

The Author as Actor: A Defense of Quentin Skinner

By

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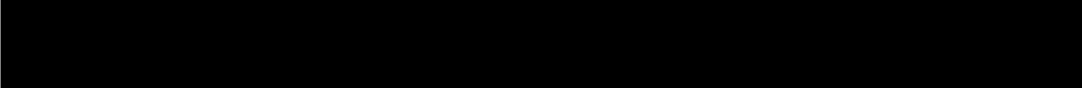
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Abstract

In this thesis, I defend Quentin Skinner's work against some criticisms raised by three of his interlocutors: John Keane, Kenneth Minogue, and Joseph Femia. All three of these critics take issue with Skinner's author-centered approach to the historical interpretation of texts. Femia, invoking Roland Barthes 'death of the author' thesis, argues that Skinner's attempt to recover the intentions of authors is impossible. While Minogue and Keane do not dispute the possibility of recovering an author's intentions, they question the utility of such an enterprise. In order to answer Femia's criticism of Skinner, I draw an analogy between Skinner's figure of the author, and Arendt's figure of the political actor. I argue that just as it is possible for someone to know what a political actor is doing *in* performing a political act, it is similarly possible for an intellectual historian to understand what political acts an author was doing *in* writing his or her text. To refute Minogue's and Keane's claims that a Skinnerian approach to intellectual history is of no use to the political theorist, I point to three examples of how Skinner's recovery of forgotten political discourses have been applied to contemporary debates in political theory.



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements		iv
Dedication		v
Chapter 1	Quentin Skinner and the Death of the Author Thesis	p.1
1.1	Introduction	p.1
1.2	The Skinnerian Approach to Intellectual History	p.3
1.3	Skinner's Critics	p.6
1.4	Skinner's Reply to his Critics	p.11
1.5	Skinner's Method	p.14
Chapter 2	The Author as Actor	
2.1	The Death of the Author Thesis	p.19
2.2	Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action	p.22
2.3	Authorial Intent in Skinner's Method	p.26
2.4	Performing <i>In Writing</i>	p.30
Chapter 3	On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Intellectual History for Political Theory	p.41
3.1	Femia and Minogue on the Disadvantages of Intellectual History for Political Theory	p.41
3.2	Negative, Positive, and Republican Conceptions of Liberty	p.43
3.3	Neo-Republicanism and the European Union	p.53
3.4	Nietzsche and Skinner	p.58
Chapter 4	The Neo-Humanist Aspects of Skinner's Thought	p.63
4.1	Moderns, Postmoderns, and Neo-humanists	p.62
4.2	Skinner and Renaissance Humanism	p.66
4.3	The Malleability of Language	p.68
4.4	Linguistic Conventions	p.71
4.5	The Techniques of Re-description	p.75
4.6	Skinner and Neo-Humanism	p.80
Chapter 5	Conclusion	p.84
	Bibliography	p.89

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For my mother, Phyllis Havercroft,
and my father, Peter Havercroft.

Chapter 1: Quentin Skinner and the Death of the Author Thesis

1.1 Introduction

As an undergraduate student at Concordia University, I took a literary theory course with professor Laszlo Géfin. Professor Géfin was adamant that “authors are dead” and their intentions in writing a text should have no bearing on how we interpret their text. This course was my first encounter with the death of the author thesis, and from the very beginning I was puzzled with the theory. While an author’s intentions may not be that important when we interpret a literary work, I always believed that understanding an author’s intentions was important when dealing with a text of political theory. Any worthwhile work of political theory should make practical proposals, and in order for readers to understand (and perhaps even attempt to implement these proposals) they must first understand what the author of the text is trying to propose. Even if someone wishes to critique an author’s theory, the critic must first understand what the author’s intentions were in writing that text, if their critique is to have any hope of being anything more than a “straw man” argument.

It was because of my belief that the intentions of a text’s author were crucial to the interpretation of the text that I became interested in the methodological writings

of Quentin Skinner. Because of my earlier exposure to the death of the author thesis, I was not surprised when I read several of Skinner's critics invoke it as a critique of Skinner's work. This thesis has grown out of my own struggles with the question of whether or not it is possible to interpret an author's intentions. In this thesis, I will attempt to defend Skinner against three of his interlocutors, Joseph V. Femia, Kenneth Minogue, and John Keane. All three of these critics use the death of the author thesis to argue that Skinner's claim that he is able to understand the intentions of the authors he studies is not possible. As a corollary, these critics also argue that even if Skinner were able to recover the original intentions of the authors of a text, this academic exercise is little more than an antiquarian art that can be of little use to contemporary social and political theorists.

Before I respond to these two critiques I will first, in this chapter, examine the debate between Skinner and his critics in closer detail. In the first section I will examine the distinction Skinner draws between an author's intention in writing a text, and the influence that text has. One of Skinner's critiques of traditional approaches to intellectual history is that the historian tends to read back into the work historical events that occurred as a result of that work. As such, the historian runs the risk of writing what Skinner calls a mythology of prolepsis. In order to avoid these sorts of misinterpretations, Skinner believes that the historian must try to understand the work in the way that the author intended. So, for Skinner an understanding of the author's intentions forms the cornerstone of a good interpretation of a text. In the second section, I will examine Femia, Minogue and Keane's critiques of Skinner's author-centered approach to intellectual history. In the third section, I will examine

Skinner's reply to his critics and the reasons he provides for continuing to focus on recovering an author's intentions in light of the much heralded death of the author. Finally, I will look at Skinner's method, as well as the speech-act theory upon which it is based, to see exactly how Skinner tries to recover the intentions of authors.

In the second chapter, I will argue that it is possible to recover the intentions of authors if we examine their writing as if they were performative utterances. In order to make this case, I will point to the similarities between Skinner's method, speech-act theory, and Hannah Arendt's theory of how an individual's identity is constituted through his/her actions. It is my contention that, if we treat the author as a political actor (in the Arendtian sense of the term) then it is possible to view the political acts that the author is doing *in* writing the text are also the intentions of the author. In the next two chapters, I will answer the charge that Skinner's approach to intellectual history is of no use to political theorists. In order to make this point, I will use Skinner's method on Skinner's own writing, and attempt to recover the illocutionary force (what Skinner is doing *in* writing the histories that he does).

1.2 The Skinnerian Approach to Intellectual History

In writing his 1969 essay "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" Quentin Skinner had two specific tasks in mind. First, he wanted to develop a new method for studying intellectual history that would make the study of texts historical. Second, he wanted to give the history of ideas a new philosophical purpose.

Skinner grounded his call for a new methodology in his belief that the two dominant historical methods of his day were inadequate to explain fully the meaning

that the author of any given text had intended in writing that text. The first of these approaches emphasized the autonomy of the text. Scholars such as John Plamenatz, Andrew Hacker, R.G. McCloskey, Karl Jaspers, and Leo Strauss all argued that a close reading of any given text was sufficient to arrive at a clear understanding of its meaning. The followers of Karl Marx and Sir Lewis Namier advocated the other orthodox method in intellectual history. These historians believed that an understanding of the social, political, religious, or economic context in which the text was written determined the meaning of the text. The advocates of the text-only approach to intellectual history all operate under the assumption that there is a set of perennial problems in intellectual history. When one studies a “great book”, one is attempting to explain how the author of that text dealt with one of these perennial problems.¹

The requirement that every field of intellectual inquiry attend to similar problems in every era leads to the belief that there are perennial problems in intellectual history. If there were not similarities between the writings of political theorists in different eras, then it would not be possible to speak of the history of the discipline of political theory. As such every historian of political theory will approach her subject matter with at least some prejudices developed by her familiarity of the field.

It is exactly these prejudices that intellectual historians tended to possess, which make a text-only approach to intellectual history so dangerous. We need classifications in order to understand, and only by using familiar systems of classification and knowledge is it possible to understand the unfamiliar.² The danger

of this approach is that the historian, by reading his own expectations into the text, will give the text a meaning that the author could never possibly have intended.

Skinner believes that a text only approach in intellectual history will inevitably lead to the writing of mythologies rather than history. Skinner identifies four different mythologies in "Meaning and Understanding": the mythology of doctrines, the mythology of coherence, the mythology of prolepsis, and the mythology of parochialism. Each of the mythologies demonstrates a type of error an historian of ideas tends to make with a text only approach. For the purposes of this essay, I will limit myself to a brief exposition of Skinner's mythology of prolepsis.

An historian who focuses on an individual work tends to examine the significance that a classic text has for us. Clearly, an author could not know the influence his book would have when he wrote it. However, many historians have a tendency to read into the author's intentions the influences that his text had on later generations. Skinner calls this tendency among intellectual historians the mythology of prolepsis. While there is nothing wrong with writing a history of the influence a given text has had, many historians have written as if this influence was the original intention of the author. When an historian does this, she has the tendency to mistake the author's historical significance for his original intentions. As such, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for the historian to recover the original meaning of a classic text.

As an example of the mythology of prolepsis, Skinner points to historians of Locke who have written that Locke was a liberal political theorist:

This only serves to turn a remark about Locke's significance which

might be true into a remark about Locke's significance which could not be true. For Locke can scarcely have intended to contribute to a school of political philosophy which, so this fashionable but muddled interpretation suggests, it was his great achievement to make possible. The surest symptom, in short, of this mythology of prolepsis is that the discussions which it governs are open to the crudest type of criticism that can be levelled against any teleological form of explanation: the action has to await the future to await its meaning.³

At the end of the essay "Meaning and Understanding" Skinner makes it clear how important knowing the author's original intention is in studying a given text.

The essential question which we therefore confront, in studying any given text, is what its author, in writing at the time he did for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by this given utterance.⁴

This conclusion is particularly important if one wishes to avoid writing a proleptic mythology. Prolepsis occurs when an historian reads the influence of a given work as the author's intentions. Therefore, if one wishes to avoid doing violence to a text, one has to uncover the author's original intentions in writing that text.

1.3 Skinner's Critics

Keane, Femia, and Minogue, take Skinner to task on the difference between influence and intention in intellectual history. While each of them has their own

reason for doing so, they all find the distinction that Skinner draws between the influence an author's work has and the author's intentions in writing the work to be problematic. In order to flesh out fully the problems they have with Skinner's approach, I will now treat each of their criticisms separately.

Femia's main problem with Skinner's method is that it renders the past useless to a political theorist. Femia believes that intellectual history is only useful if it can illuminate action in the present. As such, he argues the author's original intention is meaningless, because this intent has no bearing on our present actions. For this reason, he writes that "it is perfectly legitimate for the intellectual historian to treat the great texts as vehicles for the exercise of his own preoccupations."⁵ If history does not serve the present, then it has no bearing on our lives.

Femia believes that it is impossible to divorce the intent of an author from the influence that the author's work had. In fact, Femia maintains that what is most significant about a given text is not the author's intention in writing it, but the influence that text had on our history. Therefore, Femia believes that the historian has a duty to read the influence of the text back into the text itself. He actually does this when he writes statements such as:

Thus (assuming sufficient textual evidence can be found) there is no historical impropriety in saying that Rousseau's *Social Contract* amounts to a theoretical justification of totalitarianism, or that Locke's *Second Treatise* embodies a defence of exploitation and unlimited capital accumulation. . . . Of course, in Skinner's opinion, attempts to evaluate past ideas are pointless, if not literally

meaningless. But he overlooks an important point emphasized by Gramsci: the intellectual historian ignores the mistake of past philosophies only at our peril, for these mistakes “although made in the past,” have a nasty habit of being ‘reproduced in the present.’⁶

On this issue, it seems that Skinner and Femia have completely opposing positions. Skinner feels that uncovering an author’s intention in writing a work is essential to understanding its significance. On the other hand, Femia believes that the significance of any given text is the influence it had upon later generations.

Like Femia, Kenneth Minogue is concerned with the influences a text has rather than with the intentions of a text’s author. Through a critique of Skinner’s claim that there are no perennial ideas in intellectual history, Minogue draws a distinction between the task of the historian and the task of the political theorist in order to comment on Skinner’s methodology.

Philosophers are interested in the abstract ideas, historians in the individuality of the utterance, and the problem of the intellectual historian is how to negotiate this extremely interesting and poorly demarcated frontier.⁷

Minogue takes issue with Skinner’s claim that there are no perennial ideas in intellectual history. Perhaps from the perspective of an historian, whose job it is to flesh out the context in which an utterance is made, there are no perennial ideas. However, Minogue points out that most theorists when they are writing do believe that they are engaged in a debate over perennial ideas. The political theorist will use

the words of previous writers as “signposts” for perennial ideas. As such, Skinner’s understanding of political theory is different from the political theorist.

Minogue would like to create some room for political theorists to continue to do their work without entirely rejecting Skinner’s method. In order to do this, Minogue argues that there are two aspects to every idea. First, there is its perennial content, which is the concern of political theorists. Second, there are the specific utterances of an idea, which is the concern of the intellectual historian. Minogue believes that these two approaches to understanding ideas can co-exist peacefully.

Both Femia and Minogue believe that Skinner’s methodology severely underestimates the importance of a text’s influence. While Minogue is far less dogmatic than Femia, they both maintain that the proper concern of the political theorist is with a text’s significance rather than the original intentions of its author. John Keane also takes issue with Skinner’s claim that the task of the historian is to recover the original intention of an author in writing a given text. Whereas Femia and Minogue argue that a focus on the intentions of a text’s author ignores the significance of the text’s influence, Keane believes that the recovery of original intentions in a text is not even possible, because every historian’s interpretation is as biased as the intentions which that historian is trying to recover.

Keane believes that Skinner’s “intentionality claim” is problematic for two reasons. The first is that such a methodology assumes that an actor is fully aware of the significance of her actions. Keane points to the theories of classical psychoanalysis, which maintain that an actor’s actions are governed by her unconscious in ways of which she can never be aware. The second problem with the

intentionality claim is that it assumes that the language through which an actor expresses her intentions is transparent. Keane maintains that the language can act on the agent's intentions in ways that the agent can never be aware. Both of these problems point out the limits of agency in an individual's actions. Keane believes that by focusing too much on the author's intentions, Skinner loses sight of both the influence that the language plays in shaping these intentions, and the power which the "autonomous text" has in influencing later ideas.

