earlier works. However, in a recent work he departs from this framework and makes no use of this distinction at all, showing on the contrary that an attempt to theorize human conduct, whether of so-called historical agents or of one's contemporaries, properly involves a certain historical understanding.[17]

In the second place, Gunnell's defense of earlier historians of the Great Tradition, on the grounds that they were not describing a concrete historical reality but rather a metaphorical construct, does a potential disservice to both the concept of history and the concept of metaphor, for it removes metaphor from the understanding of reality and thus denies to the historian an important conceptual device. Implicitly, Gunnell is—more than he has done elsewhere—conceding too much to the Eastonian-empiricist definition of reality in his rather strict interpretation of what constitutes concrete historical reality.[18]

Skinner's critique of the "perennial problems" approach has produced a number of other counter-arguments based on the premise that he seeks to reduce ideas to relics of dead situations and contexts. Tarlton, who is otherwise concerned with a lack of historicity in Skinner's work, attacks him for "depicting . . . even the recent past as an 'alien culture.' "[19] But Skinner does not say that the past is an alien culture. He is referring to the interpretative stance of social anthropologists who "when attempting to understand the verbal behaviour of an alien culture" do not simply assume a familiarity with it or assume that the conventions being addressed are the same as their own; and he is advocating the same sort of stance for historians of ideas.[20] Moreover, the use of the term "alien" does not imply in this context absolute distance and incommensurability. It is only to emphasize the requirement for a consciousness of the need for translation before an utterance can be regarded as understood. The argument against an automatic conflation between the interpreter's world and the world being interpreted is very different from saying that there is some necessary ontological gap between past and present. In fact, in the same place as the above statement, Skinner discusses the situation of an author who intends not to communicate with "an immediate audience or society, but

16 *Ibid*, 25

17 For a criticism of this dualism in Oakeshott's earlier work see N Rotenstreich, *Philosophy, History and Politics* (The Hague, 1976), chap 3, "History, Tradition and Politics Michael Oakeshott " But see also M Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975), Part 1, "On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct."

18 Cf J. Gunnell, "Political Inquiry and the Concept of Action· A Phenomenological Analysis" in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, ed M Nathanson (Evanston, 1973), II, 197–275 (It is interesting that in this article Gunnell notes with approval Skinner's application of Austin's linguistic philosophy to the analysis of action, and his use of conventions in explaining speech acts see 261–262)

19 Tarlton, 323 Tarlton claims to be referring to "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts," *Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1970), 130, 133–137

20 Skinner, "Conventions," 135

to appeal over its head to some indeterminate future audience, perhaps to posterity itself."[21] To determine the extent to which such an appeal has taken place, it is necessary to begin "with a consideration of the conventions governing ordinary synchronic communications in the given society, and the extent to which such conventions may appear to have been modulated rather than followed in the situation under consideration."[22] For Skinner this interpretative enterprise may succeed or it may not. What makes the past a foreign country in some cases is not any hopeless incommunicability across time; it is "the limit of our imaginative grasp as well as our lack of information."[23]

In a similar way, Femia also misinterprets Skinner's rejection of the perennial-issues approach, taking as his cue a controversial passage from Skinner:

> What we are most likely to learn from Plato is that the cook should not participate because he is a slave. It is hard to see what problems of participation in modern representative democracies are likely to be advanced by the application of this particular piece of perennial wisdom.[24]

While this was written in a tone of ironic derision and was part of Skinner's earlier concern to expose the absurdities of a perennial-issues approach, Femia quotes it in support of his contention that Skinner wishes to show that past thought is irrelevant to the contemporary world.[25] Moreover, Femia seems to overlook the fact that in later works Skinner explicitly rejects the imputation that because an utterance is regarded as referring to specific historical conventions, its meaning is thereby reduced to its moment of utterance.[26]

Against the "historical positivism" of the Skinnerian "revisionists" Femia advances the familiar argument that the historian's "practical preferences and attitudes will inevitably influence the questions he asks, the facts he selects and the connections he perceives; and such preferences and attitudes will ultimately mirror the historian's own culture," adding, "the analysis of reality *must* be filtered through a priori theoretical assumptions . . . which are culturally determined."[27] There is an apparent irony here, although one is not sure that Femia intends it: he rejects the claim (wrongly imputed to Skinner, as will be seen) that past thought is remote from the contemporary world and culturally specific and then proposes the same thesis in reverse: contemporary thought is culturally determined and therefore remote from the past! Surely, by this view, if Skinner really wanted to isolate the past from the present by showing its utterly alien character, one could smile at his naiveté but approve of his aim, for is not the same effect achieved both ways?

21 *Ibid*, 134.
22 *Ibid*, 135.
23 *Ibid*, 137
24 Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," 51–52.
25. Femia, 126
26 Cf Skinner, "Some Problems," 282; "Hermeneutics and the Role of History," *New Literary History* 7 (1975), 232; "Conventions," 134
27 Femia, 127–128.

At this point one begins to suspect that, to the extent that history is still at issue, it starts to take on a distorted meaning. For if we cannot really escape cultural determination, in what sense may history be said to be concerned with anything outside of the immediate cultural formation surrounding the historian? Femia, recognizing the problem, quotes Gramsci on the matter: the historian apprehends through

> an intuition, a conception which must be regarded as having a complex history, a process that is to be connected with the whole process of the development of culture; but it is an informed, self-conscious "intuition", the point of departure for critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is; it is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process, which has deposited in each of us an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. . . Philosophy cannot be separated from the history of philosophy.[28]

Supposedly, then, the attitudes which we bring to history mirror our culture, are connected with the whole process of the development of culture and are "a product of the historical process." Our a priori assumptions seem therefore necessarily valid when applied to history because it is history which has deposited them in us, because it is the historically developed culture that has produced them. Thus, following this argument, there are no extrinsic grounds for discriminating between one historical a priori assumption and another.

Of course, Gramsci does not remain content with the anti-empiricist claim that our conceptions are the products of *our* world, nor with the qualification that our world is the product of history. For he says that history requires self-understanding, a perspective of where we stand in history, of how we come to this place. There is something intuitively right in this. That history in a sense produces us, we believe; that history presupposes self-consciousness, we also believe; that self-consciousness involves an awareness of how history has produced us, we may also assent to. But to hold all of these propositions at once, to apprehend them as a whole, is beyond us, for we end up where we begin: we can only understand history when we understand ourselves, and we can only understand ourselves when we understand history. By such an account, history moves back and forth between *explanandum* and *explanator* and somewhere between is the poor historian, left wondering and wandering. It becomes apparent that the problem is with the fluidity of the term history: it involves notions of process and change, but also a stock or aggregate. It can mean something long ago and far away and it can mean something momentous with direct bearing upon us, even events which have just happened. It can refer to everything that has ever happened in human life anywhere, or it can mean more or less specific cultural, geographical, institutional, and temporal boundaries—or neither, leaving it open; and it can be referring to events in time or *accounts* of events in time, or some configuration involving an interplay between the time of events and the order of history-book time. Whatever we may do by way of

28 *Ibid*, 129 and 133

clarification, whenever the word history is used it suggests a whole range of associations. Even though a particular note is prominent, the whole harmonic range resonates along with it. In none of the propositions quoted is it possible to reduce history clearly to one or another of its images, so that in the last statement above, "philosophy cannot be separated from the history of philosophy," the fullness of the tension which is created by the ambiguities in the preceding statements is finally compressed and held as in a climax, but it is incapable of resolution in its own terms. If philosophy is taken as the activity of understanding our being-in-the-world, what is its history? The entire sum of such practice hitherto, somehow leaving its trace in us? Specific sequences which are particularly pertinent, and selected according to unspecified criteria? Or the practice of writing the story of that activity? The question is ultimately open, for it is another form of the same question with which the critique of Skinner began, a form which raises in the most general way the problem of self-understanding and how this relates to past lives and worlds now gone. It raises the question over again, but it does not answer it, for it ignores altogether the analysis of actual modes of transmission in historical development. It is these modes of transmission with which Skinner and Pocock are concerned. And, as they rightly perceive, if the historian is to be properly sensitive to historical developments such as these, he or she must maintain a firm sense of historicity through, in particular, the linguistic specificity of past discourses.

