Abstract

Intellectual historians who seek to contextualize classic texts and “presentist” political theorists who seek to reclaim their still-valid insights are pursuing different intellectual goals. The two approaches do not have a methodological dispute to be settled in instrumental terms, but an ethical one that can only be settled in terms of competing values. Quentin Skinner’s famous attacks on presentism must therefore be evaluated, not only as part of a methodological program, but also as a collection of ethical arguments. This essay demonstrates why none of Skinner’s arguments can establish that his approach is ethically acceptable while presentism is not. While both contextualist history and presentist theory are justifiably seen as valuable, Skinner’s best justification of the former enterprise is that it can help us achieve the purposes of the latter.

Introduction

Ethics, under a roughly Habermasian view, is a realm of discourse in which any of us may be called to offer justifications of our evaluative stances in terms of values that we expect our interlocutors to share. Sometimes, a reasonable response to a discursive demand for justification is “That’s none of your business!” In other contexts, however, evading another’s demand for justification would itself be unjustified; whether, when and why this is the case is itself a matter of further ethical debate.

Moral philosophers and political theorists have devoted considerable energy to analyzing and evaluating the sort of ethical justifications that individuals offer each other across a wide
variety of discursive settings. This essay will apply such techniques to a debate from the academic realm in which political theorists are not only observers, but also among the primary participants. While many have quipped that academic infighting is so intense because the stakes are so low, ethical arguments in the academy often shape our understanding of non-academic matters in important ways. Such is certainly the case with the debate that I will be analyzing. In addition to being important in itself, this disagreement can also serve as an illuminating case study of how to understand ethical arguments in the academy more generally.

According to one party in this dispute, the study of political ideas ought to be bifurcated: divided into “the history of political thought” on the one hand and “political philosophy” on the other. The former of these enterprises, though to be practiced in both history and political science departments, is to be treated as a branch of intellectual history. Its proper goal is to understand authors’ ideas in their unique historical contexts. The latter enterprise—to be practiced in philosophy and philosophically-oriented political science departments—is to be treated as an essentially ahistorical undertaking.

Yet there is also a third group of scholars whose work defies this bifurcation. Green (2012) has called these authors “pupils” of the political-theoretical classics; Baumgold (1981) has labeled their work “political commentary.” Their critics, most notably Quentin Skinner, often call them “presentists.” For much of the second half of the twentieth century, presentists dominated political theory; leading practitioners of a transhistorical approach included Arendt, Berlin, Oakeshott, Strauss, and Shklar. Each of these authors has students carrying on their work today.

Divided among themselves on almost all matters both substantive and methodological, most presentists would adamantly object to being lumped together as I am lumping them.
Despite all their differences, however, they share two common opponents (see Green 2015). Against ahistorical philosophers, they argue for the continued importance of reading old books. Against contextualist historians, they argue that these books can and should be interpreted, not merely as artifacts of their time and place, but as sources of practical guidance for today.

To be sure, each figure in this triad—the contextualist, the ahistoricist, and the presentist—is a Weberian ideal type, and much of the most interesting work being done today (most notably cross-cultural, comparative political theory) is difficult to classify under this typology. As with any system of ideal types, however, I hope that the gain in clarity here is worth the price in taxonomic subtlety. If Weberian idealizations are useful in descriptive sociology, the can be even more useful in normative ethics, a field in which the goal is to clarify positions in an admittedly idealized debate rather than to capture all the messiness of actually-existing discursive practices.

This essay will be about the debate between presentist theorists and contextualist historians; the debate with ahistorical philosophers will have to be saved for another occasion. Let us assume that a political theorist has chosen to read old books. How is the choice between writing a work of contextualist history and writing a work of presentist theory to be decided? This is not a matter of methodology, an instrumental matter of selecting the proper technique to be used for solving a given intellectual puzzle. It is a matter of what sort of problems we should be trying to solve in the first place. This is unavoidably an ethical decision, one which asks for an interpersonally acceptable justification of how we choose to balance competing values. Some of the values to be weighed may be moral in a narrow sense—in that they may involve questions of interpersonal obligation, of “what we owe to each other”—but all will be broadly ethical, including the full range of human values alongside narrowly moral ones. While much of the
ethical discussion that follows will be about interpersonal responsibilities, other values—the intrinsic value of truth, the values internal to certain vocations, and so on—will play a role as well.

It is important to distinguish the ethical debate between contextualist historians and presentist theorists from the methodological debates that both historians and theorists have among themselves. Mine is not yet another methodological argument against Skinner’s contextualism, but is a continuation of a now neglected argument which predates the emergence of his methods. As early as 1951, David Easton criticized the textbook-writing historians of political thought of the first half of the twentieth century (Dunning, McIIwain, Sabine, et. al.) using arguments virtually identical to those later used to criticize Skinner—himself a vociferous critics of Sabine and his ilk, albeit along different, genuinely methodological lines. Easton argues that scholars have failed to live up to their ethical responsibilities, regardless of their interpretive methods, if “they do not use the history of values as a device to stimulate their own thoughts on a possible creative redefinition of political goals” (Easton 1951, 42; see also Crick 1959 and Gunn 1988, 5).