Keane's second major criticism of Skinner's method is that it assumes that the historian is an unbiased observer of the original meaning of any given text. As such, the historian places himself in a privileged position of having direct access to the author's intentions in writing a given text. The "intentionality claim" advanced by Skinner assumes that the historian is capable of fully re-enacting the thoughts of an author.

Here the new history embraces a covertly positivist model of interpretation – a model long since abandoned within the most sophisticated circles of interpretation theory. This copy model presumes that valid understanding is identical with the loyal reproduction of the intentionality produced and meaningful utterances of others. It thereby revives a form of objectivism, against which the project of new history has consistently (and convincingly) rallied from the beginning. For the empathy model of imitating or 'recovering' the meaning of others' utterances, of emphatically looking them in the eye and stepping into their shoes,

rests on the supposition of an initially uninvolved observer whose specific identity and prejudices can be selflessly repressed in the act of interpretation.⁸

In opposition to Skinner's thesis that there is a correct method for the study of intellectual history, Keane argues that there must be a plurality of methods. Keane believes that history best serves the present not when it is faithfully trying to reproduce the past, but when it is critical of it. In making this argument Keane is attempting to revive Nietzsche's dictum that:

The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away.⁹

For Keane, critical history is the only way we can overcome the injustices of our present society. He points to two recent feminist intellectual histories (Hanna Pitkin's *Fortune is a Woman* and Carole Pateman's *The Problem of Political Obligation*) as examples of the power of a critical approach to history. Keane believes that Skinner's approach only serves to preserve our "inborn heritage" by making us uncritical prisoners of the past.

1.4 Skinner's Reply to his Critics

In his "Reply to My Critics" Skinner argues that Keane, Femia, and Minogue have all misunderstood him. All three of his critics imply that Skinner has equated

the intentions of the author with the meaning of the text. Skinner counters this charge by saying that his method does something entirely different.

Skinner concedes to his critics that “when a text says something other than what its author intended to say, we are bound to concede that this is nevertheless what the text says, and thus it bears a meaning other than what its author intended.”¹⁰ However, Skinner’s objective in writing intellectual history is not simply to recover the meaning of a text, the sense and reference of the terms the author uses, but the illocutionary acts of the author as well. He believes that authorial intent is very important to an historian who is interested in understanding a text. Knowing the intention of an author’s illocutionary acts is crucial for an historian of ideas. Without this understanding an historian may take a satirical text literally and arrive at an absurd interpretation of that text.

Skinner bases his method on two questions that an intellectual historian must answer if she wishes to have a proper understanding of any text.

One is the question of what the text means, the other the question of what its author may have meant. I have argued that if we are to understand a text, both questions must be answered. It is true, however, that while these questions are separable, they are not separate. If I am to understand what someone meant or intended by what they said, I must first of all be sure that the meaning of what they said was itself intended. Any text must include an intended meaning; and the recovery of that meaning certainly constitutes a precondition of understanding what its author may have meant.¹¹

This distinction allows Skinner to divide his critics into two categories. Femia and Minogue do not necessarily dispute that the recovery of authorial intention is possible. As such, they are not arguing that Skinner's method is a logical impossibility; they are simply questioning its utility for the political theorist. Skinner concedes to these critics that "if we are interested in . . . the study of [a text's] influence on us, or in the free play of signifiers – then there may be no good reason to trouble about intentionality at all".¹²

Keane's objection to Skinner's method is that a recovery of an author's intentions is impossible because authors are no more than "prisoners of the discourse" within which they are writing. Skinner does not believe that the proposition that there is no author is tenable. However, he does not believe that an author is free from the horizons of his discourse either. Skinner's methodology is actually an attempt to find a middle ground between these two positions. Intellectual history is the study of how authors continuously changed and reshaped the boundaries of the discourse within which they were writing. Without any agency, it would be impossible for authors ever to effect such a change.

This means that, if we wish to recover those moments when a convention is challenged or a common place effectively subverted, we cannot simply dispense with the category of the author. To the extent that our social world is constituted by our concepts, any successful alteration in the use of a concept will at the same time constitute a change in our social world. The pen, as Tully puts it, can be a mighty sword.¹³

1.5 Skinner's Method

When Skinner wrote his first essay on methodology, he was criticizing the two dominant approaches to intellectual history at that time. The first of these approaches focuses on a close reading of a text as a way of understanding the ideas that the text contains. The second approach focuses on the historical context in which the author wrote the text as a means of understanding the text. Skinner believes that neither of these two approaches is adequate. The first approach developed out of the belief that there is a set of fixed perennial ideas with which all political theorists are engaged at all times. Intellectual historians of this persuasion would interpret texts according to these perennial ideas. The second approach leads to the confused notion that an author's social context was the "cause" of the text.

Skinner's approach attempts to understand the meanings of an author's ideas by situating them within the context in which the author wrote them. In his own words, "the essence of my method consists in trying to place such texts within such contexts as enable us in turn to identify what their authors were *doing* in writing them."¹⁴ By studying the linguistic conventions of the period in which the author was writing, Skinner hopes to come to a clearer understanding of the kinds of meanings that a given term could have had for the author. In addition to uncovering the possible meanings that a term could have had in a given era, Skinner looks to linguistic conventions as a way of determining what an author was doing in using that term.

This second aspect of Skinner's method draws heavily upon J.L. Austin's speech-act theory. Austin was particularly interested in the performative power of speech, the fact that people can act simply by speaking. Austin divides performative statements into three categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. A locutionary act is an utterance with a particular 'meaning', a particular sense and reference. An illocutionary act is the performance of an act in saying something. A perlocutionary act is one where the speaker's utterance does something.

Skinner originally turned to Austin to criticise the contextualist approach to intellectual history.¹⁵ Contextualists believe that if the historian understood the context in which an author wrote a text, then the historian would understand the meaning of the author's statements. Skinner countered this belief by arguing that a contextualist approach to intellectual history can only recover the sense and reference of an author's statements. As such, the historian is studying only locutionary statements. Skinner argues that to understand an author properly one must recover the sense, reference, and *illocutionary* force. This means that the intellectual historian must study the illocutionary force of an author's statements: what the author does *in* writing the statements that he does. By focusing on an author's illocutionary force, Skinner hopes to recover the author's intentions *in* making the statements that he does. To gain a better understanding of what Skinner means by "recovering an author's intentions," I will briefly examine Austin's concept of illocutionary acts.

An illocutionary act is one in which the speaker performs an act or deed *in* saying something. Austin's main objective in his lectures is to distinguish illocutionary utterances from perlocutionary ones. By doing this, Austin hopes to

demonstrate that an individual actually does something *in* making a statement. An illocutionary speech-act is one in which the act is performed in the utterance itself, and not because of the utterance. An example of an illocutionary act would be the bride saying “I do” at a wedding or a gambler saying “I bet you . . .” Austin’s argument is that in uttering these phrases, an individual is performing an activity.

These illocutionary acts presuppose that a convention is already in place that makes the performance of the act possible. For instance, there must be a wedding convention in place in order for the utterance of the words “I do” to have any force. As such, illocutionary force is convention dependent. The perlocutionary act, because it is concerned with the consequences of utterances rather than the utterances themselves, is not dependent upon conventions. In fact, because the consequences of an action are largely unpredictable, it is often impossible for a convention to determine the outcome of a perlocutionary act. For example, one cannot schematize the reasons that perlocutionary actions, such as persuading or convincing an individual to do something, occur in the same way that one can schematize an illocutionary act. While conventions govern the performance of an act (illocution), they do not determine the outcome of an act, because of its unpredictability.

It seems to me that Austin’s distinction between illocution and perlocution is key to resolving the misunderstanding between Skinner and his critics. Illocutionary force is what Skinner means by authorial intent. Hence, Skinner’s attempt to understand what an author intended in writing the statements he or she did is nothing more than an attempt to read a text as a series of speech acts, and to recover the illocutionary force of those speech acts. Femia, Minogue, and Keane, on the other

hand, seem to be more interested in the effects of a given text. So, in Austin's terms, they are concerned with the perlocutionary force of a text, or what events occurred as a result of, or were inspired by the text. So, much of the debate between Skinner and his interlocutors (Femia, Keane, and Minogue), seems to be as a result of a confusion about the difference between an author's intentions and an author's influence.

Whereas Skinner is concerned with an author's illocutionary force, his interlocutors are more interested in the effects of an author's ideas.

The cause of this confusion, however, is - in part - due to a more serious dispute between Skinner and his critics. What Femia, Minogue, and Keane share in common is the belief that the intentions of an author are irrelevant to the interpreters of a text. In literary criticism circles this doctrine is known as the death of the author thesis, and it is associated with the work of Roland Barthes and his followers. While only Keane makes specific mention of the death of the author,¹⁶ Minogue and Femia also see little or no use for an intellectual history that is centered on the intentions of the author.

In this chapter, I have examined an exchange between Quentin Skinner and three of his critics over the possibility and utility of recovering the intentions of an author in writing a text of political theory. In order to understand the meaning a text had in its time, Skinner believes that the intellectual historian must recover the illocutionary force (what the author was doing *in* writing his text) of the author's utterance. Femia, Keane, and Minogue, all take issue with the emphasis Skinner places on recovering author's intentions. Invoking the death of the author thesis, Skinner's interlocutors argue that it is impossible for a historian to recover an

author's intentions, and even if this were possible, the intentions of an author of a text of political theory is of no relevance to the contemporary political theorist. In the next chapter, I would like to respond to this line of critique against Skinner.

Specifically, I would like to compare the ontological assumptions of Skinner's figure of the author to those of Hannah Arendt's figure of the political actor. In doing this, I hope to point out that Skinner's author bears a family resemblance to Arendt's actor, and if we consider the author as engaged in a form of political act, it is possible to read the author's political actions as his/her intentions.

¹ In a recent interview Skinner underscores the dominance of the perennial ideas thesis in the study of *intellectual history*. Describing how intellectual history was taught at Cambridge when he was an undergraduate, Skinner comments: "We had all been told that if you were studying the history of philosophy you were studying a certain range of questions which each of the philosophers was expected to pronounce upon; this was thought to apply most particularly in moral and political philosophy". From, "An Interview with Quentin Skinner" *Cogito*, Volume 11, Number 2, 1997, p.69.

² Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" in Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.31.

³ Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p.45.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.63.

⁵ Joseph V. Femia, "An historicist critique of revisionist methods for studying the history of ideas" in Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.171.

⁶ *ibid.* p.173.

⁷ Kenneth Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History: Quentin Skinner's *Foundations*" in Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.176.

⁸ John Keane, "More theses on the philosophy of history" in Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 209.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life" in Untimely Meditations trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁰ Quentin Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics" in Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.269.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.269.

¹² *Ibid.* p.273.

¹³ *Ibid.* p.276.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding", p.31.

¹⁶ Keane, p.205.

Chapter 2: The Author as Actor

2.1 The Death of the Author Thesis

In the previous chapter, I surveyed a debate between Skinner and three of his interlocutors concerning the interpretation of the intentions of authors. Skinner's historical method relies upon the interpretation of authors by reading them within the intellectual context in which they wrote. In criticizing him, Keane directly refers to "the death of the author thesis". This is not surprising, as the dominant trend in intellectual history and literary criticism since the 1960s has been the rejection of the significance of the author in understanding the meaning of a specific text. This stance has been taken up by Roland Barthes as well as by exponents of New Criticism in literature.¹ Instead of focusing on authorial intent, the followers of these movements have focused on interpreting and deconstructing the text itself, or in analyzing the relationship between the text and the society in which it was written.

In his 1968 essay "The Death of the Author", Roland Barthes cites a passage from Balzac's story *Sarrazine* and then asks a set of questions about who is speaking in that passage. The point of this line of inquiry is to demonstrate that, when reading a text, it is impossible to know who is "speaking" and, by extension, what the

author's intentions were in writing that text. In this essay, Barthes is attacking literary critics who attempt to limit interpretations of texts to explanations of the author's intentions. He describes this approach to literary criticism as placing the author before his or her book in a cause and effect relationship. Barthes' problem with this approach to interpretation is that it fails to recognize the multiplicity of meanings a text can have for its readers. This approach to criticism ignores the fact that "to write is . . . to reach that point where only language 'performs', and not 'me'."² As an alternative, Barthes proposes to read a book as a set of performative utterances (to borrow a term from the work of J.L. Austin) enunciated by the text, to the reader. Barthes' approach to literary criticism focuses only on the interaction between the text and the reader, thereby making the figure of the author irrelevant to the interpretation of the text. Keane, invoking Barthes' famous essay, objects to Skinner's author-centered approach on two grounds:

In the first place, [Skinner's] methodology rests on the exaggerated claim that agents always have a privileged access to the significance of their own intentional utterances. . . . [Second, Skinner] assumes that language, far from assuming a productivity of its own, comes in the form of transparent wrappings within which intentional utterances are enclosed and issued.³

Quentin Skinner and his followers have gone against this theoretical trend by insisting that both the intentions of a text's author, and the context in which a text was written must be known if a reader wishes to properly interpret a text. Skinner's understanding of the author is significantly different from the figure of the author that

Barthes and Keane are criticizing. Barthes and Keane object to author-centered criticism on the grounds that such an enterprise would rest on knowing the author's motives, and as psycho-analysis has demonstrated, no individual can ever know the motives behind all of their actions. In this chapter, I would like to counter Barthes and Keane's "death of the author thesis" by pointing out that the author for Skinner is a political actor, and that when Skinner is trying to recover the intentions of the author he is actually looking at the performative utterances that the author, as a political actor, is making, rather than the psychological motivations of the author. Skinner, after all, has insisted that the true significance of any text in the history of political thought rests on the impact it had on the politics of the time in which the author was writing. Skinner attempts to recover the impact that the author had on the politics of author's time. As such, an individual using Skinner's methodological approach is really looking at an author as a political actor. Such an approach, by looking at a text in the history of political thought as a speech-act, is privileging the author over the text. The historian is trying to identify and describe who the author was, and what he meant in writing the things he wrote.