Similar problems are found in other critical commentaries. Warrender distinguishes sharply between such aims of historiography as are to be found in Skinner's work and the "canons of validity" appropriate for the political theorist, who, unlike the historian, in reading the classical texts is concerned "to seek out their structure and implication; to gain what insight is available into the present or speculation upon the future," and concludes, "nor should the historical treatment of ideas prejudice his freedom in this regard."[29] Similarly, for Ashcraft political theory concerns itself with "political problems – racism, poverty, war and riots" and is assessed "in relation to the problem of political change within our society" and its ability to provide "specific restructuring of existing social institutions."[30] Against Pocock's alleged neglect of social realities, Ashcraft proposes "an ideologically grounded approach."[31] (Curiously, Pocock's approach has also been criticized by another critic for precisely the opposite error, namely for being excessively ideological in interpreting texts for the answers they provide to a current ideological and political crisis.)[32]

LaCapra distinguishes between "documentary" and "dialogical" modes of historical understanding, where the former involves statements of factual predication and reconstructs historical reality, and the latter involves an awareness

29 Warrender, 940
30 Ashcraft, 15 and 16
31 *Ibid*, 20
32 Vasoli, *passim*

of historical interpretation, following Heidegger, as "a conversation with the past."[33] Historical understanding is properly a subtle interplay between both modes, where an historical text is seen as somehow both a document, a relic from another world, as well as itself the product of a series of interpretative readings over time. Interpretation must be more than redescription; it must be self-consciously "performative," disclosing or revealing, bringing the text into being. LaCapra rejects both the purely documentary reading, which aspires to "absolute transcendence" of historicity, and purely "presentist" accounts which are exercises in "narcissistic infatuation [in] a willful projection of present concerns upon the past."[34] The trouble with LaCapra's first distinguishing the documentary and the performative and then advocating a relationship between them is that it is left unconsidered how an awareness of the text as document—or, more fundamentally, a sense of the independent being of past acts—may itself be part of the performative dimension of interpretation. In other words it does not explain what the standards are which the interpreter uses in "performing" a text in order to avoid the danger, recognized by LaCapra, of using texts as "trampolines" for the theorist's own "creative leaps or political demands."[35] While Skinner concedes that "it is always for us, bringing our own experience and sensibility to bear, to say finally how we think a work must be taken," he warns that in the process of making such judgments "we can scarcely afford to neglect any [contextual] aids which may help us to refine or reflect on these judgements."[36] Such "contextual aids," clearly enough, are no less than the changing conventions or languages within which historical texts are written and received, the arenas within which utterances take on meaning.

If such may be said about historical judgments, decisions about the meaning of past acts, what then may be said about political judgments, or interpretations and criticisms of the contemporary world, which, it may be remembered, are alleged to be the primary concern of political theorists? While it may be conceded that an historian must maintain a sense of the historicity of the things about which he makes his judgments, is not the case of a theoretical understanding of the contemporary world a case of a completely different sort of judgment? Perhaps so, except in one important respect: so-called "political judgments" cannot be separated from an understanding of the past any more than historical judgments. In the first place, use of the "classics" of political thought to provide enlightenment about the timeless issues of politics and to provide guidance for assessing contemporary political arrangements cannot be plausible without first representing the "masters" of past political thought as human beings speaking within a particular historical situation and struggling for truth, which is ultimately timeless, within and through a language and set of concerns, which is not. How can one reveal to one's own contemporaries,

33 LaCapra, 248
34 *Ibid.*, 274
35 *Idem.*
36. Skinner, "Hermeneutics," 228

who are after all men and women, beings not unaware of the historicity of being, anything about the disclosure of truth by men and women in the past, unless that disclosure is shown as a struggle within and a living up to precisely the same condition of historicity? There is a limit to what human beings can understand from the mouths of gods and heroes unacquainted with the temporality of the human condition.

Furthermore, any account of political theory as an activity concerned primarily with the present as against a concern with the past for its own sake has to be wary of a tendency towards conceptual reductionism. Inasmuch as "past" and "present" are validly distinguishable when a sense of their essential complementarity is maintained, it is dangerous when it becomes habitual to treat them as if they designated two incommensurable identities. When used in this way, the past-present dichotomy may tend to produce a contraction in the notion of what is real to the narrow perceptual range referred to as the "here-and-the-now." Of course the response to such a contraction of mind is to point out at once that the here-and-the-now is never understandable without an idea of the "*not*-here" and the "*not*-now." J. L. Austin's analysis of linguistic meanings suggests the inapplicability of conceptual reductionism; even the word "real" itself takes its meaning from a complicity with the wider life of language. For Austin the sense in which something is described as real is only clear when one understands the specific way in which it might be considered not-real. Thus, a "real duck" may be real in the sense that it is not a hunting decoy, not a wall-hanging, not a painting of a duck, and so on, each possible way in which a duck may be not-real informing a particular understanding of a real duck.[37] In this way, I argue, it makes no sense to speak of the present or the contemporary world without implying some notion of what constitutes the past. It should not be inferred from the above example that the relevant distinction is always between "real" and "not-real"; this happens to be the example Austin chose, probably for the benefit of those who accept a simple correspondence theory of meaning as between words and the "realities" they designate. We are here concerned with a complicity between the meaning of the terms past and present, whose understanding relies on a sense of their mutuality and the reality of each of them vis-à-vis the other. The point is that to diminish one, or to subsume it to the other, is to diminish the other.

Thus when a political theorist indicates that he is interested only in a critique of the contemporary world, the critical self-consciousness which he is fond of advocating to his opponents should surely lead him to reflect about the ground upon which he bases his concept of the contemporary world. He would realize, if he paused to reflect, that his account of the contemporary political world is based upon, and contains implicitly, a certain image of the past and a certain account of historical development. To justify his "critique" the theorist finds himself having to support and defend himself on ground he little thought he

37 J. L Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford, 1964), 70–71

would need to come to, namely, the field of history. Granting this, one can see that the dichotomy between historical concerns and contemporary relevance which underlies the critique of Skinner and Pocock is really quite spurious.

Further than considering a broad complicity between concepts of past and present, there is more that may be said on the question of the self-consciousness of contemporary theorists. For it remains to be considered what the specific advantages are which may be derived from the particular type of historical understanding which Pocock and Skinner recommend.

As I have noted, Skinner's and Pocock's approach is one which contains the objective of describing what historical conventions or languages particular texts may have been written within and by which they were originally interpreted. This objective, as I have shown, has generally been taken by political theorists to be equivalent to the interest of antiquarian furniture dealers in aspects of a chair's "authenticity" or "genuineness," completely without regard for what the chair may be useful for today. This is a mistake which obscures an important implication for the whole activity of political theory.

The interest to be derived from Pocock's and Skinner's work extends beyond answering questions about what Machiavelli really meant or what Hobbes really meant, and so on; for Skinner and Pocock are as much concerned with showing the way in which an activity which may be called "political theory" is always conducted within particular linguistic or conventional contexts, to enter which is to enter into a set of considerations, concerns, and practices which intimately affect the nature of the discursive act being performed. That Machiavelli was doing something in relation to an existing convention of advice books to princes, for example, is one thing that may be said. But another concerns the nature of that "doing" as a specific sort of engagement in politics, a dealing with and a coming to terms with the conditions of discourse about politics. Not through searching for ahistorical perennial issues are texts from the past made relevant to the present but rather through showing them as instances of an engagement in politics in the fullest sense—that is, through entering into speech or discourse as a means more appropriate to the life of men than violence—can modern political theorists gain from history a sense of precisely what this "engagement" which they call political theory involves.

II

Skinner's and Pocock's works have also been placed on one side or the other of another long-standing polemical opposition in political theory, that between the position which affirms the independent character of texts and the position which regards texts as a dimension of "social relations."

Ashcraft, for example, takes a cue from Pocock's interest in the paradigms of political discourse. "Paradigms," says Ashcraft, are "metaphorical constructions" which are not really political at all because they do not refer to any social level: "Metaphorical constructions—e.g., paradigms—divorced from an empirically-grounded perspective of social-historical change are of little value

for understanding the political conflict amongst groups within any specific society."[38] (Note once again the implied opposition between metaphor and reality, here used pejoratively).