Although my argument is not against Skinner’s methods, it is nonetheless an argument against Skinner. In addition to establishing the hegemony of his preferred contextualist methods, Skinner’s classic “methodological” essays also offer the strongest arguments currently available for a “properly historical” approach to political thought (Skinner 2002b, vii). Yet throughout the vast literature which has developed around Skinner’s programmatic writings there has heretofore been no attempt to evaluate his ethical arguments as such. To the contrary, some commentators have even insisted that we misread these essays if we see their concerns as anything other than “narrowly methodological” (Haddock 2011, 66).
In fact, Skinner’s concerns have always been unambiguously ethical. In both the original and revised versions of his seminal essay “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” Skinner (2002b, 89) explicitly argues that that “to demand from the history of thought a solution to our own immediate problems is… to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error.”

This essay will examine six distinct ethical arguments that Skinner discusses when justifying contextualist history in terms of its relationship with commonly-held values that he reasonably expects his readers to share. While each of these arguments is ethically compelling, none can successfully establish that Skinner’s contextualism is uniquely justifiable, while presentist approaches to the study of political ideas are not. Indeed, Skinner himself has now abandoned this over-strong thesis. Similarly, I have no wish to defend the equally over-strong thesis that only presentism is ethically acceptable. The rejection of both of these exclusivist theses, however, does not imply a tolerant pluralism of autonomous, mutually indifferent academic enterprises each of which is justified independent of the others. To the contrary, while both contextualist history and presentist theory are justified, the most persuasive of Skinner’s arguments for the value of the former enterprise depends on the fact that it can help us better achieve the purposes of the latter. As such, it is no surprise Skinner himself now undertakes scholarship that is valuable for undeniably presentist reasons.

I. The Argument from Impossibility

Although there are moments when Skinner’s “methodological” essays explicitly invoke commonly-held values to justify the practice of contextualist history, most of his arguments are not explicitly ethical. At times, Skinner seems to deny that the choice between contextualist
history and presentist theory is really a choice at all. Drawing on epistemology and the philosophies of science and language, his early essays argue for the impossibility of any but his own interpretive approach. In the first version of “Meaning and Understanding,” Skinner (1988, 64) claims that his philosophical arguments “establish and prove the case” for his contextualist methodology, “as a matter of conceptual propriety, a matter of seeing what the necessary conditions are for the understanding of utterances.” There is simply no understanding of texts, in this view, outside of their historical context.

Here, methodological and ethical questions collapse into each other. If one simply cannot understand a book except through its historical context, one ought not to make a vain attempt to do so. There are similar arguments to be heard from the other side of the hermeneutic aisle. Gadamer (1989, 159), for example, insists that the kind of history that Skinner would later demand “is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being,” since any interpretation we can give “is always co-determined… by the historical situation of the interpreter” (1989, 296).\(^1\)

Here is hardly the place to refute all the arguments put forward by Skinner, Gadamer and their respective followers for the impossibility of any but their preferred interpretive approach. Although there are many good philosophical arguments for why it is possible to understand old books in ways that help illuminate pressing issues today (see, e.g., Bevir 1994, Lamb 2009a, 181. In recent years, Skinner (2002b, 15-16) has attempted to incorporate an acceptance of Gadamer’s ideas into his own hermeneutic theory, although it is not clear if this can be successful.

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\(^1\) For a rejection of Skinner’s approach as impossible for Gadamerian reasons, Keane 1981. For more on the incompatibility of Gadamerian and Skinnerian approaches, see Boucher 1985, esp. 181.
Kelly 2011) the continued intellectual success of both purely contextualist and unashamedly presentist readings of the canon makes such refutations unnecessary. Each enterprise can, and sometimes does, succeed on its own terms. Perhaps for this reason, Skinner has now moved away from the strongly exclusivist position of his early polemics. In the revised version of “Meaning and Understanding,” Skinner’s (2002b, 87) argument can no longer “establish and prove” the inescapability of his contextualist approach, but only “goes some way towards establishing a case for this methodology.”

An example may be illuminating, one which we will return to throughout this essay. By 1988, Skinner was willing to admit that it is coherent to ask whether Machiavelli was right to believe that mercenaries always threaten political liberty. Yet he still maintains that such a question is “likely to strike a historian as strange.” Asking whether Machiavelli is right about mercenaries is “somewhat analogous to asking whether the king of France is bald. The best answer seems to be that the question does not really arise” (Skinner 1988, 256).