In this chapter, I will argue that Skinner's methodological approach, by emphasizing the context in which a text was written as well as the intention of the author in writing that text, is specifically designed to recover the identity of the author as a political actor. In order to clarify what I mean by this I will first examine Hannah Arendt's theory of action, and suggest how this theory can be applied to Skinner's methodological writings. I will also look at Derrida's critique of J.L. Austin and Bonnie Honig's critique of Arendt's theory of action, to determine if their

criticisms can also apply to Skinner. In doing this I hope to demonstrate that when an author writes a political text, she is actually engaged in a political performance. As such, the best way to examine the author of a text of political theory is as a political actor who performs her political act through the text.

2.2 Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action

Hannah Arendt's understanding of action focuses entirely on the performance of the act itself. She believes that the motives which cause an act and the consequences of an act are not significant to understanding the act itself. Her idea of action is heavily influenced by the Ancient Greek ideal of agonism and Machiavelli's idea of *virtù*. Both of these understandings of action compared the freedom of a political actor to the elegance in the performance of an artist.

Machiavelli contrasts the *virtù* of the Prince to the *fortuna* of the world. The prince's greatness is judged according to his ability to capitalize on the opportunities the world offered him, and resist the punishments that fate imposed on him. There was a dynamic relationship between the Prince and *fortuna*, which was only resolved with the death of the Prince. As such, Machiavelli believes that the Prince is engaged in a continuous performance. The Prince's greatness and his freedom was contained in the performance itself. To underline the similarities between performance art and politics, Arendt points out that *virtù* is the root of two modern English words normally associated with the arts: virtuoso and virtuosity. A virtuoso

is one who demonstrates an excellence in the performing arts. Virtuosity is the trait we ascribe to individuals who demonstrate this excellence.

The other source of inspiration for Arendt's theory of action is the agonal spirit of the ancient Greeks. The best description of this spirit is contained in Nietzsche's essay, "Homer's Contest". In this essay, Nietzsche argues that the ancient Greeks understood the dark side of human nature - the tendency for people to be envious of others. Instead of attempting to repress this envy as Christians do, the ancient Greeks created spaces within which this spirit of envy could thrive and spur people on to greatness. Nietzsche argues that the ancient Greeks designed athletic contests as a mean of allowing people to compete. The point was to allow individuals to engage in a continuous struggle as a positive means of releasing envy. Nietzsche points out that when these contests stopped or a single person dominated them, envy would find another outlet, normally through one person inflicting violent revenge on his rivals. In order to avoid this, the Greeks developed the institution of ostracism to expel anyone from the contest who was too great. Unless there was an equally excellent rival to spur the hero onto greatness, he would not realize his full potential and would seek other, less positive, means of unleashing his competitive fires upon the world.

What Arendt found particularly interesting about these two understandings of action was the fact that neither of them posited a rational, morally responsible subject as the cause of action. While Arendt does not dispute the fact that individuals have intentions, goals, and motives for their actions, she argues that what is unique about action is its ability to overcome these banal restraints through the actual performance

of the act. Action, Arendt points out, only occurs in front of others. Just as a performance artist requires an audience to perform in front of, an actor requires others in order to act. Because of the requirement that action take place in the world, the actor cannot control what effect his act will have.

The unpredictability of action is what accounts for its freedom. Arendt contrasts action with nature to underline the fact that freedom is realized in human action. Laws of causal necessity make events in nature predictable. Human action is unpredictable, and as such interrupts the predictable processes of nature. It is precisely this unpredictability that makes action free and, hence, unique to human beings. Arendt describes action as occurring *ex nihilo* to emphasize the fact that the significance of the act does not rest in the motives or intentions of the actor. Instead, she believes that:

action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and every day life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*.⁴

For Arendt, one of the byproducts of human action is identity. An individual's identity is formed entirely by her capacity to speak and act. While every individual is distinct, the individual only reveals her distinctness when she speaks or acts. Individual identity is a direct result of the human condition. "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live."⁵

In order to explain how an identity reveals itself through speaking and acting, Arendt draws a distinction between “who” a person is and “what” a person is. To speak of “what” somebody is involves describing such things as an individual’s characteristics, traits, or skills. Someone implies “who” he is in everything he says and does. As such, an individual’s identity:

can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this “who” in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the “who,” which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *diamōn* in Greek religion which accompanies man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.⁶

Arendt believes that a recovery of the public realm is essential if the human species is to triumph. Without political spaces, places where individuals can speak and act, and in so doing reveal “who” they are, humanity reduces itself to a “mass society.” Arendt argues that a “mass society” can never be free because it “always will demand that its members act as though they were members of one enormous society which has only one opinion and one interest”.⁷

Arendt’s belief that an individual identity reveals itself through action heavily informs her understanding of history. She is highly critical of historians who believe that the purpose of their task is to uncover the causes of events. While Arendt does

not deny that historical events have causes, she believes that the true significance of an event lies outside of these causes. In order to prove her point, Arendt looks back to the historiography of the ancient Greeks and Romans. They would “both take it for granted that the meaning or, as the Romans would say, the lesson of each event, deed, or occurrence is revealed in and by itself”.⁸ They believed, as Arendt does, that processes are phenomena associated with the natural world. If human beings never acted, then the world would continue to unfold cyclically. Action interrupts the cyclical nature of the world processes by bringing something new into being. What is significant about an act is the fact that, had it not occurred, history would have continued in a predictable manner. The act, because it interrupts cyclical processes, by its very nature changes history. This is why the ancients, and Arendt, believed that an act’s significance lies in its performance, not in its cause. While

causality and context were seen in a light provided by the event itself, illuminating a specific segment of human affairs; they were not envisaged as having an independent existence of which the event would only be the more or less accidental though adequate expression.⁹

2.3 Authorial Intent in Skinner’s Method

It is my contention that Skinner is attempting to understand the significance of a text in political theory in a manner very similar to Arendt’s understanding of political action. While most people engaged in the interpretation of texts focus on the text alone, Skinner’s methodology focuses on three different things: the text, the

intention of the author *in* writing that text, and the historical context in which the text was written. For my purposes here, I will focus on the aspects of Skinner's method which deal with authorial intention. It is this aspect of Skinner's work which I believe is most closely related to Arendt's theory of action.

Upon first inspection, Skinner's emphasis on the *intention* of an author in writing a work would appear to contradict Arendt's assertion that knowing the intention of an actor is irrelevant to understanding the significance of a given action. However, Arendt and Skinner are using the word "intention" in very different ways. When Arendt speaks of an actor's intent, she is talking about the results which an actor expects from his action. Skinner, on the other hand, uses the word "intention" to refer to what an author is doing *in* writing a specific text.

Skinner draws a clear distinction between the intentions and the motives of an author. The author's motives are "a condition antecedent to, and contingently connected with the appearance of his works".¹⁰ On the other hand, the author reveals his intentions *in* the messages he is conveying. In order to speak about an author's intentions *in*, one must "know such facts as whether the writer was joking or serious or ironic or in general what speech-act he was performing".¹¹

If an intellectual historian is discussing an author's motives, she is usually implying that there is a subject which is the cause of the utterances she is studying. This belief goes against Arendt's claim that the significance of the act lie in the performance of the act. Skinner, however, does not believe that an understanding of an author's intentions prior to writing the text is necessary to arrive at an understanding of the text. In fact, he is willing to "concede that a writer's

perlocutionary intentions (what he may have intended to do by writing in a certain way) do not need to be further considered".¹² Instead of considering the perlocutionary intentions (what the actor hopes will result from the act of speaking) of an author, Skinner is concerned with uncovering the illocutionary intentions (those intentions which are contained in the spoken statement). Therefore, when Skinner is speaking about the author's intentions, he is not discussing the *a priori* motives of the author. Instead, he is speaking about the message the author is communicating through his utterances.

Skinner's focus on the intentions revealed through the utterance itself is very similar to Arendt's focus on the performance of the act. Neither of these theorists believe that the motives of the actor/author are relevant to the performance/utterance. As such, it is not surprising that they have a very similar philosophy of history. Arendt's insistence that an historical event reveals its significance the moment it occurs is very similar to Skinner's dictum that the historian must understand a text from within the context in which it is written. Arendt's critique of historians who are seeking a single process to explain all historical events is very similar to Skinner's dismissal of the notion that there are perennial ideas in political theory. Both Skinner and Arendt believe that the significance of any event is revealed through its performance, and that the historian should focus on the individual actor, not on universal processes or perennial ideas. As such, it is my opinion that Arendt's understanding of the actor is similar to, if not the same as, Skinner's understanding of the author. If this is the case, then I see no reason why Arendt's belief that action reveals identity cannot be fruitfully applied to Skinner's historical methodology.

Skinner insists that the historian must know the author's intentions if he is to understand the meaning of a text. As such, the historian uses the figure of the author to illuminate the text. Arendt would argue that Skinner has gotten the relationship between the text and the author backwards. The historian should be studying the unique contribution the author made to the politics of his day. The text was the means by which the author spoke and acted in his day, so the text is the record of the author's actions. Instead of using the author to recover the meaning of the text, the historian should be using the text to recover the political actions of the author.

Arendt's theory that individuals reveal their identity, "who" they are, through their actions, is very useful to the intellectual historian. If the intellectual historian places an emphasis on the figure of the author as actor, in the Arendtian sense of the term, then the primary objective of the historian is to describe "who" the author was. The intellectual historian, in describing "who" an author was, is not simply engaged in intellectual biography. The historian must also concern herself with the specific speech-acts the author made in the texts he wrote. In order to accomplish this, the historian must concern herself with the meaning of a text in a manner very similar to the way Skinner does. As such, the intellectual historian would be concerned with "the recovery of a writer's (illocutionary) intentions . . . as a necessary condition of being able to interpret the meanings of his work".¹³ Instead of using the figure of the author to point to the meaning of a text, the historian would use the text as evidence of the political actions of the author.

2.4 Performing *In Writing*

In her book, Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics, Bonnie Honig uses Derrida's essay "Signature, Event, and Context" to critique Arendt's overemphasis of the performative aspects of action. Honig's concern is that Arendt, in emphasizing the freedom of human action, leaves no room for stability in politics. Arendt's characterization of action as performative:

poses some problems for her equally central claim that action is a "beginning" with "nothing to hold on to . . . as though it came out of nowhere in time or space." Surely, Arendt's action must have something to hold on to. How can her performatives function without a public subscription to an authoritative discursive practice?¹⁴

To solve this dilemma, Honig turns to Derrida's writings on the speech-act theorist J.L.Austin (a figure who influenced Skinner's methodological writings). Honig suggests that the problem with Arendt's theory of action is that it cannot account for how action works or why it succeeds. Action

occurs precisely in a realm where Arendt's actors are *not* at home; there is no security, no overdetermined context to domesticate promising; on the contrary, the *mise-en-scène* of Arendt's performative action is the radically contingent public realm where anything might happen, where the consequences of action are boundless, unpredictable, unintended, and often unknown to the actors themselves.¹⁵

Derrida is critical of Austin for the sharp distinction the speech-act theorist makes between ordinary and extra-ordinary action. Austin divides utterances made by individuals into constative and performative. A statement that re-iterates old ideas, a classical assertion (to use Derrida's phrase), is a constative utterance. The context in which an utterance is made is composed of the constative utterances in use at that time and place. Austin contrasts constative utterances to performative utterances.

The performative does not have its referent . . . outside of itself, or in any event, before and in front of itself. It does not describe something that exists outside of language and prior to it. It produces or transforms a situation, it effects.¹⁶

The significance of the performative utterance is that it changes the context of ordinary language. With every performative utterance the context in which all utterances are made is forever altered. As such, any analysis of language done by Austin always requires a context, and it is this emphasis on the context that Derrida problematizes. By emphasizing the context in which ordinary speech-acts take place, Derrida believes that Austin has robbed speech-act theory of the risks associated with extra-ordinary performances. Derrida believes that Austin misses the point about the risk associated in making a performative utterance. Austin believes that the intention of the author of a speech-act determines whether or not an utterance is performative. Derrida counters, however, that some performatives can be accidental; as such, any utterance has the potential of being performative.

Austin does not ponder the consequences issuing from the fact that a possibility – a possible risk – is *always* possible, and is in some sense a necessary possibility. Nor whether – once such a possibility of infelicity is recognized – infelicity still constitutes an accident. What is a success when the possibility of infelicity continues to constitute its structure?¹⁷

By grounding his speech-act theory in the intention of the actor, Austin has robbed performative utterances of much of their perlocutionary force, their power to change the context of the language. Derrida believes that it is not the intentions of the author, but the risks involved in speaking that bring about changes in a linguistic context. Austin's focus on intention limits the risk, and by extension the power of the performative utterance.

Honig believes that Arendt makes a similar mistake by over-emphasizing, rather than under emphasizing as Austin does, the risks associated with political action. "In so doing . . . she . . . posits a home for language, a place where, as Derrida says, it is sheltered by its essence or *telos*."¹⁸ Honig believes that Arendtian action creates a sharp distinction between ordinary and extra-ordinary action. The stability of ordinary action is contained within the private realm of the household. Political action – because it is contained in the public realm - is risky and contingent. Because she emphasizes the contingency of the public realm, Arendt fails to explain how political action is supposed to outlast its performance.

If Arendt's performatives are to work in the way she expects them to, if they are to contribute to the creation of "worldly permanence

and reliability,” then she has to account for their stabilizing power and their durability with something more than the stories told by spectators, though also (given her commitment to the contingency of action) with something less than Austin’s contextualism and intentionalism.¹⁹

Honig’s understanding of the performative power of action sets up a bi-polar relationship between contingency and permanence, natality and durability, Arendt and Austin. In this philosophical divide there can be no doubt that Skinner sides with Austin. In fact, Skinner’s methodological writings borrow heavily from Austin’s speech-act theory. In what follows, I hope to suggest that this dichotomy between contingency and permanence is false, at least as it applies to Skinner’s writings.

One way around such a dichotomy, is to look at the *act* of writing as a performance. While speech and action are preserved only through the memories of those who witnessed the performative act, a text, because it is written, preserves itself. Arendt, commenting on the performative power of the Declaration of Independence, a *written* document, writes: “Since we deal here with the written, and not the spoken word, we are confronted with one of the rare moments in history when the power of action is great enough to erect its own monument”.²⁰ The significance for Arendt of the Declaration of Independence lies in the fact that through writing down their actions, the founding fathers of the United States were able to create an event that would outlast them.