In a similar way, Femia juxtaposes Skinner's position against a materialist emphasis on the "substratum of philosophizing and political thinking," namely, "food, shelter, security, language, sexual satisfaction, and human satisfaction." This highly eccentric list is translated as "social practice" which "in the final analysis . . . determines what is thought."[39] Shapiro also criticizes Skinner, Pocock, and followers (whom he labels "contextualists") for not understanding actions "as parts of the causal *processes* through which the social world is reproduced and transformed." While on the one hand accusing the "contextualists" of "a refusal to venture outside an internal analysis of action" and of limiting their treatment of actions to "*events* that need to be explained by reference to 'their' linguistic context," he rejects the epiphenomenalist claim "that linguistic actions can be interpreted by being 'read off' from the social and/or economic context."[40] However, it is not the causal element of epiphenomenalist or "vulgar materialist" interpretations that he rejects, but simply their failure to recognize that "ideologies are real entities and can be efficacious on the real world" in their turn.[41] The "causal account" of linguistic actions which Shapiro advocates is illustrated by a few cases: Hobbes's political theory cannot be grasped without understanding "his fear of the masses *which was engendered by* [my emphasis] the physical growth of violent unemployed urban mobs in the decades preceding the civil war"; and More's "iconoclastic assault on private property was *a logical outgrowth of* [my emphasis] the conservative views of the late Northern humanists."[42] Of course, the terms "engendered by" and "a logical outgrowth of" need not imply causality; but here, it is clear, we are being urged so to read them.

Skinner has also been criticized for not following his own advice about studying the history of political theory as a "social activity." As to Hobbes, for instance, he has been castigated for failing "to determine whether there is an identifiable social position from which [Hobbes] gained his particular perspective on politics and society."[43] Such a position, it is suggested, can be found in Hobbes's membership, as a commoner, of the household of the Cavendishes, which

> must have played a significant role in the formation of his ideas about man's nasty and competitive nature and about the resulting need for absolute power. A clearer conception of the relationship between social class and absolutism in this period would clarify Hobbes' position considerably.[44]

38 Ashcraft, 15
39 Femia, 123 and 124.
40. I Shapiro, "Realism in the History of Ideas," *History of Political Thought* 3 (1982), 572
41 *Idem*
42. *Ibid*, 573.
43 J Wiener, "Quentin Skinner's Hobbes," *Political Theory* 2 (1974), 256.
44 *Ibid.*, 257

There are two related propositions implied in the above criticisms. The first involves a certain range of associations deployed around the term "social," while the second has to do with the nature of the relationship between text and context.

Pocock and Skinner are criticized for ignoring, variously, "*social*-historical change," "*social* practice," "the process of reproduction of the *social* world" and, inevitably, "*social* class." It is not clear precisely what the above critics take "social" to mean, but with the help of a distinction made by Arendt and also by Oakeshott, I propose to show that certain of its connotations are inappropriate for the sort of enterprise in which Pocock and Skinner are engaged.

The ancient Greeks recognized a fundamental distinction between two realms of human life: on the one hand, the natural association of men for the satisfaction of what may be called "animal needs"—that is, the provision of all that may be deemed either necessary or useful; and, on the other hand, a further life, the *bios politikos*, constituted by the two highest forms of human activity, action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*); and of these speech (not so much the faculty of speech itself, but a way of life where it is the shared engagement of all participants to talk with each other) is the higher form.[45] In Arendt's view, "the social" designates the basic life of men which corresponds with the Greeks' concept of the concerns of the household as against the *polis*.[46] In modern times the concerns of the household have been brought into the public sphere, into a sort of collective housekeeping where men come together for the satisfaction of their needs and wants. Action is thus reduced to "behavior," ruling and being ruled is reduced to "administration" and the life of politics is reduced to the basic level of survival. Although social life is natural to man, for man needs among other things the company of other men, it is in itself not what marks man's humanity, for it is something that human life has in common with animal life. It is in the activities of politics, and especially, in speech, that Arendt notes man's specifically human condition.

The reduction of human life to the social results, then, in a realignment of terms, so that the social and the political begin to merge; not, as we can see, so that society is elevated to politics but rather that politics decays into a sort of community housekeeping, a life of needs and wants. For Oakeshott, acquiescence in this conceptual reduction is a departure from "anything recognizable as an engagement to theorize human conduct."[47] Society, as a system or an organism allegedly embracing the totality of human relationships, is "recognized as a process to be understood in terms of its regularities or causal conditions . . . [and] this 'system' is said to have a 'structure' which contains and displays functional relationships between its parts or properties."[48] Instead of human conduct as intelligent subscription to, and discourse about, the condi-

45 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1974), 25 and 26
46 *Ibid*, 46.
47 Oakeshott, 25
48 *Ibid*, 24

tions of procedures, rules, or practices, explanations in terms of the social, as if in parody, reduce the subject of inquiry to components of systems which behave according to "laws" or causal conditions. Instead of rules subscribed to we have causal laws; instead of procedures we have processes.

Whether, then, the ubiquity of the social in accounts of human life is taken as a reduction of the life of man to the subpolitical life of necessity and a struggle over the basic conditions of life (Arendt) or to a system comprised of components whose relations are fixed by lawlike correlations (Oakeshott), the effect is the same: human action and speech become reduced to mere behavior. If these are the connotations of "social," then we can conclude that the critics quoted earlier are correct in perceiving a fundamental incompatibility between Skinner's and Pocock's approach to understanding political discourse and social theory. But they are quite mistaken in their belief that this is in itself a refutation of that approach. For while the speech which comprises political discourse is a feature of the life that man has in common with other men, it is not social in the sense of a life whose intrinsic purpose is the satisfaction of primary needs and wants, nor in the sense of an element in a system of structural components.

Skinner's speech acts and Pocock's political language may together be located in a theory of political action. By such a theory human freedom consists in entering with other men into a shared context of conventions or practices within which to speak is to subscribe intelligently to certain of these practices, or at least the "considerations" which support them, in a way which enables other men to interpret what one has said or done and to respond. Insofar as this activity can be said to have an intrinsic purpose it is self-disclosure: a continuous exploration, development or reconstitution of the moral considerations which authorize the practices which constitute the *respublica*.[49] The meaning of political action is not in purposes which inevitably intrude from the life of needs and wants and which seek satisfaction in "policies." The familiar question, "Who gets what, where, and how?" has in this respect a purely extrinsic connection with politics.

Related to this attempt to reduce the Skinner-Pocock position to a variant of social theory is a tendency to read into the "text-context" relationship a causal or a determinative role for context.

An illustration of such a misinterpretation is provided by one critic who paraphrases Skinner with approval: "The social context provides 'an ultimate framework' for the recovery of intentions."[50] Making certain assumptions about what this should be taken to mean, he then criticizes Skinner for not adhering to his own maxims and ignoring the formative determination of the social context upon ideas. It is clear from the passage in Skinner which is being paraphrased that this is a distorting abbreviation of Skinner's meaning. Skinner actually says:

49 *Ibid*, 173-184
50 Wiener, 253

> The appropriate methodology for the history of ideas must be concerned to trace the relation between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context. Once the appropriate focus of the study is seen in this way to be essentially linguistic . . . the study of all the facts about the social context of the given text can take its place as part of this linguistic enterprise. The problem about the way in which these facts are handled in the methodology of contextual study is that they get fitted into an inappropriate framework. The "context" mistakenly gets treated as the determinant of what is said. It needs rather to be treated as the 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.[51]

Whether or not one agrees with the above account of reading a text or even feels confident that one understands it fully, it is clear that Skinner wishes not to be taken to mean what he has in fact been taken to mean, namely, the social context (as generally understood) causes or determines or produces what is said. The text is described as a linguistic act within a linguistic context and the social context is relevant only insofar as it conditions the interpreter's understanding of what constituted the range of "conventionally recognizable meanings" in that society. In later works Skinner refines the notion of convention and also the nature of the hermeneutical act, and how a text is to be regarded as relating to such conventions. Conventions come to be regarded not as forces which produce a text, rather as the ground upon which the uptake of a text is possible.[52]

Skinner's rejection of the text-context dichotomy and the conceptual reductions to which this gives rise such as we have seen in the various attempts to give social context a determinative or causal role, can be supported in much the same way as was done in the case of the past-present dichotomy (see section I). Just as past and present cannot be treated as distinct, positive units of meaning, but rather as terms whose meanings can only be arrived at by recognizing a complicity or mutual reference between them, so with text and context; in order to understand them, it is necessary to recognize a terminological and conceptual complicity.