Just a year after Skinner wrote these words, the first major private military company of our time, Executive Outcomes, was founded in South Africa. It soon came to play a central role in conflicts across the developing world. Yet despite the rapid rise of private armies over the past few decades, Skinner left his discussion of the matter unchanged in the 2002 version of his remarks (Skinner 2002b, 52-53). While France may no longer have a king, bald or otherwise, there is little doubt that mercenaries are now with us once more. It is certainly possible to ask whether they pose the threat to liberty which Machiavelli insists that they always do. This question can only be answered through close attention to Machiavelli’s argument combined with careful comparison of the mercenaries fighting the wars of both ancient and renaissance Italy with those fighting the global conflicts of the twenty-first century (see McFate 2015).
Any attempt to answer the question of whether Machiavelli’s fear of mercenaries is still justified can succeed or fail as presentist theory, as determined by standards distinct from those used to evaluate contextualist history. Yet simply because a scholarly activity can succeed on its own terms—simply because it is intellectually possible—does not mean that it is worth pursuing. Choices must be made: collective choices in graduate and undergraduate curricula, in academic publishing, in faculty hiring, and so on, as well as individual choices about what each of us reads and writes. The question at hand is one, not of the possibility, but of the value of competing interpretive approaches, each with a competing account of what it means to understand a text.

For those wishing to hold on to the idea of a single true understanding of a given text, an ethical turn offers the possibility of a return to a revised form of hermeneutic exclusivism, Ronald Dworkin (2011) puts forward a “value-based general theory” of interpretation. His basic thesis is that the best interpretation of a given object is the one which best advances the values promoted by the interpretive practice in question. Debates about the interpretation of a text are, in Dworkin’s (2011, 99-190) view, implicit debates about the point of interpreting it.

There is some precedent among literary theorists for this sort of ethical hermeneutics. “The choice of an interpretive norm is not required by the ‘nature’ of the text,” E. D. Hirsch (1976, 7) has claimed, “but, being a choice, belongs to the domain of ethics rather than the domain of ontology.” Dworkin’s position here also brings him surprisingly close to history’s greatest immoralist. In his untimely meditation on the subject, Nietzsche (1983) offers a value-based assessment of history in several of its diverse forms.\(^2\) Of course, Nietzsche’s values are

\(^2\) The use of Nietzsche and other historical figures throughout this essay is, of course, presentist rather than contextualist. While some may see this as a laudable consistency, others might object...
quite different from Dworkin’s; the question here is to what degree each type of history advances or undermines the anti-moral value of “life.” But although Nietzsche’s ethics are immoralist, his hermeneutics are nonetheless fundamentally ethical.

If Dworkin, Hirsch, and Nietzsche are correct, then the best interpretation of a text is the one that maximizes its value. Yet even if there is no uniquely best reading of a text, others might still call on us to justify our choices in terms of how they add value to the world. Suppose, for example, Hirsch (1967, 1976) is correct that the “meaning” of a text (as determined by authorial intention) can be separated from its “significance” (as determined by reader responses). Both appreciating its meaning and appreciating its significance are legitimate ways of understanding a text, and interpreters are free to focus either on a text’s original meaning or its significance for any of its readers over time, including but not limited to ourselves. It is this freedom, Hirsch argues, which makes interpretative choices inescapably ethical.

II. The Argument From Responsibilities to the Dead

that it creates a kind of circularity. My defense of presentism, however, does not depend on the correctness of any of my presentist interpretations qua interpretations.

3 Nothing in this paragraph should be taken as an endorsement of Hirsch’s distinction. If nothing else, Hirsch’s “significance” seems like a better candidate for what is colloquially meant by “meaning” (i.e., “what this means to us”) than what he calls “meaning.” For a more subtle analysis of the multiple meanings of “meaning,” see Martinich 2009. Furthermore, if Ricoeur (1981) is correct that every text contains a surplus of meaning, then there are far more ways of understanding a text than just the two described by Hirsch.
When the text in question is a work of political thought that might have great significance in shaping today’s public discourse for the better, the value of pointing out its current significance is self-evident. A failure to realize this denies our fellow citizens something that might greatly benefit them, something which they might even claim that they are owed in return for their collective decision to subsidize political scholarship. Questions such as whether today’s mercenaries pose the dangers that Machiavelli says they do are urgent for all those whose liberty and security are at stake. If our ethical responsibilities to help the living answer these questions lead us to disregard the original intentions of long-dead authors, so be it.

A historian might respond by arguing, to the contrary, that our ethical obligations to the dead are actually quite considerable, and may even trump our responsibilities to the living. To draw on old books for present political purposes, and hence to read them in ways that their authors never intended, is to recruit the deceased into political causes without their consent. This is the basis of Hirsch’s main argument for the ethical priority of the original, intended meaning of a text over its current significance. To “simply use an author’s words for our own purposes without respecting his intention,” Hirsch (1976, 90) insists, is to “use another person merely for our own ends,” a clear violation of Kant’s supreme principle of morality.

Certain passages from Skinner also suggest an ethical argument along roughly these same lines. Presentist commentary, Skinner (2002b, 65) claims, is often merely “a means to fix one’s own prejudices onto the most charismatic names under the guide of innocuous historical speculation.” As such, while Skinner’s contextualism is respectful of the deceased, presentism is, following Voltaire, “a pack of tricks we play on the dead.”