Honig draws an analogy between Derrida’s theory of writing and Arendt’s theory of action to underline the unimportance of intention. Derrida believes that

writing, because its purpose is to exist in the absence of the author, is always free from the original intentions of the author.²¹ Honig believes that this idea of absence can be applied with equal effectiveness to Arendt's theory of action:

Orphaned by its author, exceeding his authorizations, action is context defiant . . . resistant to intentionalist interpretation and control, boundless in its possible effects , and free from the determination of motives and goals . . . Arendtian action, like Derridian, disseminates; it posits no being behind the doing, no antecedently stable self present and transparent to itself autonomously authoring the terms of its own existence. The self that writes is stabilized as an actor by various supports and disciplines, one of which is writing itself.²²

There is a striking similarity between the Arendtian/Derridian theory of writing and Skinner's understanding of writing is the location of the author. Arendt believes that the actor only exists in the moment of the performance, and as such, action occurs *ex nihilo*. Skinner, attempts to uncover the author's intentions by looking at the writing is doing *in* writing the statements that he or she does. The author's intentions are supposed to guide the historian's understanding of the meaning of a given text. Skinner, however, is prepared to admit that the author's intent is not the be all and end all of textual interpretation. He does concede that "when a text says something other than what its author intended to say, we are bound to concede that this is nevertheless what the text says, and thus it bears a meaning other than what its author intended".²³ As such, Skinner does not believe that a text

is completely shaped by its author's intentions. In conceding that a text can contain something other than what its author intended, Skinner has created space for the performative accidents, the *possible risks* that Derrida celebrates.

The fact that a text can contain something other than what the author intended *a priori* is startlingly similar to Arendt's belief that action always transcends the intentions of the actor. Arendt celebrates the transcendental capacity of action because she believes that it is through the *unintended* consequences that great changes occur. Because of its unforeseen consequences, Arendt believes that action is miraculous.

Every act, seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a "miracle" – that is, something which could not be expected. If it is true that action and beginning are essentially the same, it follows that a capacity for performing miracles must likewise be within the range of human faculties.²⁴

This celebration of action as miraculous is very similar to Skinner's celebration of the political consequences of speech-acts. What interests Skinner in the history of political thought is the power of the author to act through his writing. The author, through his text, is always attempting to change or re-assert the linguistic and political conventions of his era. Skinner's concern is with *how* the author effects this change. "The upshot of this approach, it is perhaps worth underlining, is to challenge any categorical distinctions between texts and contexts."²⁵

Because every text is involved in shaping the intellectual context of its era, Skinner believes that the author still has an important role to play. Without the author, Skinner points out, there would be no way of accounting for how the political discourse of a society changes. While the language games of every society shape and limit an individual's thoughts, these same language games are also the source of political change. An author needs a discourse from within which to make his performative utterances, just as a political actor needs an open space in which to act. As such, the text and the context are always interacting, and Skinner believes that the best way to explain this interaction is through the figure of the author.

While Skinner uses the author to account for changes in the political discourse, he does not let the author occupy a central position in his methodology:

It ought to be obvious that the approach I am sketching leaves the traditional figure of the author in extremely poor health.

Reiterating, defending, underpinning commonplace insights as they generally do, individual authors can readily – perhaps too readily – come to seem mere precipitates of their contexts. It is certainly an implication of my approach . . . that the idea of discourse, not individual authors, becomes the main focus of intention. The historian primarily studies . . . ‘languages’ of discourse, and only secondarily the relationship between individual contributions to such languages and the range of discourses as a whole.²⁶

In this passage, it appears that Skinner is privileging the discourse over the individual author. I believe that such a privileging of the discourse over the author could be

problematic. If the intellectual historian starts paying too much attention to the discourse, then she will start to look for general laws, or perennial ideas, to explain the discourse as a whole. Arendt was very critical of those theories of history that privileged the process. This approach to history would privilege the universal meanings of an event, rather than celebrate the unique significance of each event.

Arendt, in her essay “The Concept of History” argues that if we truly are to appreciate the uniqueness of human action, we have to focus on the significance that the act had when it occurred, rather than on the significance of the act from the perspective of world-history. Arendt hopes that a history that celebrates human deeds, rather than processes of historical change, will help humanity recover a respect for the power of human action. As such, there is a clear political agenda behind Arendt’s theory of history.

Skinner also intimates that there is political agenda behind his historical methodology. By becoming aware of earlier political ideas we can challenge the ideas of our present intellectual context. Skinner implies that intellectual history should serve as a source of inspiration for modern political theorists. If we treat Skinner’s figure of the author as a political actor, then it is possible to overcome the pitfalls privileging the dominant discourse of the author over the specific utterances that an author of a text makes.

By reversing the relationship of author to text, and considering the author as an actor, intellectual history has a more political purpose. By treating the author not as an external cause of a text, but as a political actor who reveals himself within the text, the historian would be able to emphasize the performative power of the author.

Skinner's intellectual history, when understood as an attempt to recover to political actions of authors, resembles Hannah Arendt's theory of history. This allows intellectual historians to provide us with examples of great deeds that individuals performed *in* writing political texts. Authors would be judged according to their capacity to change the language games in which they were situated. The great authors of the past would be used as examples against which political theorists would measure themselves. The great speech-acts of political theorists would acquire through this type of intellectual history an aura very similar to that of the heroic deeds of ancient Greece. Modern political theorists would use great theorists of the past "as a kind of yardstick with which to measure one's own capacity for greatness".²⁷

In this chapter, I have responded to Skinner's critics who use the death of the author thesis to criticize Skinner's author-centred approach to intellectual history. By demonstrating a family resemblance between Skinner's figure of the author and Arendt's theory of action, I have demonstrated that it is possible to recover the intentions of an author if we treat that author as a political actor and if we treat the illocutionary force of the author's statements as the author's intentions. This understanding of authorial intention is significantly different from the one that Keane reads Skinner as having. Keane seems to read Skinner's method as an attempt to recover the author's motives, and Keane invokes the work of psychoanalysts to argue that such an activity is a futile endeavor.²⁸ Skinner, however, makes it clear that he is not concerned with an author's motives, but rather with the illocutionary force of an author's statements. So, while Keane reads Skinner as being engaged in an attempt to

psychoanalyze an author, Skinner is only concerned with understanding what an author was doing *in* writing his or her text.

In the next two chapters, I answer the charge that Skinner's work is apolitical, by applying Skinner's method to Skinner's historical writings, and recovering the illocutionary force of Skinner's own work. In the next chapter I will look at how Skinner's historical writings can also be seen as contributions to debates about liberty and the democratic deficit in the European Union. In the fourth chapter, I will compare the ontological assumptions of Skinner's methodological approach, to the theories of language of classical humanist rhetoricians. In doing this, I hope to demonstrate that the political agenda of Skinner's methodology is a revival of the values and techniques of classical humanism.

¹ Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" is also often associated with the death of the author. This essay, it seems to me, however is more concerned with the social and political conditions which make the existence of the figure we refer to as An Author possible, than with matters concerning textual interpretation.

² Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in Image Music Text, translated by Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p.143.

³ Keane, p. 206.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), p.205.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.8.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.179.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.39.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History," in Between Past and Future (New York: Meridian Books, 1963), p.64.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.64.

¹⁰ Quentin Skinner, "Motives, intentions, and the interpretation of texts." in James Tully ed. Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.73.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.73.

¹² *ibid.*, p.75.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.75.

¹⁴ Bonnie Honig, Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 87.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.93.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" Limited Inc., trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.13.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁸ Honig, p.94.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.94.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, On Revolution, (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), p.130.

²¹ This is the point Derrida is making when he writes: "For the written to be written, it must continue to "act" and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written "in his name."", Derrida, p.9.

²² Honig, p.95.

²³ Quentin Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics", p.269.

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, "What if Freedom?" in Between Past and Future (New York: Meridian Books, 1963), p.169.

²⁵ Quentin Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics", p.276.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.276.

²⁷ Arendt, "The Concept of History," p.67.

²⁸ Keane pp.206-207.

Chapter 3: On The Advantages and Disadvantages of Intellectual History for Political Theory

3.1: Femia and Minogue on the Disadvantages of Intellectual History for Political Theory

In the previous chapter, I defended Skinner against John Keane's charge that the recovery of authorial intent is impossible by drawing parallels between Skinner's work, speech-act theory and Hannah Arendt's theory of action. In this chapter and the next one, I will respond to the criticisms of Skinner raised by Minogue and Femia. Specifically, they argue that Skinner's approach to the history of political thought is of little significance to the practising political theorist. Both Minogue and Femia focus on Skinner's statement at the end of "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", that "there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners."¹ Both Femia and Minogue read this statement as implying that if there are no perennial ideas in philosophy, then the historical study of texts cannot offer anything to the political theorist. It seems to me that Femia and Minogue have misread Skinner as a neo-Oakeshottian, who sees the study of history as a purely

impractical pursuit.² When Skinner is read from this perspective, he seems to attack the entire discipline of political theory. Minogue in particular, implies that Skinner uses history to call into question the practice of political theory:

Critics of Skinner have often seen this controversy in terms of a conflict between political theorists, who tend to immerse themselves in the great texts of political thought, and historians whose tendency is to dissolve writings in the wider context of events to which they belong. All political theorists wanted to be was left alone with their books . . . , grateful if historians should correct their odd historically implausible misreading of their texts. But the Skinnerian programme seemed at times to be a war *à outrance* in which only one of these academic activities could survive the great debate.³

This suggests that, at the heart of the charge that Skinner's intellectual history is useless for political theorists, is a nasty academic turf war. The debate between political theorists and intellectual historians, if we are to take Minogue's statements seriously, has less to do with which methods are best for the interpretation of a text, than with which department has the right to read a text. As such, much of the debate between intellectual historians and political theorists consists of the historians accusing the theorists of anachronistic interpretations, and the theorists responding by deeming the historians work "useless".

In this chapter and the next one, I will try and overcome this debate between historians of political thought and political theorists. I demonstrate two ways that the work of intellectual historians can complement the work of political theorists more

meaningfully than simply correcting the theorist's "odd historically implausible misreading of [a] text."⁴ Rather than theorizing how the work of intellectual historians could assist political theorists, in this chapter I will point to two concrete examples of how historical approaches to political theory have helped to clarify contemporary debates. In the first section of this chapter, I will examine how the debate surrounding Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" has misled some political theorists into believing that there are only two concepts of liberty. I will argue that if we turn to intellectual history, we will encounter another theory of liberty that does not fit into either of Berlin's categories. In the second part of this chapter, I will look at how a version of neo-republicanism, inspired by Skinner's historical work, has been used by Dario Castiglione and Richard Bellamy to critique current theoretical debates concerning European integration. This, I conclude, constitutes a pragmatic refutation of Minogue's objection that the historical study of texts of political theory can offer nothing of value to the contemporary political theorist.

3.2 Negative, Positive, and Republican Conceptions of Liberty

As a result of Isaiah Berlin's famous "Two Concepts of Liberty" lecture, it has been commonly assumed by many academics that negative liberty and positive liberty were mutually exclusive concepts. As such, much of the theoretical debates around liberty have focused on defending the merits of one concept of liberty from critiques made by advocates for the other concept of liberty. In this section, I would like to discuss a third concept of liberty, re-discovered by Skinner, that combines the

principle of non-interference, associated with negative liberty, with the principle of self-mastery associated with positive liberty. Before doing this, I will first examine Berlin's defence of negative liberty and contrast it with Charles Taylor's critique of Berlin's work, as the work of these two thinkers seems to be exemplary of the negative versus positive liberty debate. In so doing, I will underscore how Skinner's retrieval of classical republicanism offers a fresh perspective on a stale debate.

Berlin defines negative liberty as the freedom from coercion or interference by others. An individual's negative liberty is the extent to which he or she can act without having their actions obstructed by someone else. From this perspective, whenever someone attempts to prevent me from acting she is infringing on my freedom. Conversely, the less others interfere with my actions, the freer I am.

Berlin points out that the negative conception of freedom has been most influential in English philosophy. However, just because a philosopher, such as Hobbes, defines liberty as non-interference, it does not follow that his philosophy promotes negative liberty as a desirable objective. In any political philosophy, liberty will always come into conflict with other principles such as justice, or equality, or happiness. As such, it is possible to have a political philosophy based on negative liberty (again Hobbes is the paradigmatic example) and argue that negative liberty should be sacrificed for some other principle (in Hobbes' case peace).

While political philosophers who use the word liberty in a negative sense do not have a common political agenda or ideology, Berlin maintains that they have a common understanding of human beings. Berlin believes that theorists who subscribe to a theory of negative liberty all share "an individualistic, and much disputed

conception of man.”⁵ Without such an understanding of human beings, it would not be possible for Mill to argue that to encroach on an individual’s negative liberty, “is to sin against the truth that he is a man, a being with a life of his own to live.”⁶

So to summarize, Berlin defines negative liberty as freedom from interference by others. He finds this conception of freedom, to varying degrees of explicitness, in a diverse set of modern political theorists ranging from Locke, Hobbes, Smith, and Mill, to Constant and de Tocqueville. So, the negative conception of freedom does not necessarily imply a specific political agenda; but, the negative conception of freedom is based on an individualist conception of human beings.

Berlin’s other conception of liberty, positive liberty, grows out of a different set of concerns. To be free in the positive sense is to be one’s own master. Berlin, defining it in opposition to negative liberty, describes it as “not freedom from, but freedom to – to lead one prescribed form of life.”⁷ Berlin’s argument is that, although at first glance the difference between these two aspects of liberty may not appear very disparate the end result of conceiving freedom in the positive sense may be quite different from conceiving it in the negative sense. Berlin believes that the use of the positive sense of liberty is strongest in the Platonic and Hegelian traditions. Theorists in these schools of thought tend to talk about people being slaves to their passions or appetites. Hence, one is free from the perspective of a positive conception of liberty, by acting in a way that accords with their own enlightened self-interests. Berlin’s argument is that it is possible, from the perspective of positive liberty, “to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not because they are blind or

ignorant or corrupt.”⁸ What Berlin is quick to point out is that there is no reason to assume that positive liberty’s principle of self-mastery will not come into conflict with one’s negative liberty.