The terms text and context themselves derive from the Latin *texere* (to weave) and *contexere* (to weave together, to weave with). A text is literally something that is woven, a web which in our usage is a web of words; and a context is that together with which a text is woven. A text's context must imply a sense of the activity of weaving together. A context cannot therefore exist prior to (logically or causally) the text with which it is woven. To unweave them is like trying to make sense of the figures in a tapestry by picking it apart—one ends up with a handful of threads and no more.

Often it is as if words themselves resist such reductions. The word "substance," for instance, is usually taken to mean some intrinsic feature of a person or a thing. However, if the word is read, literally, as "that which stands beneath" (the act of apprehending which, presumably, is "understanding") then

51 Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," 49

52 Cf Skinner, "Hermeneutics," 216, and "Conventions," *passim*

to understand something's substance one would need to look beyond intrinsic features and refer instead to "an attribute of the thing's *context*, since that which supports or underlies a thing would be a part of the thing's context."[53]

To the extent that a text implies a context, there is no such thing as a textualist as against a contextualist approach. All of us are, implicitly, "contextualists." The question is whether we are *good* contextualists, that is, whether we choose an appropriate context within which to read a text.

Accordingly, to speak of a text, with Skinner, as a linguistic act is to mean more than that it is comprised of words. It is to suggest a certain kind of interweaving, a certain kind of contextual implication. We do not understand a *book*; what we understand is the woven pattern of associations and conventions—the context—through which a book becomes a *text*.

That Skinner and Pocock stress the linguistic context of political texts is not simply a project of interposing a mediating level between society and text, as between a substratum and a superstructure. The sense in which political texts are seen as acts within a set of conventions or a linguistic context goes beyond the notion of what is "political" or what is "social" in the established polarities of debate. For there, in the established debate, politics is characterized in terms of struggle or competition among various social entities. Here, in Skinner's and Pocock's approach, we find a return to a more fundamental, classical conception of the political—the political as the *public*, where what is referred to is the level at which acts take on meaning and significance, or the common field within which the terms of the various struggles and divisions may be recognized and struggled over. We may add that it is not the relations among groups which constitute the polis; it is as "a public space," in Pocock's words, that the polis imbues these relationships with meaning and signficance.[54] This redefinition of the sense in which historical texts are political has been completely overlooked in the readiness to read the terms of Pocock's and Skinner's theories as if they were the old disputes over again.

III

The above arguments over the autonomy of texts against social relations easily slide into disputes over individual creativity against contextual determination of one form or another. Theorists on opposing sides in this polemic freely ac-

53. K. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, 1969), 22-23 I owe this reference, as well as the point about the linguistic roots of "text" and "context," to Dr. R L Nichols of Monash University.

54 Pocock, "The Reconstruction of Discourse· Towards the Historiography of Political Thought," *MLN* 96 (1981), 960 There is a striking resemblance between Pocock's "public space" and Arendt's concept of a "public realm" or a "public space" in which men are gathered together and related to each other (Arendt, 55) Both Pocock and Arendt appeal to the classical concept of action or speech within this space as an interdependence between human beings, not as a division between doers and sufferers (Arendt, 189-190), rulers and ruled (Pocock, *idem*). And Pocock's "the interchange of speech acts may be thought of as constituting such space" (*idem*) follows Arendt's "action and speech create a space between the participants" (198)

cuse each other of tendencies towards voluntarism and determinism, and sometimes both!

Skinner's earlier writings on intentions have attracted attention in this regard. Some of the criticisms of the place given to intentions in his early historiographical work—especially in the seminal "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas"—Skinner later accepted and, by his own account, modified his views in favor of an emphasis on conventions.[55] Other interpretations, however, seem completely to misunderstand the sense in which intentions were held to be central in the meaning of given texts. In the first place Skinner's emphasis upon Austin's distinction between the "locutionary" and the "illocutionary" aspects of utterances, or "what S meant by his utterance" and "what S meant in uttering his utterance," has often been overlooked.[56] Moreover, the specific sense of intentionality which Skinner used—namely illocutionary intentions, intentions *in* saying something, which refers to various specific conventions that provide the necessary conditions for "uptake"—has been conflated with a third dimension of a linguistic act, a "perlocutionary" act, which is aimed at producing "certain consequential effects on the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons."[57] It is in this latter sense that Parekh and Berki have interpreted Skinner's use of intentions. They assume that Skinner employs the notion as "a definite and limited desire to perform an action," that it is "what (X) wanted to achieve with his action" and involves "a single action to bring about a definite result."[58] Such a notion, they argue, does not make sense "once we leave the context of specific actions and limited objectives" and enter the world of political texts. Shapiro, I think, makes a similar mistake. He accuses Skinner, Pocock, and others of examining only "the roles that writers intend their ideas to play," claiming that they are consequently blind to instances of where "the intentions of political theorists are thwarted by the ends their ideas serve in practice."[59] This confusion about the sense in which Skinner employs the term intention occurs despite the fact that the author elsewhere in the article has shown himself familiar with the Austinian distinction between the "illocutionary" and the "perlocutionary" dimensions of speech acts.

LaCapra, on the other hand, appears to have confused intentions (in the limited sense in which Skinner employs the term) with the locutionary: "Quentin Skinner has argued forcefully that the object of intellectual history should be the study of what authors meant to say,"[60] which suggests more "the performance of an act *of* saying something" (a locution) that "the performance

55. See Skinner, "Some Problems," 283 and 284

56 Skinner, "Conventions," 120

57 J L. Austin, *How to do Things With Words*, ed J O Urmson and M Sbisa (Oxford, 1975), 101

58. Parekh and Berki, 169

59 Shapiro, 572–573.

60. LaCapra, 254.

of an act *in* saying something" (an illocution).[61] From this misinterpretation LaCapra concludes that Skinner's view "tends to assume a proprietary relation between the author and the text" and that he presents the text "solely as 'embodied' or realized 'intentionality.' "[62]

From this pole, where Skinner is considered to be overemphasizing the control an author has over the meaning of his utterance, we move to the other pole, where he is accused of determinism and a denial of originality in the history of political thought. Skinner's thesis that there is, in a sense, a "range of descriptions" available to any author means, for Parekh and Berki, "the denial of the possibility of new insights and new experiences" and that the "meanings and intentions that philosophers articulate are always trivial and conventional."[63] The same conclusion is reached by Tarlton, who takes Skinner to be arguing that knowing conventions is "tantamount to knowing the meaning of actions" and for whom Skinner

> merely substitutes a determinism for a determinism; not "context" in the sense of causal social forces, but the subtler "conventions" governing the practically conceivable intentions of actions, now fixes the range of what a writer can be said to have done and, thereby, meant.[64]

Both poles in this critique of Skinner—that which reads him as proposing a sort of linguistic voluntarism and its mirror, which concerns an alleged determinism—share two misconceptions.

The first type of misconception concerns the nature of the relationship between intentions and conventions, on the one hand, and meaning on the other. Those who criticize Skinner's theory of intentions for implying excessive control by an individual over meaning, and those who take issue with his account of conventions because they regard this as denying the originating power of individuals over meaning, have in common, despite an apparent contrariety, an inappropriate mode of explaining meaning. The explanatory figure commonly applied to the elucidation of meaning in political theory texts is contingency or causality, whereas it is necessary to see the relationship of intentions and conventions with meaning in hermeneutical terms.