Although prioritizing our responsibilities to the dead over those to the living may seem intuitively implausible, presentism can often be justified even in terms of our respect for the
intentions of the authors under discussion. After all, many of the writers whom a presentist might want to recruit for present use have already given explicit consent to the procedure. Nietzsche was hardly alone in writing self-described preludes to the philosophy of the future, and Thucydides (1972, 48) was not the only author to intend his work not as “a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public,” but as something “to last forever.” Even in cases where such explicit statements cannot be found, an implicit intention to speak to the future can be found in most classic works of political thought—perhaps by virtue of their assertion of universal claims about political phenomena which are not limited to the conditions of their own time and place (see Kelly 2011, 26; Lamb 2009a, 57-58), or simply by virtue of publishing their thoughts in a medium capable of long-term preservation and available to an open readership (see Green 2012, 107-108).

Skinner acknowledges that post-mortem effects may very well be part of an author’s intention. Writers, he grants, may seek to communicate not to “an immediate audience or society, but to appeal over its head to some indeterminate future audience, perhaps to posterity itself” (Skinner 1970, 134). Presentists show a morally proper form of respect to dead authors when they respect their intention to have effects on the future which they never could not entirely foresee, let alone intend.

To return to our previous example, Machiavelli’s explicitly states that his intention is “to write something useful to whoever understands it,” with no implied limitations as to time or place (Machiavelli 1988, 61). It is hard to imagine that the author of the famous 1513 letter to Francesco Vettori (Machiavelli 1988, 107-111), who entered so proudly into the conversations of the ancients, would object to entering our current debate about the dangers of military contractors, even if he could never foresee the details of privatized warfare in the age of
Blackwater. In his application of the practical wisdom of the ancients in a Renaissance context, Machiavelli might even serve as a good methodological model for the application of his own insights to our political problems.

III. The Vocational Argument

Contextualist historians might be glad to concede that contemporary applications of Machiavelli’s ideas might perform a needed service to the living without violating our obligations to the dead. Even if it is ethically incumbent upon someone to perform this service, however, historians can nonetheless reply that it is not their responsibility, since it is not historical work. Skinner makes clear that he does not believe that we are “precluded” from asking whether Machiavelli is right about mercenaries. He is “merely insisting” that this is not “our task as historians.” (Skinner 2002b, 53).

For certain individuals engaged in certain vocations, it may be immoral to play the moralist. My station and its duties may justifiably demand that I refrain from active normative evaluation. Perhaps the most famous statement of academic professional ethics, Weber’s (1946) “Science as a Vocation,” argues that it is the responsibility of all scholars to remain morally neutral in roughly this way. Even if this is not true of all scholars—even if moral philosophy and political theory are legitimate academic activities, not something to be left to politicians and preachers—surely it is true of scholars who call themselves historians.

As Dunn (1968, 89) observes, most methodological arguments in the history profession are attempts “to legislate for the type of historical explanations which should ideally be given, a lengthy exercise in the persuasive definition of the adjective 'historical.'” Skinner (2002b, 182) recognizes all such rhetorical strategies by “innovative ideologists” wielding “evaluative terms”
to be attempts to “impose a particular moral vision on the workings of the social world.” The attempt to embrace “history” as a rallying point is understandable in this case, especially given the struggles that intellectual historians have faced in establishing the legitimacy of their enterprise in departments dominated by social and political historians hostile to their work.

Skinner (2002b, 170-171) himself recognizes, however, that a viable alternative to claiming a key evaluative term as one’s own is to instead challenge the normative valence of a term itself. Presentists could probably never win a debate with contextualists over which of us is practicing “real history.” It is important to realize, however, that “historical” can easily function as a value-neutral descriptor, or even as a term of opprobrium, as it does in many analytically-oriented philosophy departments. Although historians might not wish to consider this possibility, it is entirely possible that work which least qualifies as history is what is most valuable, and what best qualifies as history is what is least valuable. If gaining practical wisdom from great books is fundamentally unhistorical, perhaps the proper response is to conclude, “Well, so much the worse for history.”

As Applebaum (2000) observes, what creates an ethical justification for abiding by the duties of a particular profession is the importance of that profession for one’s larger society. If a particular vocation serves no justifiable purpose, then the internal rules of that profession are not a legitimate branch of any larger human ethical system. We’re all better off without professional gladiators and professional torturers. The question is therefore whether choosing to devote one’s

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4 That said, there are many within the discipline of history who have made precisely this attempt. For an influential defense of “dialogical history” along these lines, see LaCapra 1983. It is important to note that many who self-identify as historians would nonetheless side with presentism in the arguments against contextualist exclusivism being discussed in this essay.
life to answering purely historical question is justifiable in a way that devoting one’s life to gladiatorial combat is not.

IV. The Argument From Intrinsic Value

Although this essay has so far only discussed arguments for the practice of contextualist history that Skinner endorses, it is also worth including one argument that he discusses at some length, but ultimately rejects. This sort of argument was popular among historians a generation older than Skinner. Butterfield (1965, 16), for example, argues that, whatever our purposes in taking up the historical calling, “we cannot save ourselves from tumbling headlong into it and being immersed in it for its own sake.” It might be argued that because contextualist history has intrinsic value—because it is to be pursued for its own sake—historians do not have to make any further ethical argument in its defense.