One example of how such a conflict emerges occurs when people assume that by securing their positive liberty through popular sovereignty they are simultaneously securing their negative liberty. As Berlin points out, however, “those who govern are not necessarily the same ‘people’ as those who are governed, and democratic self-government is not the government ‘of each by himself’ but, at best, of ‘each by the rest.’”⁹ By pointing out that positive and negative uses of the word freedom are not the same, Berlin is drawing our attention to how too great an emphasis on positive liberty can lead to a loss of negative liberty. Mill’s idea of the tyranny of the majority, and the Jacobin rule during the French Revolution are two instances where an overemphasis on democracy has led to a serious infringement of negative liberty.

Taylor’s response to Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty” begins by pointing out that dividing liberty into two categories oversimplifies how the word is used in political theory. “Even as applied to official communism, this portrait is a little extreme, although it undoubtedly expresses the inner logic of this kind of theory. But it is an absurd caricature if applied to the whole family of positive conceptions.”¹⁰ In his craving for a general theory to explain all uses of liberty through two categories, Berlin misses important aspects of several different theories of liberty. For instance, both J. S. Mill and de Tocqueville advocate self-government for individuals (positive liberty), but they clearly limit this positive liberty to the common life of a society.

So, here is a theory of positive liberty that does not “generate necessarily a doctrine that men can be forced to be free.”¹¹

Because of the rigidity of Berlin’s categories, defenders of negative liberty often reject any theory of liberty that includes an aspect of self-realization or self-fulfillment. Included in this group would be J. S. Mill’s defence of individual freedom in On Liberty, on the grounds that each individual has a unique potential that they can only realize by themselves. Hence, “the proponents of negative liberty themselves often seem anxious to espouse their extreme Hobbesian view. Thus even Isaiah Berlin, in his eloquent exposition of the two concepts of liberty, seems to quote Bentham approvingly and Hobbes as well.”¹²

In order to account for theories that do not neatly fit into either of Berlin’s categories, Taylor introduces two other aspects of freedom: freedom as an exercise concept, and freedom as an opportunity concept. Upon first glance, these two sets of distinctions appear to be the same. However, there is a crucial difference to be drawn between Taylor’s freedom as an exercise concept and Berlin’s positive freedom. For Berlin, theories of positive freedom “are concerned with who or what controls,” whereas Taylor defines this type of freedom as “exercising of control over one’s life.”¹³ For Taylor, this exercise concept allows him to differentiate between theories of positive liberty based on self-realisation (such as Herder) and theories of positive liberty in which individuals are forced to be free (such as Rousseau).

The differences between Taylor’s and Berlin’s categorizations of freedom become even more apparent when we turn to how the two deal with negative conceptions of liberty. Berlin defines negative liberty as the absence of obstacles to

one's ability to act; while Taylor argues that negative theories of liberty can rely on either an exercise or an opportunity conception of freedom, "for we have to allow for that part of the gamut of negative theories . . . which incorporate some notion of self-realization."¹⁴

By introducing the exercise/opportunity distinction, Taylor demonstrates that any useful conception of freedom must incorporate some aspect of freedom as an exercise concept. This is because according to the opportunity conception of freedom, freedom is doing whatever you wish. Taylor's point is that by this view, you are free whether or not you act in a way that accords with your basic objectives. The opportunity conception of freedom does not justify external authorities coercing you to act in accordance with the basic objectives of your life, but it does mean that it is possible to describe yourself as less free if you do not act in a manner that accords with the basic purposes of your life. The negative view of freedom treats all our possible actions as having an equal amount of significance. As Taylor points out, however, some limits on our freedom, such as traffic lights, are less significant than other limits, such as state bans on religious worship.¹⁵ Hence, "our attributions of freedom make sense against a background sense of more and less significant purposes, for the question of freedom/unfreedom is bound up with the frustration/fulfillment of our purposes."¹⁶ Because humans do, on occasion, allow desires for less significant purposes (such as consumption of illicit drugs) interfere with more significant desires, an individual's freedom can be interfered with by internal as well as external obstacles. So, if freedom is to have any meaningful connotation, it must reflect "the sense of being able to act on one's important

purposes.”¹⁷ Otherwise, a person who destroys her life through an addiction, and as such is unable to actualize the significant purposes of her life, could be described as being free, because no form of external coercion prevented her from becoming addicted. Hence, Taylor’s conclusion that the “Hobbes-Bentham view . . . is indefensible as a view of freedom.”¹⁸

Skinner in “The idea of negative liberty”, “The republican ideal of liberty” and Liberty before Liberalism, rejects the positions of both Taylor and Berlin. He argues that, contrary to the assumptions of Berlin, Taylor, and their followers there is an adequate concept of negative liberty that is compatible with the notion, normally associated with positive liberty, that citizens can be coerced into fulfilling their civic duties. However, rather than theorizing about the form that such a theory of liberty would take, Skinner uses history to show us how such a theory was articulated in Renaissance Republicanism.

Skinner believes that the best articulation of Renaissance Republicanism can be found in Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy.¹⁹ In the beginning of Book I, Machiavelli states that there are always two groups in every polity. The first group is the *grandi*, the rich and powerful elites who desire power and glory. They tend to pursue these ends with great *ambizione*, “a tendency to strive for pre-eminence at the expense of everyone else.”²⁰ The *grandi* tend to place a great deal of value on personal liberty, “for the aim is obviously to remain as free as possible from any obstruction in order to act in such a way as to acquire glory for themselves by way of dominating others.”²¹ The second group, the *popolo*, are the ordinary citizens, whose main objective is to live a life of security. These people tend to pursue these ends to

an extreme that Machiavelli calls *licenza*, “a wish to avoid any interference in their affairs on the part of even a legitimate government.”²²

Machiavelli’s use of the word freedom is very similar to the negative meaning of the term. This is because he uses the term to refer to individual freedom. “What he clearly has in mind is that [individuals] are free in the sense of being unobstructed in the pursuit of whatever ends they may choose to set themselves.”²³ For Machiavelli, the issue is which society best secures the negative liberty that both the *grandi* and the *popolo* desire. He makes an argument at the start of Book II, that the only way to secure liberty (in the negative sense) is if one lives in a community that “itself is living ‘a free way of life.’”²⁴ A free community is one that is not controlled by anyone outside of it, and is free to govern itself and choose its own ends. This community allows the ambitious *grandi* to acquire power and glory, while ensuring that the *popolo* can live securely, without the threat of their property being taken from them. So, “the continued enjoyment of our personal liberty is only a possibility, according to Machiavelli, for members of self-governing communities in which the will of the body politic determines its own actions, the action of the community as a whole.”²⁵ While Machiavelli does concede that a free polity is possible under a monarch (if the monarch designs the laws to reflect the general will of the community), he believes that the preferred form of governance is a republic. “This conclusion . . . represents the heart and nerve of all classical republican theories of citizenship.”²⁶

Machiavelli’s defence of Republicanism was extremely influential on Western political theory through to the late eighteenth century.²⁷ Subsequent republican

theorists tend to share several common traits with Machiavelli. First, they all believe that the private liberty of individuals rests upon the liberty of the state. Because “these writers take the metaphor of the body politic as seriously as possible” they believe that a political body is free in the same way that a natural body is, “if and only if it is not subject to external constraint.”²⁸ So, a free polity is one that is able to govern itself without interference, according to its own will.

Second, republican theorists believe that there are two main benefits that citizens of free republics will enjoy. One benefit is that republican governments are the surest way for a city to be prosperous. The second benefit is that republics are the best way for citizens to ensure their personal freedom. This type of freedom is freedom in the negative sense of the term. The public liberty of a republican government is the best way to ensure against the infringement upon the personal liberty of the citizen.

If, as republican theorists assert, a self-governing republic is the only way that a people can secure their freedom, then the next question to be answered is how such a republic can be established and maintained. Following in the tradition of Cicero, most republican theorists argue that a republic’s prosperity depends upon its citizens’ cultivation of *virtù*. “The term is used to denote the range of capacities that each one of us as a citizen most needs to possess: the capacities that enable us willingly to serve the common good, thereby to uphold the freedom of our community, and in consequence to ensure its rise to greatness as well as our own individual liberty.”²⁹ There are two aspects to the *virtù* of citizens. First, citizens need to have the courage to defend their republic from conquest or domination by external powers. Second,

citizens need to have prudence in order to participate effectively in the governance of the republic. These two aspects of *virtù* place a great demand on the citizens of republic. The duties of a citizen of a republic are in fact so great that no one can be expected to display the virtues of courage and prudence all the time. In fact, citizens tend to shirk their civic duties to such an extent that they become ‘corrupt’, “a term of art republican theorists habitually use to denote our natural tendency to ignore claims of our community as soon as they seem to conflict with the pursuit of our own immediate advantage.”³⁰ The reason this attitude is described as corruption is that this shirking of civic responsibility will lead to the downfall of the republic. For the individual, private freedom that everyone desires is only possible through the public freedom of the city. When citizens become corrupt, they forget that the private freedom they value is only possible if they continue to protect the public freedom of their republic.

Because republican theorists believe that the private freedom of individuals is dependent upon the public freedom of the republic, and that the public freedom of the republic depends upon the *virtù* of its citizens, it is justified, and even necessary, for the republic to enact laws that force its citizens to uphold their civic duties. The justification of coercion is based on the belief that “by coercing people into acting in such a way as to uphold the institutions of a free state, the law creates and preserves a degree of individual liberty which, in its absence, would promptly collapse into absolute servitude.”³¹

It is important to note that although both Skinner (through his recovery of classical republicanism) and Taylor argue that it is justified to “force someone to be

free”, they are talking about two different kinds of freedom, and two different justifications for coercion. For Skinner, coercion is necessary to ensure that citizens participate in the public affairs of their republic, as this is the only way that individuals can protect their private, individual liberty. Taylor, on the other hand, associates freedom with the realisation of specific goals. So, for Taylor, and other proponents of positive liberty, coercion is justified if it enables people to pursue certain specific ends of their own. Republican theorists never “defend the idea of forcing people to be free by claiming that we must be prepared to reason about ends. They never suggest, that is, that there must be a certain range of actions which it will be objectively rational for us to perform, whatever the state of our desires.”³² The only justification of coercion for republicans is that by forcing people to participate in the affairs of the republic, the individual, negative liberty of citizens is secured.

3.3 Neo-Republicanism and the European Union

In the previous section I examined how Skinner’s intellectual history can be used to criticise contemporary political theory and liberate us from conventional modes of thought. Through his recovery of classical republicanism, Skinner has uncovered a theory of liberty that combines the principle of the protection of the individual from interference by others associated with negative liberty, and the principle of self-mastery that is commonly associated with positive liberty. Classical Republicanism is not, however, a simple synthesis of Berlin’s theory of negative liberty and Taylor’s neo-Aristotelian theory of self-mastery. Whereas Taylor and

Berlin both begin by determining what liberty is for an individual, and from there reason about which political order best secures that type of liberty, Skinner and the classical republicans consider the form of the polity first, and reason from there what form the citizen's personal liberty should take on the basis of what best secures the freedom of the republic. As such, Skinner's work has provided us with a third conception of liberty that combines the merits of negative and positive liberty while overcoming the inherent weaknesses of those two theories.

In this section I would like to examine how Dario Castiglione and Richard Bellamy have used this third conception of liberty to critique debates surrounding European integration. This debate tends to break into two camps. The first group, the Euro-skeptics, resist greater integration on nationalist grounds. They argue that a European federation would not be able to adequately address the demands and interests of specific communities within the European Union (EU). Different communities will place different values on the rights and responsibilities of their citizens. Furthermore, Euro-skeptics argue that individuals need to feel a sense of belonging to a community in order to feel a responsibility to protect the rights of other members of the community. Finally, drawing on communitarian arguments, Euro-skeptics, "tend to stress the priority of democracy over rights in the preservation of . . . liberty" thereby establishing a link with national sovereignty.³³ The Euro-skeptics believe that the EU, by ending national sovereignty, is also eroding the sense of community that is necessary to preserve the liberty of its citizens.

Advocates of deeper European integration through a federalisation of European nation-states tend to have a traditional liberal understanding of rights. They

believe that the European federation would help to protect “universal human rights.” This objective can be achieved in either one of two ways. Some advocate greater supranational authority by increasing the jurisdiction and powers of the European Parliament and Commission, and the creation of common policies of the issues of domestic justice, foreign affairs, and economic and social policy.

The similarities between this debate and the liberal-communitarian debate are striking. Advocates of deeper integration have a liberal conception of rights and believe that the state, in this case a European super-state, is an effective instrument for the securing of these rights. The Euro-skeptics, on the other hand, believe that rights are always grounded in a social context, and as such, different communities will prioritize and organize their rights in different ways. Because of the similarities between the European integration debate and the liberal-communitarian debate, it is possible to translate classical republicanism to this debate, with little difficulty.

While Skinner’s criticism of the liberal-communitarian debate is that Republicanism finds a theory of liberty that combines the best elements of liberalism and communitarianism, Bellamy is more interested in how Republicanism can solve debates about the best form of government for Europeans. Drawing heavily on Skinner’s research on classical republicanism³⁴ as well as Pettit’s theory of republicanism,³⁵ Bellamy argues that freedom and justice for Europeans can best be secured not through mechanisms such as a European Charter of Rights (as European integrationists argue) or through preserving the sovereignty of the European nation-state (as Euro-skeptics maintain), but through the process of politics itself.

What the Euro-skeptics and the European federalists share is the belief that

the EU has succumbed to all three aspects of the democratic deficit. Instead of a constitutional consensus, we have a number of competing and overlapping constitutional traditions. Instead of a federal organisation of sovereignty, we have an emerging multi-level mode of governance involving a mix and dispersal of sovereign powers over a number of areas. Instead of a unified democratic system based on uniform citizenship of the Union, we have multiple demoi operating at different levels and kinds of aggregation.³⁶

From a liberal or communitarian perspective this form of polity is a disaster, but from a republican perspective it offers an interesting opportunity.