This means, in practical terms, recognizing that there is a certain sense of intentionality in which a particular intention is not contingently related to the "meaning" of an utterance, but only "logically related,"[65] which is to say that meanings are not seen as being produced or precipitated by an author's intentions, but rather revealed by them: "When someone recognizes the intended illocutionary force of a given (linguistic) action what he grasps is 'an intention that the thing one has made *means* (and be taken to mean) something or

61 Austin, 99–100
62. LaCapra, 254 and 255
63 Parekh and Berki, 168 and 169
64 Tarlton, 322
65 Skinner, "Hermeneutics," 214

other.' "[66] This is not to say that such recognition always takes place, or that such meanings are always unambiguous—and in this sense, at least, the author cannot control "meaning"—but when such recognition does occur it is always with a cognizance of a general intention on the part of an agent to be understood, although not always in the specific way envisaged by this agent. Similarly, with regard to conventions, a text need not be seen in

> causal and positivist terms as a precipitate of its context, but rather in circular and hermeneutic terms as a meaningful item within a wider context of conventions and assumptions, a context which serves to endow its constituent parts with meaning while attaining its own meaning from the combination of its constituent parts.[67]

Neither the intentions of the author nor the context of conventions is to be seen in a causal relationship with a text; it is a hermeneutic relationship involving an interpretative rather than a progenitive function. As with the relationship between text and context, which we also discussed in the last section, the relationship between authorial intentions and text does not permit us to identify either without understanding a fundamental complicity between them, and then also with a particular context. Just as a text can only be seen in terms of a weaving together with things beyond itself, so must intentions be seen as being involved in this weaving together. A text is interpreted through an understanding of both intentions and context, and a recognition of an interaction between them. One cannot form an understanding of an author's intentions in writing unless one can establish which conventions were being specifically addressed; in other words, exactly what context a text is woven with. When seen in this way, discourse can be a highly creative engagement, but always an engagement to be understood, and therefore always an engagement with a particular context of conventions.

For Skinner, interpretation, as elaborated in the field of hermeneutics, is "a special kind of—or substitute for—explanation." The hermeneutical approach places a text "within a field of assumptions and conventions to which it contributes and from which it derives its distinctively meaningful character."[68] For Pocock this is conveyed through a political metaphor: agents in a linguistic situation resemble citizens in the Aristotelian polis insofar as all are committed to an interaction in which they are liable to be affected in ways that they cannot precisely circumscribe in advance, and in which they display the characteristics of "ruling and being ruled" and where neither party "is simply a master or simply a slave."[69] From such perspectives—the hermeneutical context which endows statements with meaning and the political nature of linguistic performances—it makes no sense at all to talk of absolute freedom, just as its dyadic twin, determinism, is an empty notion.

66. *Ibid.*, 212 (quoting Hancher)
67. *Ibid.*, 216
68 *Ibid*, 210
69 Pocock, "The Reconstruction of Discourse," 960 and 963

IV

A second misconception underlying the voluntarism-determinism dichotomy in critiques of Skinner concerns the way in which language is conceived. This misconception is significant enough to warrant close examination.

Those who criticize Skinner for overemphasizing the freedom of the individual take him as proposing a view of language as a tool or instrument of intentions. Those who criticize him for overemphasizing contextual determination of an individual's acts, on the other hand, seem to impute to him a view of language as a limitation upon human intentions. These views may be characterized, respectively, as "instrumental" and "restrictive" notions of the relationship between thought and speech.

The failure of critics to enunciate a theory of language outside of this sterile dichotomy has resulted in a misreading of Skinner, for it is upon an alternative to either an instrumental or a restrictive model that Skinner's theory of intentions may more fruitfully be based.

The apparent incompatibility between instrumental and restrictive models belies a common assumption: they both appear to be premised upon a view of language which Merleau-Ponty calls "empirical" and which Max Black refers to as "the model of the garment." Here, speech is ideally "the opportune recollection of a pre-established sign" (Merleau-Ponty) and "thought is what it is, quite independently of its verbal dress" (Black).[70] The instrumental and the restrictive images of language vary only in the emphasis that they give to the autonomy of the human agent in selecting from a range of already established significations, against the degree to which this choice is circumscribed by the limits of the available range. But they both fail to account for an act of speech as anything more than a selection, nor do they go beyond a notion of language as an already existing set of signs which exists against, and in opposition to, "pure thought."[71] Merleau-Ponty remarks:

> our analyses of thought give us the impression that before it finds the words which express it, it is already a sort of ideal text that our sentences attempt to *translate*. But the author himself has no text to which he can compare his writing and no language prior to language.[72]

The history of political thought is so often befuddled by the tendency to retranslate from fixed signs back to pure thoughts, separating them, reducing them to an original isolation, finding thoughts as they were before being spoken and words as they were before being thought.

Yet language need not be seen empirically thus. It may be regarded as "mon-

70. M Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston, 1982), 44; Max Black, *The Labyrinth of Language* (New York, 1968), 65.

71 Some of the terminology employed by Skinner and Pocock may be responsible for misleading their critics on this point There are real difficulties with Skinner's "range of descriptions" and Pocock's "language," when used in the sense of a vocabulary or fixed set of meanings These terms certainly require modification or further elaboration

72 Merleau-Ponty, 42

stration" (from the Latin *monstrare*, to show, to prove), that is as a disclosure and display of truth and meaning to both speaker and listener.[73] But this should not be taken to mean that human intentions are irrelevant to meaning, for that would lead back into the dualism between thoughts and words; having left ceremoniously by the front door we would be found stumbling in foolishly through the kitchen. Reiterating the contrast with the empirical model of language, Merleau-Ponty explains:

> speech does not simply choose a sign for an already defined signification, as one goes to look for a hammer in order to drive a nail or for a claw to pull it out. It gropes around a *significative intention* [my emphasis] which is not guided by any text, and which is precisely in the process of writing the text.[74]

That there is this "significative intention" does not imply, on the other hand, that meanings can become clear to the writer before he has entered the world of language or, more precisely, of speech.[75]

The mystery may be explained in two ways. Semiology teaches us, if nothing else, that meanings are formed by the interrelations of signs within a complex whole. Meaning is a web of significations rather than a one-to-one correspondence between a sign and its unique signification.[76] The "lateral or oblique" connections between words constitute the meaning of an act of speech[77]—nothing can have meaning which stands alone. And since a writer cannot know in advance precisely what sort of web of associations his words will be woven into—although anyone who has learned a language and lives and breathes within it can make a guess—he cannot know the meaning of his words in advance.[78]

The mystery of language can also be approached through a return to the idea discussed above of a text as something woven. If the text is woven, then the writer is the weaver, and like the weaver "the writer works on the wrong side of his material."[79] The writer's intention to signify can only approximate the meaning of a text because he stands behind his words, as it were. It is only when

73. *Ibid*, 43 The term used by Merleau-Ponty to designate this nonempirical view of language is "expressive." I have avoided inclusion of this term because it may mislead through the emotive or affective connotations which, in English at least, it has acquired It also connotes "squeezing out" or "exuding" which may suggest, contrary to the purpose, that meaning is drawn forth from within a subjectivity or individual mind

74. *Ibid*, 46.

75 It may be noted that I tend to employ "speech" in a way that covers written or inscribed discourse, not simply oral discourse. I do not wish to imply that there are no distinctions to be made between inscription and dialogical relationships. Paul Ricoeur (see note 101 below) argues persuasively for a firm distinction to be made. However for the present purpose I assume that this distinction is not relevant

76. The text-context nexus discussed earlier prefigures this point

77 Merleau-Ponty, 46.

78 Cf Merleau-Ponty's remark, "One does not know what one is saying, one knows after one has said it," *Prose of the World* (Evanston, 1973), note on p 46 Cf also the anecdote, told in Black, note 3 on p. 68, of the girl who, when told to "think before she speaks," replied, "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?"

79. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 45

he enters discourse with those on the other side that he can begin to see from another view, to see with the eyes of others, to understand. The significative intention, then, is an engagement in the life of speech, an openness to the participation of others in the disclosure of meaning. And with Pocock we may say that it is this openness to other human beings in discourse that marks man as the *zoon politikon*.[80]

Allowing the view of language outlined above, in opposition to the apparently unquestioned acceptance of an empirical model among critics of Skinner, one may recognize its possible contribution to Skinner's attempt to clarify the relationship between intentions and text, namely, that there is a sense of intention ("illocutionary intention") which is not formed prior to a given utterance, but rather in the act of uttering itself. The above account of language may be a starting point in helping to reduce the obvious confusion of many of Skinner's critics on this point, by suggesting an alternative "context" within which his work may be taken.