G. E. Moore (1903, viii) famously insisted that, in support of claims of intrinsic value, “no relevant evidence whatever can be adduced; from no other truth, except themselves alone, can it be inferred that they are either true or false.” We usually explain why something is valuable in terms of its extrinsic connections to other valuable things. Since this sort of explanation cannot work in cases of intrinsic value, it might be thought that no explanation of intrinsic value is possible, and all we are left with is the appeal to intuitive self-evidence.

In fact, however, there is a great deal one can say in defense of the claim that some particular entity has intrinsic value. Audi (2004, 79) has argued that the intrinsic value of certain entities may indeed be self-evident, but that even the self-evident is “capable of being evidenced.” Nothing in the nature of self-evident ethical claims “prevents informatively deriving them from, or integrating them in relation to, other propositions; and, even apart from the
explanation this can make possible, their conceptual complexity makes them appropriate objects of explanation of other sorts” (Audi 2004, 156). The self-evidence of certain intrinsic values, moreover, “does not entail the indefeasibility of our justification for believing them… Theorizing, or even careful but ordinary reflection, may defeat that justification” (Audi 2004, 149). Contextualist historians may intuitively feel that their vocation is intrinsically valuable, but unless something more can be said in defense of this view, it is quite possible that this intuition will be overturned upon reflection.

Since contextualist history in particular is not among the classic lists of intrinsic goods, contextualists could certainly begin by explaining how their form of history is one species of some larger intrinsically good genus. Pleasure is one candidate, and knowledge is another. Each has been defended as an end in itself, the former most famously by Epicureans and Utilitarians, and the latter by non-utilitarian defenders of the liberal arts from Aristotle to John Henry Newman (1852). Perhaps suspecting that more and greater (if perhaps not higher) pleasures could be found in other activities, historians such as Elton (1969) have typically defended their profession in terms of the intrinsic value of historical knowledge.

One important problem with any of these appeals to the intrinsic value of historical knowledge, however, is that it is unclear whether they can give us an ethical basis for our vocational choice, all things considered. The world is filled with intrinsically and extrinsically valuable entities, after all. It might be the case that something genuinely has intrinsic value, but only to a vanishingly small degree, such that any reason to pursue this value is always overridden by the need to pursue other (intrinsic or extrinsic) values (Davison 2012). As a result, the knowledge that something has intrinsic value of some sort gives us only a weak pro tanto reason for pursuing, promoting or respecting it—a reason which might easily be trumped by other
reasons. Knowledge of historical truth may indeed be intrinsically valuable, but the world is filled with truths we might come to know, both historical and otherwise, and the intrinsic value of knowledge itself gives us no reason to privilege contextualist historical knowledge over any other kind.

Skinner recognizes the overwhelming surplus of potential truths that we could pursue. This insight is the basis of Skinner’s devastating critique of Elton’s defense of history as the pursuit of intrinsically valuable knowledge. Skinner (2002b, 15-21) imagines himself a befuddled graduate student of Elton’s who has chosen to study Chatsworth House in Derbyshire. “But how can one hope to set about seeking the truth, *simpliciter*, about such a thing as a house?” Skinner asks. “Will it not be necessary to approach the study of the house with some sense of why I am studying it, why it might be of interest, before I can tell how best to go about examining it?” Yet if our goal is only knowledge for its own sake, “Does this mean that all the facts I might discover about Chatworth are of equal interest? Am I just to go there and start making a list of anything it occurs to me to say about it? If this is all I am expected to do, might I just as well be studying something else, perhaps anything else?” Even if we decide that it is our calling to seek historical knowledge for its own sake, there is so much historical knowledge to be had about even a single house that, without some extrinsic standard of choice, we will be paralyzed. This is not to mention all the historical knowledge which could be had about the rest of the human past, and the vast amounts of knowledge which other disciplines (presentist theory among them) could provide about other aspects of the universe. “We can’t do it all,” Southgate (2005, 76) concludes, and so we “must choose, and for some reason.”

Our choice becomes even more complicated when we realize there is probably not only one type of intrinsic good in the world, but several. We must not only learn to weigh pleasure
against pleasure, or knowledge against knowledge, but knowledge against pleasure, and both
against other values, most notably social and political justice. Although this is hardly the place to
craft a comprehensive hierarchy of intrinsic values (if such a hierarchy of seemingly
incommensurable goods is even possible; see Seung and Bonevac, 1992), there is a widely held
belief that it is not knowledge and pleasure but justice and virtue which should rank near the top.

No amount of knowledge, Cicero argues in *De Officiis*, can trump social and political justice:

> For there is no one, surely, however greedy he is to examine and understand the nature of
> things, who, though contemplating in his studies the highest objects of learning, would
> not cast them all aside, if his country were suddenly and critically endangered and he
> could come to its aid or relief… From all this we realize that the duties of justice must be
given precedence over the pursuit of knowledge and the duties imposed by that. For the
former look to the benefit of mankind, and a man should hold nothing more sacred than
that (Cicero 1991, 60).