Drawing on Pettit's argument that freedom, from the republican perspective, is absence of domination (which was in turn derived from Skinner's work on classical republicanism), Bellamy points out that the multi-level system that is the EU has an opportunity to be less dominating than the traditional nation-state or a potential European federation. The objective of republicanism is to provide "a non-dominating environment where citizens can live secure lives, plan ahead, and live on the basis of mutual respect."³⁷ Instead of the liberal concern of designing a constitution that makes it safe for politics, republicans see politics as "the medium through which a polity constitutes itself."³⁸ It is possible for a liberal constitution to dominate the freedom of some members of society if appeals to universal rules are used to override policies that protect minority groups from discrimination.

While traditional liberals may try to avoid these sorts of problems by developing a more substantial theory of rights that protects minorities, republicans

believe that a better way to achieve this objective is through the process of politics itself. For instance, in ancient republics there was a great deal of concern that one social class of citizen would dominate the others. It was commonly held that the way to avoid this sort of conflict was to create a mixed government and assign different functions of the government to the different classes. Using this ancient ideal as an inspiration, Bellamy argues:

In contemporary societies, the answer lies in multiplying the sites of decision-making and the forms of representation via the dispersal of power and the electoral system. These devices influence where decisions are made, who makes them and less directly yet crucially from our point of view, how they are made.³⁹

Because of this, Bellamy believes that political power should not be focused in national and supranational assemblies. In order to make room for a variety of different perspectives, the power to make decisions should be dispersed across a number of civic institutions. Bellamy believes that this approach provides an opportunity for increased participation. This increased participation allows different groups to negotiate, debate and argue thereby making it possible for their perspectives and interests to be heard.

Bellamy believes that the current set up of the EU provides an interesting opportunity for the flourishing of republican values. By dispersing power over a number of different levels of government and through a number of different sites, the EU provides spaces for increased political participation without resorting to the hierarchical model favoured by liberals. For instance, there is no need, Bellamy

argues, for European institutions, such as the European Court of Justice, to become sovereign over the courts of the EU's member states. As he is quick to point out:

The absolute supremacy of Community law over domestic constitutional provisions has never been accepted by all national supreme courts. They have acknowledged the authority of Community law for reasons internal to the national legal order rather than, as the ECJ argues, because of its intrinsic Supremacy, and have distinguished between alterations to basic principles of the national constitution and the transfer of certain powers. . . . From this perspective, the ECJ need not assert the Supremacy of any given set of laws over others, but merely seek mutual accommodations in areas of friction.⁴⁰

The fact that there is not one uniform set of laws being imposed by the EU on its member states is problematic for traditional liberal federalists. The republican approach to European integration however, believes that uniformity of laws throughout the EU should not be a guiding principle. Republicans believe that the law should reflect the interests and values of the citizens it rules over. By dispersing power and making the law appreciate the differences and diversity of its citizens, a republican approach makes the EU far more democratic than any traditional liberal approach to European integration could.⁴¹

3.4 Nietzsche and Skinner

In his critique of Skinner, John Keane, invoking the work of Frederick Nietzsche, argues that Skinner's approach to history is nothing more than an

antiquarian history, useful only for “he who likes to persist in the familiar and the revered of the old.”⁴² Keane believes that the best and most useful kind of history is a critical history, “a history that judges and condemns.”⁴³ In this chapter, I have demonstrated that Skinner’s history is a form of critical history, because it allows us to challenge the conventional assumptions of contemporary political theorists by referring to the historical record. In the instance of the debate between negative and positive liberty, Skinner has pointed to a third conception of liberty, associated with Renaissance republicanism, that overcomes the limits of the two conventional understandings of liberty found in our era. With respect to debates surrounding European integration, Bellamy and Castiglione have used Skinner’s historical work as an inspiration in their re-imagining of Europe as a non-hierarchical polity. So, it seems to me that Skinner’s history is a critical and practical enterprise. In the next chapter, I will extend this argument further, by demonstrating how Skinner’s intellectual history is a political theory in its own right by comparing Skinner’s work, to that of the classical humanists that are often the object of his historical work.

¹ Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” p.65.

² Micheal Oakeshott, “The Activity of Being an Historian” in Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays (Indiannapolis: Liberty Press, 1991).

³ Minogue, p.177.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.177.

⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in Four Essays on Liberty (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1969), p.128.

⁶ *ibid.* p.127.

⁷ *ibid.* p.132.

⁸ *ibid.* p.133

⁹ *ibid.* p.163.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong With Negative Liberty?” in Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.185.

¹¹ *ibid.* p.212.

¹² *ibid.* p.213.

¹³ *ibid.* p.213.

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.213.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.218-219.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.227.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.227.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p.215.

¹⁹ Quentin Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Perspectives" in ed. Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 205.

²⁰ *ibid.* p.205.

²¹ *ibid.* p.205.

²² *ibid.* p.205.

²³ *ibid.* p.205.

²⁴ *ibid.* p.206.

²⁵ *ibid.* p.207.

²⁶ *ibid.* p.208.

²⁷ The classic survey of Machiavelli's influence on European political thought up to the American revolution is J.G.A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*. Skinner also offers a survey of Republicanism during the English Civil War in his book *Liberty Before Liberalism*.

²⁸ Quentin Skinner, "The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty" in ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.301.

²⁹ *ibid.* p.303.

³⁰ *ibid.* p.304.

³¹ *ibid.* p.305. There is a slight, but significant difference between this Renaissance Republican understanding of forcing someone to be free, and Rousseau's understanding of this principle. In Book 1, Chapter 6 of *On The Social Contract*, Rousseau draws a clear distinction between citizens (what individuals are when they participate in the popular sovereignty of the state) and subjects (what individuals are when they are on the receiving end of the sovereign's laws). When Rousseau says that individuals must be forced to be free, he is specifically referring to the fact that subjects must obey the sovereign's law. This is what he means when he writes: "And in viewing the moral person which constitutes the state as a being of reason because it is not a man, he would enjoy the same rights of a citizen without wanting to fulfill the duties of a subject, an injustice whose growth would bring about the ruin of the body politic. Thus, in order for the social contract to avoid being an empty formula it tacitly entails the commitment – which alone can give force to the others – that whoever refuses to obey the general will will be forced to do so by the entire body. This means that he will be forced to be free." (Jean Jacques Rousseau, "On the Social Contract" in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. by Donald A. Cress, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p.150. If one were to apply Rousseau's distinction to Renaissance Republican writings, it would be clear that when classical Republicans discuss forcing individuals to be free, what they really mean is forcing individuals to fulfill their duties as citizens. Rousseau, on the other hand, is clearly implying that to force someone to be free, is to coerce individuals into being obedient subjects to the laws of the sovereign.

³² *ibid.* p.307.

³³ Richard Bellamy and Dario Castiglione "The Normative Challenge of a European Polity: Cosmopolitan and Communitarian Models Compared, Criticised, and Combined", in A. Føllesdal and P. Koslowski (eds.), *Democracy and the European Union*, (Berlin: Springer, 1998), p.7.

³⁴ See Richard Bellamy, *Liberalism and Pluralism* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.120-139.

³⁵ Drawing heavily on Skinner's historical work Philip Pettit has developed a contemporary theory of republicanism. This political theory is outlined in Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: a Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). At the core of this philosophy is a "conception of freedom as non-domination which requires that no one is able to interfere on an arbitrary basis – at their pleasure – in the choices of the free person" p. 271.

³⁶ Richard Bellamy and Dario Castiglione, "A Republic if you can keep it", unpublished, p.13.

³⁷ *ibid.* p.15

³⁸ *ibid.* p.15.

³⁹ Bellamy 1999, p.123.

⁴⁰ Bellamy and Castiglione, 1999, p.21.

⁴¹ Bellamy and Castiglione describe their Republican version of the EU as follows: "Territorially based representation has to be supplemented by functional and cultural forms within particular sectors. Social and cultural interests are often territorially dispersed, or located below any specific territorial unit. Empowering certain groups may require their representation within a specific location, or across a given sector, or in the case of vertical cleavages, according to segment. Work place democracy and parent governors at school are examples of the first, corporatist representation of unions, employer organisations and professional associations of the second, consociational representation of a given ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural groups of the third. Such mechanisms allow minority opinions to have both a degree of autonomy within their own sphere combined with a say in collective decision making. On the one hand, all groups (those asking for special consideration included) are obliged to consult the broader interests and concerns of society as a whole. On the other, these same mechanisms operate as checks and balances on the purely self-interested or partial exercise of power" in "A Republic if you can keep it", p.18. They see many parallels between their neo-republican approach to European integration and the multi-level governance approach. For an example of the latter, see G. Marks, L. Hooghe, K. Blank, "European Integration from the 1980s: State Centric v. Multi-level Governance" *Journal of Common Market Studies* (34, 1996), pp.343-58.

⁴² Frederich Nietzsche, "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life" in *Untimely Meditations* trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.72.

⁴³ *ibid.* p.73.

Chapter 4: The Neo-Humanist Aspect of Skinner's Thought

4.1 Moderns, Postmoderns, and Neo-Humanists

In *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Stephen Toulmin describes the emergence of the modern world view in the seventeenth century. Toulmin argues that the work of thinkers such as Descartes and Hobbes were responsible for a shift in philosophy from a practical activity to a theory-centered one. It is this theory-centered approach to philosophy that postmodern philosophers such as Derrida have attacked in the second half of the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, modernists express problems in abstract, timeless, universal terms. Postmodernists,¹ on the other hand, tend to focus on the context in which philosophical problems arise as a means of underscoring the uniqueness and contingency of ideas. Not surprisingly, the debate between modernists and postmodernists has led to two different approaches to the study of the humanities and social sciences. Modernists have continued the theory-centered approach to the human sciences, while postmodernists have attempted to underscore the contingency of all human knowledge by deconstructing philosophical claims of universality.

Toulmin rejects both the modern and post-modern projects as insufficient because neither engages in the practical problems of human affairs. Instead, he proposes the recovery of the methods of the 16th century humanist tradition of philosophy, as a means of again making philosophy a practical and useful activity. Specifically, Toulmin points to the philosophy of Renaissance humanists, with their focus on “the practical, concrete, timely, and local details of everyday human affairs,”² as an alternative to the theory-centered approaches to philosophy that he associates with modernists and post-modernists. He argues that there is a revival of these values in the work Ludwig Wittgenstein and his followers.

In books such as the *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* and *Liberty before Liberalism* Skinner has written extensively about the political theories of Renaissance humanists. In this chapter, I will argue not only that Skinner has drawn our attention to Europe’s humanist tradition, but that he is himself a humanist political philosopher. Traditionally, in order to make such a case, one would provide a definition of humanism and then compare some of Quentin Skinner’s philosophical tenets to this definition. The problem with this approach is that it assumes that there is a single essential definition of humanism. Conversely, as Michel Foucault has pointed out:

[Humanism] is a theme, or rather, a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in European societies; these themes, always tied to value judgements, have obviously varied greatly in their content, as well as in the values that they have preserved. . . . In the seventeenth century, there was a

humanism that presented itself as a critique of Christianity or of religion in general; there was a Christian humanism opposed to an ascetic and much more theocentric humanism. In the nineteenth century there was a suspicious humanism, hostile and critical toward science, and another that, to the contrary, placed its hope in that same science. Marxism has been a humanism; so have existentialism and personalism; there was a time when people supported the humanistic values represented by National Socialism, and when the Stalinists themselves said they were humanists.³

With so many different humanisms, it is obviously impossible to reduce humanism to a single definition. Instead of doing this, I will use Wittgenstein's approach of perspicuous representation. He developed this approach to understanding concepts in order to avoid the problems that philosophers encounter when they search for the essential meanings of words. Wittgenstein believes that the major flaw of positivist philosophy was that it attempts to find fixed meanings for words. In order to undermine this approach, Wittgenstein begins in section 66 of the *Philosophical Investigations* a conversation with his interlocutor on the concept of games. Wittgenstein points out that when one surveys different types of games one discovers many similarities and differences between games; one does not, however, find any trait that is common to all games. As such, any attempt to find a fixed and essential meaning of the word "game" is doomed to failure.

As an alternative to such an approach, in section 122 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposes the concept of perspicuous representation, that

“produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’.”⁴

Perspicuous representation is both a type of understanding and a way of achieving this type of understanding. As a type of understanding, perspicuous representation means “to have a comparative understanding, an awareness of various possibilities and different aspects; to have a comparative understanding is to have clarity.”⁵ As a means of attaining understanding, “these goals of perspicuous representation are achieved by means of the ‘survey’, which is a technique of bringing hitherto unnoticed aspects of phenomena to someone’s awareness.”⁶

I would like to conduct a survey of different aspects of humanist thought and compare these aspects to Skinner’s own writings. Specifically, I will compare humanist techniques of rhetoric to Skinner’s historical methodology. In the first part of this chapter, I will examine *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, in which Skinner explicitly outlines some connections between his own work and that of the Renaissance humanists. While this alone could be sufficient proof that Skinner sees himself as a humanist, I believe that there are several additional similarities between his work and that of the humanist theorists of rhetoric that Skinner does not point out. As such, in the next two sections, I will outline Skinner’s methodological writings and some aspects of classical theories of rhetoric. In the fourth part, I will focus my attention on the similarities between the rhetorical technique of *inventio* and Skinner’s technique of reading a text in relation to the linguistic conventions in which the author of the text was writing. Finally, I will compare rhetorical techniques of redescription to Skinner’s technique of analyzing the changing sense, reference, and illocutionary force of terms used in texts of political theory. In undertaking this

survey, I hope to illuminate the humanist aspect of Quentin Skinner's work, and in so doing, point to an emerging form of humanism.

4.2 Skinner and Renaissance Humanism

In order to compare humanist theories of rhetoric to Skinner's technique of analyzing language and social change, I will focus my attention on Skinner's book, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. In this book, Skinner investigates what Hobbes meant by the term *scientia civilis* (civil science). Skinner argues that the context of the humanist political thought of Hobbes' day shaped Hobbes' understanding of that term. Cicero, a thinker who had a great deal of influence on the thinking of Tudor Humanists, argued that civil science had two components, *ratio* (reason), which allows one to discover the truth, and *eloquentia* (rhetoric), which enables one to persuade others of this truth. Skinner believes that by understanding what the term *scientia civilis* meant to Hobbes' humanist contemporaries, it is possible to get a more accurate understanding of what Hobbes meant by the term.