V

An important feature of attacks upon Skinner and Pocock has been a preoccupation with a certain idea of tradition and the belief that their advocacy of historical reconstruction will destroy the sense of tradition which has animated political theory. Underlying this is a confusion in reference between tradition per se and what is called the Great Tradition of Political Theory.

For Gunnell, the grand edifices of past historians of political thought based on the idea of a Great Tradition were indeed mythological constructs, as Skinner and Pocock had shown, and had little historical foundation; the Tradition was "an invention of the historian."[81] The only force which "tradition" carries is as a mythological device for talking about contemporary politics; and it is only with this aim in mind that the activity of the history of political theory can be legitimated. As has been noted above, Gunnell believes that the attack on the Tradition for being an unhistorical category misses the point about its mythological character being a useful platform for writing contemporary political theory. In fact, he maintains, by undermining belief in the Great Tradition through applying rigorous standards of historicity, Skinner and Pocock are endangering the whole activity of political theory.

Other critics make a similar point. Whereas Skinner is criticizing a particular mode of constructing traditions or schools into which classical thinkers are placed, these authors construe his aim as antitraditional. Femia reads Skinner as treating the ideas of our ancestors "as purely historical phenomena, forever locked into their determinate contexts" and Parekh and Berki as well as Schochet see it as ironic that Skinner accepts as an object of study the classic

80 This "openness," of course, is not the same as the special love for men, *caritas*, nor anything to do with mere warm feelings, to which this is debased in the glibber popular cliches

81 Gunnell, *Political Theory*, 89

texts while at the same time denying the existence of the tradition which has borne them.[82]

LaCapra considers the dimensions in which a text is "overlaid . . . by interpretations to which we are consciously or unconsciously indebted" and concludes that interpretation of such a text is thus always situated within "a sedimented layer of readings that require excavation."[83] Pocock himself argues that this is the role of the historian of political thought, less that of an interpreter, more "an archaeologist of interpretations performed by others."[84] Elsewhere, in direct reference to Skinner's ideas, Pocock stresses that the history of an utterance is more than the first moment of its articulation, "which now represents a limited area of the history of the statement."[85]

Skinner has replied that his method of considering the specific historical conventions surrounding an author's intentions in a linguistic act actually complements and extends the idea of traditions in political thought. It is not sufficient simply to "indicate the traditions of discourse to which a given writer may be appealing," says Skinner; it is also necessary to ask "what he may be doing when he appeals to the language of those particular traditions."[86]

It is apparent that this debate is really about two different things. On the one hand, Skinner's critics accuse him of undermining "traditions" (by which some of them have in mind the Great Tradition, so called) by emphasizing the recovery of historical meanings. The fear being expressed here is that political thought, by being broken into discrete speech acts, where each historical moment is understood from the inside, as it were, will be deprived of its identity in a continuity across time. Exactly what this continuity consists in, of course, is not made clear or else is disputed: it may be seen as the literal passing-down and slow clarification of certain great ideas; or as the survival of a mode of discourse, such as critique or creating the theoretical conditions for new forms of political praxis; or else, simply a "myth," not an historical entity, used by modern theorists to support their own diagnoses of contemporary political arrangements. "Tradition" here, notwithstanding these differences, is conceived as an entity, an objectified thing, a something-carried-on.

On the other hand, Skinner is talking about the way in which human action within ostensive traditions may be understood. Following Collingwood's point that history is really about human beings, whatever we may call other sorts of accounts, Skinner argues for a closer understanding of the historical nature of "traditions," which are, for Skinner, activities performed across time by actors who live within specific historical circumstances and who understand traditions only insofar as they are revealed within an available historical language.

Taking this as a point of departure we may begin to speak not of traditions

82 Femia, 116, Parekh and Berki, 180, Schochet, 270
83 LaCapra, 261
84. Pocock, "The Reconstruction of Discourse," 975
85 Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time,* 24-25
86 Skinner, "Some Problems," 288

as objects carried on, but of the nature of that carrying on, that activity of handing down through language. In this we are closer to the origins of the word tradition (Latin *tradere*), which connotes both an act of handing down *and* of narrating or relating through speech.

For this purpose the noun tradition seems ill-suited, but the adjective traditional also has disadvantages. In ordinary speech traditional can mean literal conservatism (preservation of an existing order) or even retrogression (retreat to an earlier and defunct order). Therefore, to describe this action of handing down through speech, I employ the less usual "traditionary," which corresponds with the various strict senses of traditional but has not the same immediate colloquial associations as that term. For, contrary to the habitual tendency to confuse an act of handing down or passing on, it is not at all "conservative" or "reactionary," at least in the usual sense. Rather, it presupposes conscious selection, deliberate choice, and an awareness of the *historicity of truth*. Truth either develops by the way in which previous "passings on" are narrated and made sense of through an understanding of the historical conditions of their transmission, or it is corrupted through men forgetting that this "passing on" is necessary. They forget that, in history, truth and human action are necessary co-partners (and thus relativism and transcendentalism are really each a similar kind of forgetfulness).

In this I realize that I am departing from certain features of Pocock's use of the term traditional. He uses the term to denote a particular mode of apprehending the past—confined to inheritance, transmission, and continuity—which is contrasted with other modes, such as that of the modern historian, the radical revolutionary, or the prophet.[87] In the sense in which I use the term there is nothing inherently nontraditionary about the historian's, the revolutionary's, or the prophet's attitudes towards the past insofar as all of these figures advance some form of narrative reconstruction of the past which "situates" them in the present.

In advocating an emphasis upon traditionary action rather than traditions, and the idea of the historicity of truth, I have in mind a model of historical development akin to Cardinal Newman's thesis in *The Development of Christian Doctrine*, which is in many respects more appropriate for political thought than the better-known *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn, which has had great influence over many political theorists, including Pocock.[88]

The traditionary character of thought involves a series of interpretative "readings" and "narrations" which condition the subsequent understanding of a text; each of those readings does something relative not only to the text but also makes new sense of the various earlier readings. To understand a tradition,

87 Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*, 233-272

88 J. H Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* [1845] (Harmondsworth, 1973); T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1970). An interesting comparison is to be found in Richard Vernon, "Politics as Metaphor Cardinal Newman and Professor Kuhn," *Review of Politics* 41 (1979).

one must understand what precisely each of the readings which constitute it and which draw upon it is doing rather than just locating readings (by outward resemblances) within a series of ideas or terms called the "Tradition." An interpretation of a linguistic event is more than a description of a body or edifice of terms and the location of that event within it at a certain chronological point; it involves an account of the event as an *act* which is traditionary in character. Thus traditions can be described as having true historicity, rather than as convenient abstractions for series of resemblances and similarities over time. Pocock moves in this direction in his later writings; in *Politics, Language and Time* he spoke of Kuhnian "paradigms," whereas later he prefers to speak of the paradigm adjectivally or adverbially, so that it can be depicted as "constantly active in speech and constantly affirmed and reaffirmed by it," preferring to say that "this or that verbal convention functions 'paradigmatically' than to identify the 'paradigms' supposedly the scaffolding round which rhetoric is built."[89] In moving away from paradigm structures and towards an appreciation of the speech event as act, perhaps Pocock will also produce a similar refinement in the way in which "traditions" are perceived.

The danger arising from a notion of a tradition as a structure or edifice comprised of a set of concerns defined ahistorically and abstractly is that traditions become regarded as things which limit or constrain the imagination of individual thinkers. Gunnell, for instance, seems to take this view in his claim that the classic authors were not in fact traditional, they were radically untraditional, by which he means that they were mostly removed from their political situation and were alienated from the "traditions of politics" of their contemporaries.[90] Such a view fails to distinguish between whatever subjective sense of alienation a particular theorist experiences towards a particular community, or even just features of it, and the actual affinity between his discourse and the language of the community which he has learned. Even hermits speak a language, to be intelligible, and yet also are members of a perceived community whose meanings and practices they seek to renew and pass down. The desert may be a place for solitude or escape, but the moment one speaks one identifies oneself as an actor in a particular historical community.