We might explain Cicero’s intuitions by arguing that the intrinsic value of knowledge is
overridden by the greater intrinsic value of justice. Alternately, we could argue that the intrinsic
value of knowledge is conditional on its compatibility with justice, just as Kant famously argues
the goodness of all other goods is conditional on their accompanying a good will. Either way, it
is unclear whether scholars could ever be justified in remaining in their studies while their
polities falter around them—perhaps because of unjust, expensive, and unwinnable wars
provoked by self-interested mercenaries—unless, that is, their scholarship can be understood as
itself providing a needed service to their fellow citizens. Presentist theorists typically intend their
work as a direct contribution to the pursuit of justice in their societies. Contextualist historians,

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5 This is not to say that all—or even most—political theory actually succeeds in advancing social
or political justice. Most of it probably has no effect of this sort, while some of it (as will be
discussed later) may actually prove deleterious. That said, all activities often fail to achieve their
if they wish to point to a similar contribution, must point to some more indirect benefit. Given
that he rejects any argument grounded in the intrinsic value of historical knowledge, Skinner
has always maintained that, far from evading their social responsibilities, contextualist historians
perform an all-important service to advance the progressive realization of social and political
justice in their societies. At times, Skinner has also argued that presentist theorists cannot
contribute anything of comparable value, and may even be more likely to harm than to benefit
their society.

V. The Argument for Critical History

Throughout his career, Skinner (2002b, 6) has emphasized the power of his contextualist
approach to history to check our tendency to “fall under the spell of our own intellectual
heritage.” Such history can “help to liberate us from the grip of any one hegemonal account of
those values and how they should be interpreted and understood.” This is roughly what
Nietzsche calls “critical history” ([1874] 1983, 75-77). Contrary to popular belief, Skinner has
never actually been an antiquarian, at least not in Nietzsche’s sense. Antiquarians, Nietzsche
says, piously preserve, and hence kill and mummify, the treasures of the past ([1874] 1983, 72-
75).

Hardly famous for his piety, Skinner argues that history serves its critical function by
revealing “not the essential sameness, but rather the essential variety of moral assumptions and
political commitments” defended by classic texts. This is the source of the canon’s real “moral
value” (2002b, 88). Recognizing the difference between our normative commitments and those
goals, and we can separate our judgment of the value of an aim from the efficacy of any given
activity in attaining it.
of the past frees us to re-evaluate what we once believed—not because we might adopt past values once again, which Skinner here insists we would not, but because the very absurdity of doing so reveals the historical contingency of all human values. Presentists searching for useful parallels between past and present only serve to mask this contingency, and thus only serve to bind us more strongly to the imagined traditions which we falsely assume to support our current prejudices.

Under this critical view, when contextualist history intersects with our current concerns, it does so in a negative way—debunking the pseudo-historical myths which authoritative traditions tell to legitimate their authority. Presentist theory searches for authorities; contextualist history, by contrast, stands opposed to all authorities, criticizing everything and defending nothing except autonomy itself. Yet precisely insofar as they cannot guide our choices, critical contextualists can claim credit for setting us free.

After the criticism of tradition is complete, the past can no longer offer practical wisdom, wisdom which we once depended on to guide our existence. Nietzsche (1983, 76) understood that critical history, which “cruelly tramples over every kind of piety,” is “always a dangerous process, especially so for life.” The strong may be able to handle the new-found freedom bequeathed to them by critical historians, but the rest will descend into deadly nihilism. Now, as Skinner famously puts it, we must “learn to do our own thinking for ourselves” (2002b, 88) and not all of us will be up to the task. Most of us simply cannot survive without some form of practical guidance from others.

There is nothing inherently base or servile about turning to others for advice in times of need. Indeed, no less a defender of the freedom of individual thought that J. S. Mill (2003, 64) insists that “even the originality which can, and the courage which dares, think for itself, is not a
more necessary part of the philosophical character than a thoughtful regard for previous thinkers, and for the collective mind of the human race."

No one makes his or her way in the world alone; Skinner’s own historical method, for example, owes much to his mentors Hebert Butterfield and Peter Laslett. Unfortunately, Butterfield and Laslett are now confined to the pages of the history of historiography. But if it was ethically permissible for Skinner and his peers to learn from them when they were still alive, surely it is still permissible for us. And if it is permissible for us to learn from Butterfield, perhaps we can also learn from Butterfield’s inspiration R. G. Collingwood. And if it is permissible for us to learn from Collingwood, perhaps we can also learn from F. H. Bradley. And if we can learn from Bradley, perhaps we can also learn from Hegel. And back it goes until we reach Socrates and Plato, who have been inspirations to us all.

Of course, good teachers don’t want slavish disciples. They want students who can think for themselves, but who do so in a way that would have been impossible if not for their teachers and mentors. Skinner didn’t simply copy Butterfield and Laslett, but built on them and extended their insights. Good students of canonical authors do the same.