By reading Hobbes within the context of Renaissance humanism, Skinner discovers that there are three different phases in Hobbes' writings on civil science. Skinner believes that Hobbes' early writings endorsed a humanist conception of *scientia civilis*. Sometime, during the 1630s, Hobbes changed his mind. As such, his writings from this period, *The Elements* and *De Cive*, are an attempt to replace the humanist notion of a civil science with one grounded entirely in reason. In these writings, "he maintains that so long as we reason aright from premises based in experience, we shall be able to not only arrive at scientific truths, but to teach and

beget others in exactly the same conceptions as we possess ourselves.”⁷ Finally, Skinner argues that, in the *Leviathan*, Hobbes returns to his earlier belief that rhetoric is necessary in order to persuade others of the truth.

In order to prove his thesis, Skinner looks at humanist theories of education that were in vogue in Hobbes’ childhood, and compares aspects of Hobbes’ writings to the rhetorical conventions of seventeenth century England. As such, the first half of *Reason and Rhetoric* is a history of the humanist writings on rhetoric. While Skinner’s primary purpose in doing this is to flesh out the historical context of Hobbes’ writings, Skinner also hopes to make his readers aware of the entire renaissance humanist tradition and how it differs from the tradition of political theory that supplanted it, just as Toulmin seeks to do in *Cosmopolis*.

In *Reason and Rhetoric*, Skinner outlines three different views about the nature of moral and political argument. The first one is the stance adopted by Hobbes in *De Cive* and *The Elements*: that political theorists should try to reach their conclusions through deductive reasoning. The second view, as argued by Hobbes in the *Leviathan*, is that our political arguments should be grounded in reason as much as possible, but that it may occasionally be necessary to reinforce reason with rhetoric. Finally, there is the view advanced by the humanists that, because it will always be possible to argue *in utramque partem* (on either side of the case) it “will never be possible to couch our moral or political theories in deductive form.”⁸ Skinner makes it clear that, of the three views on the nature of moral and political arguments, he is most sympathetic to the humanist vision. In fact, one of his secondary objectives in writing *Reason and Rhetoric* is to present the humanist

principle of *in utramque partem* as an alternative way of conceiving of moral and political philosophy.

The humanist vision has by now been so widely repudiated that the very idea of presenting a moral or political theory in the form of a dialogue has long since lost any serious place in philosophy. I hope, however, that I may have succeeded in presenting more sympathetically the values of early modern rhetorical culture against which the practice of modern philosophy was to rebel so successfully.⁹

The fact that one of Skinner's secondary objectives in writing *Reason and Rhetoric* is to expose his readers to the humanist principle of *in utramque partem* is a clear indication of Skinner's sympathy to the humanist project. However, I believe that a comparison of the theories of language that inform both Skinner's methodological writings on intellectual history and humanist theories of rhetoric, will reveal many other similarities between Skinner's intellectual enterprise and that of humanist scholars. As such, in the next two sections I will provide a brief outline of both humanist rhetorical theory and Skinner's methodology of intellectual history.

4.3 The Malleability of Language

The humanist principle of *utramque in partem* implies that words have varied and flexible meanings (*paradiastole*). Orators trained in the art of rhetoric use the various techniques of rhetoric to manipulate the meanings of words to make their case appear more persuasive. Before examining a few specific techniques of re-

description and demonstrating the similarities between humanist theories of language and Skinner's theory of language, I will use this section to outline the humanist "art of rhetoric".

Skinner begins *Reason and Rhetoric* with an examination of the works of pedagogical theory that were influential during Hobbes' childhood. Skinner points out that the objective of most pedagogical theorists was to revive the curriculum of the Roman *studia humanitatis*. "There can be no doubt that the five-part syllabus of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy constituted for every Tudor humanist the essence of the *studia humanitatis*."¹⁰ There was a strong emphasis placed on the study of rhetoric, because one who had mastered the techniques of rhetoric was able to speak persuasively and effectively.

Tudor experts on rhetoric had for the most part developed their theories by reading the classic rhetorical theorists of ancient Greece and Rome. As such, there is a great deal of unanimity about the methods and techniques of rhetoric. For instance, most theorists of rhetoric, taking their cue from Aristotle, argued that there are three different types of orations: demonstrative, judicial, and deliberative. The demonstrative oration either commends or derides, praises or criticizes things.¹¹ Normally, a lawyer would deliver the judicial oration at a trial. This type of oration consists of an argument that something is either just or unjust.¹² The deliberative oration persuades or dissuades people from acting by proving that a course of action is either profitable or unprofitable. Speakers normally delivered these types of orations in political organizations. It is for this reason that every theorist of rhetoric

agrees “that deliberative oratory represents the central and inescapable idiom of *scientia civilis*.”¹³

Besides the three genera of oration with which a student of rhetoric was expected to be familiar, there was a set of five techniques which a student of rhetoric was expected to master. “A truly conscientious student was expected to learn the full range of skills required for writing or speaking in the Grand Style with the maximum degree of clarity, elegance and emotional force.”¹⁴ The opening pages of the *Ad Herennium* clearly lay out the five techniques of the Grand Style. The first skill is *inventio*, which the *Ad Herennium* describes as “the capacity to find out the considerations, true or plausible, that may serve to make our cause appear probable.”¹⁵ The next technique is *dispositio*, “the capacity to order and distribute the things we have found out as to indicate how they can best be placed.”¹⁶ The third skill, *elocutio*, is “the application of appropriate thoughts and words to describe the things we have found out.”¹⁷ The next technique, *memoria*, is “the capacity to hold firmly in the mind things we have found out, the words in which we wish to express them, and the order in which we wish to present our arguments.”¹⁸ Finally, there is the technique of *pronuntiatio*, which theorists of rhetoric described as “the regulation of voice, countenance and gesture in a temperate and elegant style.”¹⁹

Teachers of rhetoric believed that a master of the Grand Style had to know all five of these techniques. While all of the techniques were clearly important, some techniques were deemed more important, and more difficult to master, than others. As such, classical theorists of rhetoric tended to focus a large part of their writings on the three skills that they considered the most important and most difficult for the

student of rhetoric to master: *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*. Theorists of rhetoric deemed the techniques of *inventio* and *elocutio* to be particularly difficult to master because they involve the manipulation of language. It is the humanist notion of the malleability of language to which I will compare Skinner's theory of language and social change later in this paper.

4.4 Linguistic Conventions

In this part of the essay, I will focus on the idea of linguistic conventions. Theorists of rhetoric believe that a large measure of an orator's ability to persuade his audience came from his ability to base his arguments in the *loci communes*, the "common places" of his audience. In other words, the orator's arguments, if they are to be successful, must respect the *conventional* assumptions of the audience. Skinner's approach to intellectual history also places a strong emphasis on linguistic conventions. Through a closer examination of the role of "conventions" in Skinner's interpretation of texts, and the orator's "invention" of arguments I hope to demonstrate that both Skinner and the classical theorists of rhetoric share the belief that linguistic and ideological conventions govern the speech-acts of authors and orators.

One of the tenets of classical rhetorical theory is that there are certain types of arguments that are inherently persuasive. The task of the orator is to learn these arguments and discover how they apply to specific cases. This rhetorical skill is called *inventio* by Roman theorists who believe that it is both the most important rhetorical skill and the most difficult to master. Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* originally develops the technique of *inventio*. He distinguishes between two types of

arguments, artificial proofs, which the rhetorician invents, and “inartificial” proofs, whose truth is not dependent upon the skills of the orator. Roman theorists of rhetoric, such as Quintilian and Cicero, accept this division. They describe “inartificial” proofs as facts that the orator learns of through the reading of documents and listening to the testimony of witnesses. Artificial proofs are based upon the orator’s ability to manipulate the *loci communes*, the “common places” of rhetorical argument. There are two types of *loci communes*. The first consists in applying abstract rhetorical arguments to specific cases. The second type of *loci communes* is the application of various maxims and stock arguments to specific cases. Because the *loci communes* are so abstract and general, it will often be possible to apply them to either side of an argument.

The orator’s task is to persuade his audience of his case. In order to do this, he must make his case appear to be in accordance with the beliefs of his audience. As such, the orator must have a clear understanding of the *loci communes*, the opinions of his audience. By drawing parallels between popular opinions of what is just, and the justness of his cause, the orator is able to make his case appear to be just to his audience. The orator does this by citing general maxims and principles about justice. As such, the task of the orator is to “show that the course of action [he is] advising ought to be acceptable to anyone who already endorses such general principles. The *loci* are thus treated as storehouses of material for the amplification of our case.”²⁰

The emphasis that the theorists of rhetoric place on the *loci communes* is very similar to the emphasis that convention plays in Skinner’s methodology. An orator’s ability to persuade his audience depends upon his ability to make his case justifiable

according to the popular opinions of his audience. Similarly, Skinner argues that we can understand the arguments that an author of a text in political theory makes only by placing them in the linguistic and ideological conventions of their era. The reason for the similar emphasis on conventions is that Skinner treats the authors of the texts he studies as orators. Skinner is examining the techniques the author used to persuade his readers of his case. Just like any successful orator, an author of a tract of political theory must use the conventions of his day to persuade his audience.

For classical theorists of rhetoric, the *loci communes* consisted of abstract theoretical arguments and popular maxims. Skinner's understanding of convention is significantly broader:

Skinner uses ['convention'] heuristically to refer to relevant linguistic commonplaces uniting a number of texts: shared vocabulary, principles, assumptions, criteria for testing knowledge-claims, problems, conceptual distinctions and so on.²¹

By reading a text within the linguistic and political conventions of its author, Skinner hopes to gain an understanding of what an author is doing *in* writing a text. An understanding of the linguistic conventions allows the historian to understand what issues the author is engaged with and to what extent the author is attacking or defending the dominant political assumptions of their day. In order to understand the arguments that the author is making, we must first understand what arguments it was possible for the author to make. Furthermore, without sufficient understanding of linguistic and ideological conventions it is impossible to appreciate how an author challenged or changed the conventions of his era. Skinner's point is that, "we are all

limited by the concepts available to us if we wish to communicate. But it is no less true that language constitutes a resource as well as a constraint.”²²

In order to illustrate the importance of understanding conventions to understand texts, Skinner points to Machiavelli’s statement in Chapter 15 of *The Prince* that “Princes must learn when not to be virtuous.”²³ There are two questions that Skinner’s approach can answer only by appealing to convention. The first question is: “what does Machiavelli mean by this phrase?” The historian can answer this only by looking at how authors of “advice books for princes” used the word “virtue” in Machiavelli’s era. The second question is: “what was Machiavelli doing *in* making this statement?” The intellectual historian can only answer this question by examining the political context of the era in order to establish what course of political action Machiavelli was advocating. In writing *The Prince*, Machiavelli was appealing to the Medici prince of Florence to unite Northern Italy and expel the French and Spanish from the peninsula.²⁴

Skinner and the classical theorists of rhetoric share a belief that the speech-acts of authors and orators always occur in a given context or contexts, and that the context(s) provides a number of linguistic and political conventions which the authors and orators must respect if they wish their speech-acts to be successful. They both see conventions as having a dual nature: conventions limit what an author or orator can say, but they also provide the resources for an effective argument. It is for this reason that both Skinner and theorists of rhetoric place such an emphasis on conventions. For an orator, a mastery of the *loci communes* will allow him to manipulate the opinions of his audience by making his beliefs appear to be similar to

theirs. For an intellectual historian, an understanding of the linguistic and political conventions of the author he is studying, is the only way to understand exactly what an author was doing when he was writing a book.

4.5 Techniques of Re-description

In addition to the similar emphasis that Skinner and the classical theorists of rhetoric place on the role that convention has in the performance of speech-acts, there are also a number of similarities in their theories of how the meanings of words can be manipulated and changed. Skinner's method of intellectual history focuses on how political languages change, and how these changes can be analyzed by looking at changes in the sense, reference, and illocutionary force of terms. Similarly, the rhetorical technique of *elocutio* places a great deal of emphasis on the orator persuading his audience through his ability to change the meanings of terms and the way in which events or ideas are described.

After *inventio*, the second most important skill of rhetoric is *elocutio*. The *Ad Herennium* describes this technique as “the application of appropriate thoughts and words to describe the things we have found out.”²⁵ There are two aspects to *elocutio*. The first is the ability of the orator to express his ideas in a clear and elegant manner. This is because, as Quintilian points out in the *Institutio Oratoria*, “perspicuity is the very first virtue of a good style, and that it requires suitable words to be used, their order to be appropriate, no excessive deferment of our conclusion, and nothing that seems either inadequate or superfluous.”²⁶

The other aspect of *elocutio* is *ornatus*, the technique of “arming” one’s words for “battle”. *Ornatus* normally consists of a redescription of terms in a way that is favorable to the orator’s case. The classical theorists of rhetoric believe that there are two methods of *ornatus*. The first technique involves challenging a conventionally accepted definition or description, and to redescribe it in a way that makes it more favorable for the orator’s cause.

The other, more elegant, technique of *ornatus* is the amplification of the orator’s argument using tropes and figures. When an orator uses a trope, he changes a word from “its proper signification to a different one in an especially powerful way.”²⁷ In contrast, when an orator uses figures no change in meaning is involved. Instead, the orator uses figures to give an unusual configuration to his speech. Furthermore, figures are sub-divided into two categories: figures of thought and figures of speech. Figures of speech express ideas in an indirect way. For example, an orator may ask a rhetorical question instead of making a direct statement. Figures of speech use interesting linguistic arrangements to give an idea a new appearance.²⁸

An orator will use the first technique of re-description, the challenging of the definition of a term used to describe an event, to allow a person accused of a crime to admit to the facts of the crime without actually admitting to having committed a crime.

To cite Aristotle’s own examples, [the orator] may be willing to admit that he took something while denying that it was an act of theft; that he killed someone while denying that this was an act of homicide.²⁹

The only way that an orator can defend against such a technique, as Aristotle points out, is to get all the parties involved in the trial to agree about the definition of key terms beforehand.