Skinner's and Pocock's emphasis on the linguistic context of texts is not incompatible with tradition, only with a particular—and, it should be remarked, a *peculiar*—conception of tradition. The Pocock-Skinner approach does not dismember traditions; it reconstitutes them in a historicity which the Great Tradition never attained. And while in some cases the Great Tradition of the old masters may be revealed as nothing more than a good story, in other cases the historian's fortitude may be justified as he supports, perhaps in new ways, some of the continuities assumed by earlier writers. And even more likely, perhaps, is the possibility that different forms of traditionary connection may be recognized. Far from working against traditions, Skinner and Pocock redeploy the

89 Pocock, "The Reconstruction of Discourse," 965.
90 Gunnell, *Political Theory*, 89.

old terms in a profounder and more historical way. In portraying ideas as historical events, this approach rejects at once the antihistorical prejudices of the behavioralists and the skepticism of modern political theorists who are prepared to live with "traditions" which are no more than "myths," by which they apparently mean figures which aspire to no connection with the lived reality of the past. To avoid confusion, and to understand better the theoretical implications of Skinner's and Pocock's approaches for "tradition," I suggest instead an emphasis upon the notion of traditionary action.

VI

The last area of criticism which I propose to consider involves more explicitly epistemological concerns and raises the wider problem of the nature of historical knowledge itself, for this is an issue which underlies many of the debates examined above.

The theoretical categories in Skinner's approach, in particular, have been criticized for not being capable of sufficiently precise definition for the method which proceeds from them to attain validity or conclusiveness. Tarlton, for instance, regards the linguistic entities which Skinner claims to be analyzing—"statements," "utterances," "speech-acts"—as vague and ill-defined. Since they are the starting points for Skinner's whole methodology, he argues, the validity of its conclusions in any historical study must be in doubt.[91] This should be divided into two very different claims: the unexceptionable claim that Skinner's linguistic terms are in need of further explication and the more contentious claim that this should be *in abstracto*, prior to any concrete act of historical interpretation. It is the inherent rationalism of the second claim with which I am concerned rather than with defending Skinner's terms from the substance of the first claim. The theoretical categories of a methodology need to be seen as logically related to conclusions, but that is not the same as holding that their specification is *procedurally* primary in any particular interpretative process. Such specification may come later, through the interpretation of concrete historical events. The content of our words is revealed only through the interpretative process, which is the complex act of comprehending specific acts. Only so can the particular character of the various theoretical, shorthand terms deployed be apprehended and given concrete existence. The rationalist fallacy is that the logical order of the syllogism becomes a procedural model for the mind to follow rather than an analogue of reason, and of one of its features only. The logical order of the syllogism cannot function as a template for the procedures of understanding for it cannot serve as a pattern of how we reason and how we understand, nor is it able to give the terms within its structure any reference. It is a specific mode of testing the validity of propositions in relation to each other, but cannot in advance lend conviction to its terms.

91 Tarlton, 311

Confusion over modes of validation to be applied to the conclusions of a Skinnerian approach is also apparent. Tarlton assumes that Skinner wishes to "unequivocally rule out" all but one interpretation of a past utterance, using the writer's intentions. Mulligan and others argue that nevertheless under Skinner's method "we may go on looking for an indefinite number of possible, plausible intentions" and that such a method fails to provide explanatory force "because no causal status can be given to intentions."[92] Some reservations about causal modes of explanation have already been noted. However, I wish to note here that a method is not invalid because it does not necessarily produce a conclusive or a definitive interpretation, or because it produces several reasonable yet contrary interpretations. While there are some grounds for criticizing Skinner on the basis of an early tendency to use intentions as if they were always capable of providing the required conclusiveness, by the time of his "Hermeneutics and the Role of History" he was clearly speaking of the possibility of several "good" readings of a text, apart from the question of which is the "correct" reading.[93] Moreover, the purpose of the criteria advanced by Skinner is not to choose unequivocally between equally reasonable interpretations; it is to decide what is reasonable in the first place, what is more or less reasonable and, *sometimes*, why different interpretations are equally reasonable.

Interpretation is an act which involves learning the language (Pocock) or reconstructing the mental universe (Skinner) and cannot therefore be precisely schematized in advance. And, as Ricoeur has shown, this act always begins with a "guess" and there can be no rules for making good guesses.[94] Before such positions are labelled "intuitivist" or "romantic," it is necessary to ask whether there is not some other approach to cognition which does not fit within either rationalist or intuitivist modes and within which the type of historical understanding which Skinner and Pocock advocate may be justified.

If we revise our standards of validation from the empiricist ideal or the conclusiveness of the logical syllogist to one which involves a sense of what may be called "converging indices"[95] or Newman's "illative sense,"[96] these criticisms lose their force. If Newman was right, it is ultimately impossible to validate a proposition about the world by reference only to syllogistic models of conclusiveness. An historical thesis is not invalid because it does not attain the perfection of such a standard, nor need it be doubted because there are other plausible accounts. We come to certitude about a matter of fact or an ontological truth by a process of converging probabilities and the possession of a sense

92 Tarlton, 320, L Mulligan, J Richards, and J Graham, "Intentions and Conventions: A Critique of Quentin Skinner's Method for the Study of the History of Ideas," *Political Studies* 27 (1979), 89 and 97

93 Skinner, "Hermeneutics," 226-227

94 P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, 1976), 75-76

95 *Ibid*, 79

96 J H Newman, *A Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, 1979), *passim*, esp 270-299.

which allows us to judge at what point the accumulated force of probabilities is sufficient to enable an act of certitude or assent.

In their haste to defend political theory from the charges of Eastonians and empiricists, some political theorists have perhaps been too quick to assimilate many of the epistemological criteria used against them. Too eager for rigor, they have adopted the wrong sort of standard of rigor.

VII

In this section I take up again some of the questions which were seen to bear upon the methodological debate over Skinner's and Pocock's theories. I try to suggest ways in which their ideas may be relocated outside the unproductive dichotomies of much of the recent critical literature. Inevitably, this relocation involves some suggestions for possible modifications to and extensions of some aspects of their work.

We saw how a dichotomy between political theory and historical reconstruction has been an important preoccupation of many critics. This dichotomy is based upon an unnecessarily rigid conception of the distance between present concerns and the past, and goes beyond any legitimate desire to understand the past in its specificity; for it often leads, not to an attitude of caution when speaking of things past, but to its opposite, an attitude of recklessness in a completely conscious imposition of what are held to be "contemporary concerns" over past texts. The radical otherness of things past proposed by those who deride the naiveté of any project of historical reconstruction leads to an interpretative attitude which can only be described as imperious. The paradox is that a sense of absolute otherness is conducive to absolute domination. This is completely alien to the interpretative attitude of "distanciation," which in hermeneutics is regarded as the procedural counterpart of "appropriation." To understand is to appropriate into a life-world; this must be preceded by a consciousness of the original distance of that which we seek to understand, but a distance that is regarded as only a moment in a dynamic interpretative interaction between interpreter and text—it is not the absolute chasm assumed by the skeptics. Thus, while distance must be regarded as a feature of any process of understanding, when it becomes translated as an irremediable feature of life and of time, we end up in the fruitless dichotomies between past and present such as we have seen.

In what other context may we then place the interpretative posture of distance which Pocock and Skinner in effect advocate? For Dilthey being is itself intimately historical. All experience is intrinsically temporal in that each act is itself a remembrance of things past and in some sense an anticipation of the future. Historical awareness is not simply an awareness of a serial contiguity between distinct events, for each human event is founded upon an implicit sense of an historical theory. For Heidegger each event as an act involves a more or less conscious appreciation of a "life-world" which extends beyond the instant. The world is neither an agglomeration of things nor is it simply the

mental universe of an individual; it is a temporal ground of being, and our mode of being in it is understanding. Being in the world involves an understanding of temporality. Understanding past events is not something that is done from within an already revealed world. It is part of the process of disclosing that world itself.