To be sure, if we can still be successful students of even Socrates and Plato, this implies that there is less of a chasm of difference between the present and the past than Skinner (at least at his most critical moments) seems to believe. Seeing similarities as well as differences between historical epochs, however, is not unrealistic, or even anti-historical. The very fact that we are able to understand the past at all suggests that it is not wholly alien to us (see Boucher 1985). Although this understanding may necessarily remain imperfect, we are just as likely to err on the side of seeing too much difference between the past and the present as we are to err on the side of seeing too much similarity, as Skinner himself did when he failed to notice the return of
mercenary armies at the end of the twentieth century. Each situation we face—each context for practical deliberation—is unique, but none is entirely unique. Since all are the kinds of situations in which human beings can find themselves, all share certain common features of the human condition, often allowing parallels to be drawn between what practical wisdom requires in even apparently quite different socio-historical contexts. In this way, the relevance of classic texts to the present does not result, as Lockyear (1979, 217) puts it, from their “having provided answers to our questions but from their attempts to answer their own. Their questions or problems are related to ours in the same way as their society is related to ours.”

Sometimes, history serves its critical function by virtue of the continuity, rather than the discontinuity, of the values of the past with our own. For example, the large and vibrant literature on the relationship between liberalism and imperialism in the nineteenth century provides

6 “It is easy to delude ourselves,” Lane (2011) observes, “that our distinctions are newly minted, our problems or concerns unprecedented.” Popper (1997, 100) famously maintained that one of the many flaws of what he called “historicism” (most of which, admittedly, bear little or no resemblance to the flaws of Skinner’s own, very different sort of historicism) was its tendency to exaggerate “the somewhat spectacular differences between various historical periods.”

7 As Janaway and Alexander observe (1988, 182), the past does not display a uniform dissimilarity from the present, but ranges from “identity, through partial similarity, to analogy, to incommensurability. At different levels of generality,” moreover, “the same piece of text may exhibit a variety of such relations.” Lane (2002, 39) agrees, writing that “the history of some ideas will teach contingency, while the history of other ideas will teach continuity, and if that were not so then the piecemeal emergence of the present from the past could not have been possible, as it was.”
considerable resources for criticism of liberalism’s imperialist tendencies today. At other times, however, history can serve important social functions that do not qualify as critical at all.

VI. The Argument for Monumental History

It is difficult for even the most committedly critical contextualists to refuse to learn from as well as about the objects of their study. Skinner, in contrast to Elton, has long known that we must choose among the infinite array of possible objects of knowledge in the world based on criteria other than the intrinsic value of truth. “The decisions we have to make about what to study must be our decisions,” he says, “arrived at by applying our own criteria for judging what is right and significant” (Skinner 1974, 281). It seems likely that any author from the past significant enough to still be worth studying today is likely to be in possession of some piece of practical wisdom worth reclaiming. As a result, even those who at first explicitly reject presentist theory often end up practicing it implicitly.

Such, at least, has clearly been the case with Skinner. In a recent interview, Skinner (2011) went so far as to say that “The reason for studying the past is that, as my great mentor in Princeton, Geertz, always used to say, ‘These guys are meant to be working for us!’” Historical scholarship, he explains, is meant “illuminate our world, and if it doesn’t we’re not going to publish our results because they’re not going to be important.”

Over the course of his career, Skinner has gradually moved from what Nietzsche calls critical to what he calls “monumental” history, to the positive celebration of past accomplishments as potential models for life today. Many have noticed this turn in Skinner’s thought (see, e.g., Lamb 2009b; Lane 2012), although Skinner himself has never fully admitted to it. He may “no longer entirely endorse” all of what he wrote in the programmatic essays of the
sixties and seventies, but Skinner insists that he still holds by most of it (Skinner 2002b, vi).

Clearly, Skinner has never entirely abandoned his critical project. In recent decades, however, it has become obvious that he is now also engaged in a positive, monumental project, one of “bringing buried intellectual treasure back to the surface” (1998, 112). Far from criticizing all traditions of political thought, Skinner now seems to defend at least one of them, one which he hopes might serve as “a shared European heritage,” perhaps even as the basis of a new form of political order (see Gelderen and Skinner, eds., 2002).

As is well known, Skinner has become interested in a lost, neo-Roman conception of republican liberty, one opposed to the now-dominant liberal conception. Yet if neo-Roman liberty is to serve a constructive rather than merely a critical function in contemporary politics, it cannot merely shock us with its intractable alienness. It must, in some modified form, remain a live option for us today. Rather than focusing on difference and discontinuity alone, Skinner must now give equal time to similarity and continuity. “If the study of intellectual history is to have the kind of use I am claiming for it,” he acknowledges, “there must be some deeper level at which our present values and the seemingly alien assumptions of our forebears to some degree match up” (Skinner 1988, 117). Ceasing his one-sided focus on difference has undoubtedly improved Skinner’s work as a historian; his description of the past is now more accurate.8 Yet by making this turn toward constructive reclamation of lost ideals, Skinner has ceased to be a pure contextualist and has become, at least in part, a presentist (see, e.g., Lamb 2009b; Edling and Mörkenstam 1995).

8 As T. S. Eliot ([1919] 1975, 38) points out, “the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence… a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal, as well as the timeless and the temporal together.”
At least initially, Skinner was not entirely comfortable in his new role. In *Liberty Before Liberalism*, at least, he still insists that the reclamation of republican liberty is not a normative project as such. In the classic voice of the Weberian social scientist, Skinner (1998, 118) claims that the goal of even a seemingly monumental historian is only to “provide their readers with information relevant to the making of judgments about their current values and beliefs, and then leave them to ruminate.” Such is the historian’s limited vocation; philosophers (presumably neo-republican ones like Pettit [1997]) must handle the rest.