Roman theorists realized that this technique of redefining terms was “a somewhat crude and inflexible rhetorical device.”³⁰ Instead, they focused their attention on the second technique. They believed that the best way to challenge the description of an event is not by challenging definitions, but by challenging the moral complexion of the act. The orator changes the moral complexion of an act by changing the appraisive terms used to describe the act. “The difference between the two methods is not that one involves word substitution while the other does not, but rather that process of substitution operates in the two cases in different ways.”³¹

In this second case, the words that the orator substitutes are the ones used to evaluate the act. The example used in the *Ad Herrenium* to illustrate the difference between the two techniques, focuses on debate between two orators over the description of an act as courageous. One type of dispute may focus on the definition of courage: “one party may seek to insist, while the other attempts to deny, that genuine courage always presupposes heedfulness.”³² Nevertheless, even if the two parties agree that “needless courage is really recklessness,”³³ another dispute may arise over whether a specific act is courageous. In this case, the struggle between orators will be over the description of the act.

If the orator’s aim is to ‘augment’ the significance of the action with a view to arousing the admiration of his audience, he will seek to establish that the action embodied a sufficient degree of

forethought. But if he wishes to arouse their hostility, he will seek to deny that it reflected any such quality.³⁴

Quintillian has a slightly different view of this second technique of re-description. He does not believe that the orator in re-describing an action is just substituting one word for another. When the orator re-describes the act, he is actually substituting one thing for another – *res pro re*.

Underneath this rhetorical technique is a theory about language itself. “This is the fact that, if we can manage to challenge the description of a given action or state of affairs, we can often manage, *eo ipso*, to challenge its moral appraisal at the same time.”³⁵ This means that every re-description is an attempt to re-evaluate the action. As such, “there is no categorical distinction, in other words, between descriptive and evaluative terms: some descriptions serve at the same time to evaluate.”³⁶

This idea that a re-description of an action can lead to a re-evaluation of it, is very similar to Skinner’s theory of how changes in how writers describe a social or political phenomenon can lead to a change in political ideologies. In the essay “Language and Social Change,” Skinner argues that:

The surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept with consistency.³⁷

While the possession of a new concept does not necessarily signal the employment of a corresponding term, Skinner does believe that there is a strong link between the two phenomena. Just like the classical theorists of rhetoric, Skinner focuses his attention

on those terms that simultaneously describe and attach a value to a concept (Skinner calls them appraisive terms). He believes that changes in the meanings of these appraisive terms signal changes in social concepts.

In order to understand how changes in the meanings of appraisive terms change social concepts, we must first examine how someone comes to understand the meaning of a term. Skinner argues that an intellectual historian must meet three requirements if he wishes to acquire a proper understanding of the meaning of a term. First, that individual must know the *sense* in which the term is used. In other words, he must know the criteria that distinguish the word from words with similar and contrasting meanings. Second, he must know what the circumstances are in which a term can be properly used – the *reference* of the word. Finally, the individual must know what *speech-acts* can be performed with a term. He must know if an author uses an appraisive term to express either approval or disapproval. To know what speech-acts a term can perform is to know what one is doing *in* using that term (the illocutionary force of a term).

Skinner believes that we can understand ideological disputes by examining the linguistic disputes that surround them. A change in the sense, reference, or illocutionary force of an appraisive term often signals an ideological change. In order to illustrate this, Skinner points to the debate surrounding Marcel Duchamp's designation of familiar objects, such as coat-pegs, as art. By placing ordinary objects in a museum, Duchamp changes the sense of the term 'art'. Not surprisingly, there has been a great debate about whether or not what Duchamp does is art. As such the

debate about the sense of the term ‘art’ is really a debate about the nature of a social practice.

Another type of debate that can surround the meaning of a word focuses on the circumstances in which one can properly use a term – Skinner calls this the reference. Skinner points to debates between Marxists and Liberals, over whether or not the word *exploitation* can refer to work, as an example about debates over reference. By applying the term *exploitation* to work, Marxists are calling into question the capitalist practice of wage labour.

The final way in which a debate about the meaning or use of a term can lead to social change is through a change in the type of speech-acts that people perform when using that word. For instance, for a long time in the social sciences the term *civilization* was used to privilege European culture over non-European cultures. Many contemporary social scientists are more sensitive to the ways in which the word *civilization* is now used. The term is now applied to many different cultures, and as such the illocutionary force of the term is less Eurocentric than it once was.

4.6 Skinner and Neo-Humanism

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the connections that I have pointed out between Quentin Skinner and classical humanism. First, Skinner believes that one of intellectual history’s uses is to free ourselves from the dominant political ideologies of our time.

The intellectual historian can help us to appreciate how far the values embodied in our present way of life, and our present ways of

thinking about those values, reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds. This awareness can help to liberate us from the grip of any one hegemonal account of those values and how they should be interpreted and understood. Equipped with a broader sense of possibility, we can stand back from the intellectual commitments we have inherited and ask ourselves in a new spirit of enquiry what we should think of them.³⁸

In his own work, Skinner has focused much of his attention on the political thought of Renaissance humanists. Furthermore, one of the stated aims of his two most recent books, *Reason and Rhetoric* and *Liberty Before Liberalism*, is to recover some humanist values, and present them as alternatives to the dominant ideology of Liberalism.

Second, Skinner shares with classical humanists a very similar conception of language. Both classical theorists of rhetoric and Skinner believe that the success of an orator's or author's arguments depends largely on his ability to make his arguments conform with the linguistic and political conventions of the day. Furthermore, they both share a similar understanding of the malleability of language. Both Skinner and the classical theorists of rhetoric believe that there is no categorical distinction between terms that are used to describe and terms that are used to evaluate ideas and courses of action. By manipulating the meanings of these terms or their illocutionary force, it is possible to change the moral perception of an action.

At the heart of Skinner's work is the belief that the great philosophers gave us powerful re-descriptions of our ideas and practices. Similarly, the rhetorical tradition

has always known that the criteria for our application of key moral and political concepts have been open for re-description. In pointing out the family resemblance between the rhetorical tradition and Skinner's historical method, I am also pointing to the possibility of a new kind of humanism: a humanism that recognizes the malleability of our political language games, and realizes that there is always the possibility to challenge the meaning of a term and go on differently.

¹ For a succinct and lucid definition of postmodernists I turn to Judith Butler who asks: "Who are these postmodernists? Is this a name that one takes on for oneself, or is it more often a name that one is called if and when one offers a critique of the subject, a discursive analysis, or questions the integrity or coherence of totalizing social descriptions?" "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism.'" in Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, and Fraser. Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange (London: Routledge, 1995), p.35.

² Stephen Toulmin, Cosmopolis, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 35.

³ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in The Foucault Reader, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 44.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1953), sect. 122.

⁵ Michael Temelini, Seeing Things Differently: The Comparative Dialogical Approach in Contemporary Social and Political Philosophy. Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Philosophy, McGill University, 1998, 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷ Quentin Skinner, Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁵ Cited in Skinner, 1996, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁰ Skinner 1996, 115.

²¹ James Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword," in Tully and Skinner, Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 9.

²² Quentin Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics," in Tully and Skinner, Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 276.

²³ Cited in Tully, 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

²⁵ Cited in Skinner 1996, 46.

²⁶ Cited in Skinner 1996, 46.

²⁷ Cited in Skinner 1996, 50.

²⁸ Skinner 1996, 50-1.

²⁹ Skinner 1996, 140.

³⁰ Ibid., 142.

³¹ Ibid., 143.

³² Ibid., 143.

³³ Ibid., 143.

³⁴ Ibid., 143.

³⁵ Ibid., 144.

³⁶ Ibid., 145.

³⁷ Quentin Skinner, "Language and Social Change," in Tully and Skinner, Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 120.

³⁸ Quentin Skinner, Liberty Before Liberalism. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 116-117.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

When Quentin Skinner published his first paper on methodology in 1969, his primary concern was to critique the two dominant methodological approaches being employed in intellectual history. The first school, whose pre-eminent scholar was John Plamenatz, believed that it was sufficient for a scholar to study the text in order to understand what that text was about. The second school of thought, closely associated with Marxist approaches to history, such as those employed by C.B. MacPherson, believed that in order to understand a text, one had to have read that text within the social, political, economic and religious context in which it was written. Skinner rejects both of these approaches, calling instead for a recovery of the author's intentions by reading the sense, reference, and especially the illocutionary force of the author's statements from within the intellectual context in which they were written.

Since the publication of Skinner's early methodological writings, a fourth approach to textual interpretation has come into vogue within the academy. This approach, pioneered by Barthes in his 1977 essay "The Death of the Author", argues that it is impossible for an interpreter of a text to know the intentions an author had in writing a text. This fourth approach to textual interpretation has been used by three of

Skinner's interlocutors, Kenneth Minogue, Joseph Femia, and John Keane (in slightly different ways) to critique Skinner's methodology. Femia believes that the intentions of an author are of no significance. If intellectual history is to have any use in the present, Femia argues, then historians should focus on the influence the text had rather than on the intentions of the author. So, for Femia, the historian's duty is to read a text's influence back into the text and then use this interpretation as a means of critiquing the text. Minogue's primary concern seems to be that Skinner's emphasis on historical readings of texts will lead to the unemployment of countless political theorists. Echoing Plamenatz' famous statement "Is there to be no division of labour?"¹, Minogue argues that political theorists and intellectual historians are interested in two different aspects of a text. For a political theorist, texts serve as sign-posts for perennial questions, whereas for intellectual historians, their concern is with the specific utterance of an idea within a text. Finally, Keane argues that it is simply impossible for an author to recover the intentions of an author because everyone's interpretation is biased. To claim otherwise is to place the historian in a privileged position. At the heart of these three critiques is the suggestion that the recovery of an author's intentions in writing a text is not possible (Keane), and even if the recovery of an author's intentions is possible, it is of little (Minogue) or no (Femia) use to the political theorist.

Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" is the classic example of the argument that it is not possible to understand the author's intentions. What is interesting about Barthes' argument, is that he, like Skinner, argues that the interpreter's job is to focus on the "speech-acts" contained in the text. It seems to me

that this would indicate that Skinner's historical method has more in common with the approaches used by the "New Criticism" than many of Skinner's critics would concede. When Barthes is critical of attempts to recover author's intentions, his targets are critics who use biographies and psychoanalytic techniques as a means of determining what events from an author's life shaped the writing of a text. This is not what Skinner means when he writes about authorial intent. For Skinner, intention is revealed through the "speech-acts" of the authors. As I argue in chapter 2 of my thesis, authors of texts of political theory are like political actors. So when Skinner talks about authorial intent, he is talking about understanding the political proposals and arguments that an author is trying to communicate by writing a specific text. In order to clarify this point, Skinner draws a distinction between the motives of an author, which are the conditions that provoked the author to write the text, and the intentions that an author has in writing this text. When Skinner writes about an author's intentions, he is really writing about what J.L. Austin calls the illocutionary force of an utterance. As such, the concern is to understand what the author is doing *in* writing the statements he writes. When focusing on the intentions of an author such as Hobbes, for instance, Skinner is looking at the illocutionary force of Hobbes' statements to determine whether Hobbes is being serious or ironic in the statements that he is making about God.

As I argue in Chapter 3, the charge that Skinner's focus on recovering authorial intention is useless seems to emerge from an intra-disciplinary struggle between historians and political theorists. At no point in time has Skinner argued that ahistorical readings of political texts are illegitimate or bad scholarship. His concern

has always been limited to which method best allows us to understand what an author meant in writing the statements that he did. This does not preclude political theorists from critiquing texts, or using texts as sign-posts for ideas, or focusing on the influence that a text had on latter historical events. So, Minogue's fear that Skinner's work is calling into question the validity of all unhistorical approaches to political theory is a bit misguided. Keane's argument that Skinner's approach to intellectual history cannot uncover the inherent injustices or silences of texts (such as gender bias) is a far more significant critique. There is however nothing in Skinner's methodological writings that is fundamentally opposed to the work done by Hanna Pitkin or Carole Pateman. What Minogue and Keane seem to be implying in their critiques of Skinner, is that the Cambridge School approach to intellectual history is claiming a methodological hegemony as to how texts are interpreted.² There is, however, nothing in Skinner's writings that would justify such a reading of his work.

While Skinner does not argue that his approach to interpreting the text is the only way to interpret the text, it does seem to me that in dismissing Skinner's work as useless Keane and Minogue are making a claim that the work of political theorists is more useful and more relevant than the work of intellectual historians. For instance, in calling for a division of labour between historians and political theorists, Minogue seems to be implying that historians have nothing useful or insightful to offer to contemporary political theorists. As I argue in Chapter 3, however, historians, by reminding us of forgotten philosophies from earlier eras can offer political theorists fresh insights into contemporary debates, and free us from the narrow perspectives of contemporary discourses. In this respect, Skinner's work can be seen as a similar

enterprise to the genealogical studies of Michel Foucault.³ The Oakeshottian distinction between history as an impractical pursuit and political theory as a practical one seems to me to be a false one. Although an historian has to be careful not to read his own biases into the interpretation of texts, it does not necessarily follow that the historian's work must serve no practical purpose whatsoever. The best history uses the past to critique the present, by showing us that what we often assume to be necessary to our political order is contingent. Once we are aware of what is contingent in our social and political order, it is possible challenge these assumptions and bring about political change.

¹ John Plamenatz, Man and Society (London: Longmans, 1963), p.ix.

² The specific passage that Minogue points to as an example of Skinner's alleged desire for methodological hegemony is p.99 of Quentin Skinner, "Some problems in the analysis of political thought and action" in James Tully, ed. Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988). Minogue states that "At its most extreme, the claim plays around with the notion that the correct method is not only necessary but also sufficient" (Minogue, p.320 n.4). But it seems to me that Minogue has chosen to read this passage in a negative light. All Skinner claims in this passage is that his method provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding an author's intentions. He never claims that this is the only way to interpret or understand a text.

³ James Tully has pointed out the similarities between Foucault and Skinner in numerous places, most recently in "To think and act differently: Foucault's four reciprocal objections to Habermas," in David Owen (Ed.) Foucault Contra Habermas (London: Sage, 1999) as well as in "The Agonic Freedom of Citizens" Economy and Society 28:2 (May 1999), pp.161-182.

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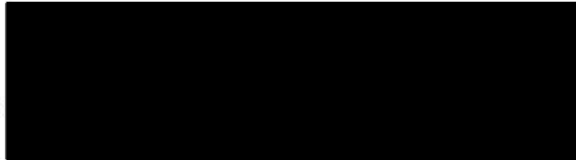
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