This cuts both ways, however. Gadamer emphasized the obverse: there can be no pure seeing of history without reference to the present. In a way similar to Gramsci's position mentioned earlier, Gadamer qualifies this by stressing that the past is nevertheless operative through the present in "intentions, ways of seeing, and preconceptions bequeathed from the past."[97] However, this tends to pass over the question of the bearing of the understanding of the past upon our construction of the present. Our conception of the present involves all sorts of more or less clear images of the not-present and where we stand temporally. This is where the idea of traditionary action is so important—it is not an anonymous, forgotten inheritance like jewels from a long-dead aunt about whom we seldom think. Tradition must involve a conscious, reflective attitude which informs and contributes to our self-understanding.

In fact, it is this reflective aspect which characterizes an action, which makes it traditionary. Descartes imagined himself to be putting all in doubt, but what he took to be the spontaneous reflection of his own mind was in fact a repetition of sentences and phrases from school textbooks and the language of a tradition which had influenced him.[98] The doubt of Descartes was not in fact "contextless doubt"; the crisis of the self is to be understood in terms of a crisis in a tradition; and as with the former, so it is with traditions that moments of crisis are generally not signs of collapse, but moments in a process of greater self-understanding. Against the Cartesian model, understanding should be seen as constructing a narrative, retelling a story. It is not a question of pulling up the pegs and setting up one's tent on new ground altogether, as it tends to be in Kuhn's model, but rather of making sense of how and where past explanations were inadequate and, through a reconstruction of relations between one's predecessors, showing one's own contribution. Thus the greatest scientist, according to MacIntyre, is not the one who represents his theories as if they were on fresh ground altogether, but one who, like Galileo and Einstein, is able to make sense of his predecessors' attempts in new ways.[99] The connection between past and present is thus intimate: if Galileo rather than Descartes is taken as a model, our present ability to grasp truth is seen to depend on our ability to reconstruct the past. Hence, while tradition involves an inheritance about which we are not always fully aware, it is also always being made explicit. When we make our mental sketches of the world we are always leaving places for the

97 In R E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, 1969), 176 Much of the foregoing account of the hermeneutical philosophers is drawn from this source

98 A. MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *Monist* 60 (1977), 458-459

99 *Ibid*, 470

past. These places are often approximations, "dummies," or occasionally blanks to be filled in and colored over time. The past is not simply that which makes our world possible; its figures and shapes are woven into this world. That which explains why they are there—why they must be there—is a tradition. Therefore traditionary action is not the anonymous mode of transmitting relics from the past; it involves a mode of understanding itself. To approach the matter from a slightly different perspective, a traditionary act involves subscription to a more or less sophisticated account of the development of a particular form of practices through time and the identification by the actor of his act as, in one way or another, a part of that development. The actor who thus acts is reconstructing for himself a traditionary continuity, like the author of a book, except that here, in the latest chapter, he comes face to face with himself.

An implication of the narrative aspect of understanding is that outside of tradition, or narrative reconstruction, there is no possibility of "revolution" or "novelty," only universal incoherence. Those who protest that Skinner's and Pocock's methods of analyzing conventions deny individual freedom and creativity should bear in mind that they are perhaps operating within a very apolitical view of revolution and change, sometimes because the sources for their metaphorical representations are themselves second-hand and misunderstand the field of politics from which they are drawn.

A good example of such a derivation is the influence of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* upon political theory. It is ironic that Kuhn's account is held as a metaphor for understanding revolution in political theory, for it is from politics that Kuhn originally draws his images. However, in his account of revolution he fails to make a distinction for which political theorists are themselves responsible, that is, between "political revolutions" and "revolutions in politics"; that is, changes which are understood as internal to political communities or groups and changes which overturn the whole structure and mode of understanding politics itself.[100] If revolutions are taken in the first sense, an understanding of the revolutionary character of a (linguistic) action is in no way at odds with the reconstruction of narrative sequences or traditions; rather, it presupposes it.

This has implications for both Skinner and Pocock. First, concerning Skinner, if we justify the role of historical understanding within political theory by appealing to a theory which stresses the essential historicity of truth and the intimate connection in our own mind between understanding the "present" and the "non-present," we must be prepared to allow the same for those whose texts we interpret. In other words, intentionality cannot be construed in terms of a context of simply synchronic relations, but must involve reference to pasts and futures. The historicity of intentions (which, as Ricoeur points out, is closely connected with inscription or writing as against verbal, dialogical relations)[101] means that the interpretative act cannot stop with the

100 See Vernon, 529
101 Ricoeur, 29

synchronic horizon of an author; it must eventually move to a consideration of the temporal world, or the traditionary "passing on," within which an author struggles for meaning, and which in his writings he strives to understand in ever renewed ways. The context with which an author weaves his text must be seen, with the addition of the traditionary dimension, as part of understanding the "point" of a text, in Skinner's terms. This is not a departure from Skinner's method, simply a filling in of the terms.

Second, Pocock's earlier work tended to suffer because of the inherent ambivalence of the Kuhnian concepts he employed, particularly as regards paradigms and revolutions. As we have seen, he was not entirely satisfied with these concepts and tended to move away from some of the more obvious problems created by them. What is needed now is a more thorough renovation of our understanding of the traditionary character of thought, and the true relationships between the terms "change and continuity," "perversion and development," than is possible through the Kuhnian categories. Richard Vernon advocates a closer look at the more subtle interplay between these terms in the work of Cardinal Newman, especially his *Development of Christian Doctrine.*[102] In that work it is easier to get a sense of the political nature of discourse closer to that which Pocock seems to have in mind than either the epistemological structures or the later sociological notions in Kuhn's work would allow. Newman treats a polity not only as a community or a society, but as having a "public" character. By this view we can reason only about *public* objects, objects which only in a "public space" are approachable and only in such a space may be the subject of debate and dispute.[103] Traditionary action is as much participation in debates over and renewal of a perceived past as it is a careful preservation of a received past.

VIII

The theory of traditionary action which I have sketchily represented is based upon a set of interpretative postulates proposed in opposition to certain implicit assumptions in the field of the history of political thought. My starting point has been an examination of a past-present dichotomy and its replacement with a notion of human action that takes into account the mutual reference of these categories. In response to a text-social context polarity I have suggested a clearer distinction between the social and the political and the recognition of the latter as a more appropriate "setting" for the analysis of anything recognizable as human action. I have also proposed a recognition of the text-context relationship as an interweaving rather than as an opposition between distinct, pre-existing entities. Starting from another problem, the relationship between individual creativity and context, I have suggested a similar approach to the

102 See n 91 *supra.*
103 Vernon, 514-515

intention-context duality as for the text-context formulation, that is as mutually defining categories rather than as pre-existing, complete entities. Associated with this, I have argued, is a deeper question about the nature of language, which is the level at which these connections are established, namely, the question of whether language is to be regarded "empirically" or as "monstration," as the medium for the disclosure of meaning. Basing my judgment upon these propositions, I have argued that prevailing notions of "tradition" are inadequate, before noting briefly the inadequacy of certain residual epistemological assumptions and sensitivities deposited by the empiricist tide of Easton and his followers.

While the critiques of Skinner and Pocock manifest a high level of theoretical sophistication, they also reveal a lack of a certain form of self-consciousness among participants who share in a discourse whose characteristics are no different from the traditions of discourse about which histories of political thought are written. The furious polemicism and struggle over the meanings of terms like "tradition," "intention," and "context" indicates that even at the ethereal plane of methodological disputation, discourse bears within it precisely the same political nature as the earthier discourses which are the stuff of our histories. The reluctance to set aside established conceptual categories, however ambivalently they are regarded, resistance to changes in a mental universe, the persistence of former disputes in present ones, and the "elasticity" of words themselves as they become the symbols and standards of parties and groupings contesting the vast field of discourse—these are precisely the features of that history of political thought which Pocock and Skinner attempt to describe in their emphasis upon linguistic conventions and discursive traditions.

Only with an awareness of the history of political thought as an activity along the lines suggested by a particular interpretation of Skinner and Pocock can a history of political thought provide that sense of an identity for "political theory" which it has always claimed to be able to do, but never quite succeeded in doing. An important step in understanding "the history of political thought" in its duality as both being *about* acts of political discourse over time and as itself being political is to recognize the traditionary nature of discursive acts. Implicit in this is an attempt to define the nature of historical interpretation, following Skinner's and Pocock's lead, in a way which overcomes the categorial dichotomies underlying much of the contemporary methodological dispute.

Monash University
Melbourne