Some have been attracted to this moral modesty; Palonen (2002) praises this “indirect, historical style of theorizing” because it “does not patronize present political agents by suggesting how they should act.” Others have objected; Bartelson (2007, 111-112) observes that, for allegedly value-neutral historians, “the unwillingness to patronize becomes equally an unwillingness to take responsibility for one’s normative judgments, however well concealed these might be.” In Skinner’s case, however, normative judgments are barely concealed at all. It hardly takes a strongly esotericist reading of *Liberty Before Liberalism* to determine whether the “before” or “after” picture is the one that Skinner prefers. If anyone is responsible for the neo-republican revival among normative political theorists, it is Skinner himself. And as this revival begins to have practical impact—think only of Pettit’s involvement in Spanish politics (Pettit and Marti, 2010)—these real-world repercussions will, at least in part, be Skinner’s responsibility as well.

Unsurprisingly, in a more recent excavation of buried treasures from the history of political thought, Skinner’s mask of Weberian value-neutrality drops almost entirely. In his 2009 “Genealogy of the Modern State,” Skinner (61-62) begins by insisting that his goal is to “free us to re-imagine the concept in different and perhaps more fruitful ways,” suggesting that any
prescriptive conclusions to be drawn from his work must be drawn from the reader’s own moral imagination. By the end of the genealogy, however, Skinner explicitly concludes that “the earlier and more explicitly normative ways of thinking about the state” that his scholarship brings to light represent “‘a way of thinking that ought never to have been set aside.’”\(^9\)

If nihilism is the great danger posed by too much critical history, action-guiding monumental history also has its dangers. It “deceives by analogies,” Nietzsche ([1874], 1983, 71) writes, “with seductive similarities it inspires the courageous to foolhardiness and the inspired to fanaticism; and when we go on to think of this kind of history in the hands and heads of gifted egoists and visionary scoundrels, then we see empires destroyed, princes murdered, wars and revolutions launched.” This may not sound much like the recent neo-republican revival that Skinner has inspired, but it is not too far from what the most extreme critics of Leo Strauss believe has occurred in the name of a misguided political theory inspired by deceptively monumental history. The stakes are high when one is participating in a scholarly enterprise with direct practical implications.

Contextualist history, in its critical capacity, is valuable when it helps prevent the worst sorts of misguidedly monumental presentist theorizing. Yet it can also play a positive role in helping produce good monumental presentist theory. Indeed, this is probably the best justification that contextualists can make, not only for the value of their work, but also for their need to operate autonomously.

The value of basic research can never be predicted accurately; one never knows where buried treasures will be found. “What we can learn from the past is always what we can succeed

\(^9\) I owe the observation of the explicit prescriptivism of this conclusion, and its tension with what Skinner says in the introduction to the piece, to Lane 2012, 81-82.
in learning,” Dunn (1968, 98) observes, “and the educative past can change—as if some disused Mendip lead-working were one day to disclose a new and precious sort of uranium.” Historians must therefore be allowed to dig where they will. If they wish to leave it to philosophers and theorists to separate the gold from the dross—that is, if they wish to remain value-neutral scholars who leave it to others to tease out the normative implications of their work—then there is no inherent ethical objection to this division of labor. Nor, however, would there be any ethical objection were contextualist historians to abandon their Weberian stance. It seems at least prima facie plausible that those who are best suited to determine the political application of once-buried treasures are sometimes those who first unearthed them.  

Although Dunn (1996, 26) admits that “to understand what its author meant could never be sufficient for assessing the current significance of a great text’s arguments,” he nonetheless maintains that “it is both impertinent and ludicrous to assume that is not in general a wise preliminary in trying to do so.” It is true that, for scholars practicing what Dunn recommends, history is in some sense prior to theory, in the sense that contextualist research must be performed before presentist application can begin. Yet if contextualist history must take temporal priority over presentist theory in this view, presentism takes ethical priority over contextualism,  

10 Using a different metaphor, Leslie (1970, 443) describes intellectual history as a “storehouse of materials”—a “collection of ideas, images and possibilities”—that should be kept ready-at-hand for use in “conceptual bricolage,” with such anachronistic bricoleurs lauded as a creative class of “unquestionable value.”  

11 Green (2012) puts forward an argument along roughly these lines against what he calls the “ethic of specialization” separating intellectual history from political theory. For a similar argument against a rigid division of intellectual labor, see Leslie 1970, 441-447.
since it ultimately the contemporary application which justifies the preliminary historical research, rather than vice versa.

The question remains open as to whether there may be other justifications for this practice as well. Although none of the arguments for contextualist history considered in this essay succeed in justifying its practice independent of its value for presentist theory, my catalogue of arguments on the matter was never meant to be exhaustive. The present intervention is meant as an invitation to, rather than a closing off of, debate. Such a debate would be valuable, not only because of the importance of the particular question at hand, but also as a model for discussing the related ethical justifications available for other modes of scholarship.
References


