

The Narrator and the Archaeologist

Modes of meaning and discourse in Quentin Skinner and Michel Foucault

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Purpose & beginnings

What is the function of historical social science? How can it be used? Where, precisely, is the ground on which the scientist of social and discursive history may tread without getting his or her feet too wet? In what manner may the stories of the social and discursive past be told and what are the consequences and implications for these stories of their different theoretical underpinnings? The outcome of any analysis of social history, either taken as empirically neutral and factual or as discursively constituted and constructivist, must surely depend on and be determined by the mode in which those theories of meaning are constituted and the subject-matter identified on which it turns. It is no doubt possible to distinguish between a large number of ways to formulate the ontological basis for social historical research in the works of present and earlier writers. A conclusive survey of these is, however, not the point of the study at hand. I contend myself only with acknowledging the presence in current and late historical research on society and ideas of two major methodological and ontological rifts.

First, there is the view of those historians propounding the possibility of a fruitful reading of historical texts whilst paying scant regard to the context in which these have been produced (i.e. the textualist approach) and those who lament the futility of such a reading of texts and who insist on treating them only as parts and expressions of the cultural, social, political and/or discursive environment out of which they have come forth (i.e. the contextualist view). The battle between these perspectives has been underway for some time and still rages on, seemingly with no less fervour. Suffice it here to notice that these goings-on form part of the background to this paper, since the basic issue discernible at stake in the debate is the mode in which meaning is constituted. Both views contend that the reason to do it their way is that then meaning is better grasped. For the textualist approach meaning resides in the text itself, through a close reading of which the scholar is able to perceive what its inherent message or meaning in fact is. The contextualist view claims that it is only when due consideration is given to the intellectual (political, cultural, discursive etc.) milieu in question that a text's meaning may be surmised by the scholar. The

details of the battle need not be elaborated at this point, but will be indirectly investigated and touched upon as my argument develops.

Second, there is the rift between those historians of society and ideas who in various ways maintain that the object of analysis is real empirical events taking place in real time and who, therefore, must cling to some traditionalist concept of science and knowledge and those for whom these images of Reason have lost their appeal and who claim that language, or discourse is the outer limit of what we can historically explain. This is part of the general social scientific debate caused by its more or less recent 'linguistic turn'. I will not dwell upon these matters in great detail, save by noticing that they exist and that they, also, form part of the background to what shall be dealt with presently.

The substance of this paper may be considered in the light of these two, partly independent and partly intertwined, complexes of questions and differing perspectives. The aim is to make an effort to come to terms with some aspects of these problematics and tentatively formulate what I find to be the most feasible approach to them. Practically, I proceed in the following way. In the paper an attempt is made to open up ways to construct answers to the initial questions above, by examining and counterpoising the methodological approach to the historical study of social discourse of Quentin Skinner to that of Michel Foucault. The advantages of this are threefold: (i) As the works of Skinner and Foucault both merit regard in their own right and as the theoretical distance between them may not in fact be, at least in some respects, as large as previously commonly granted, some food for thought and reflection ought to appear at the end of the day from the comparison. (ii) As the complexes of problematics of the theories of social history and history of ideas and discourse hinted at above are extremely rich in potential hornet's nests, the structuring of their exploration along these lines ought to make for less confusion and more cohesion. (iii) As Skinner and Foucault both constitute history, in the sense that I'm concerned here with what they've written in the past (partly, on Skinner's part, in the near past), they actually play the role in this paper of those same historical texts, the study of which they have so much to say about and that they themselves have spent so much time trying to decipher and to show the coherence and meaningfulness of. This makes for an intriguing doubleness, where to some extent the outcome of their own labour as social scientists scrutinising social science in turn becomes scrutinised, partly with the aid of their own conceptual and theoretical tools. The question in this respect becomes to what degree they hold up to their own professed standards.

Quentin Skinner assessed

Contextual discourse & the narrative mode of meaning

Central to Skinner's historical methodology is the proposition that:

[T]he appropriate methodology for the history of ideas must be concerned, first of all, to delineate the whole range of communications which could have been con-

ventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance, and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the writer. (Skinner, in Tully [ed.], 1988, pp. 63)

Present in this perspective are a number of commitments as to the nature and goals of the work of the social scientist, a summary of which would look something like the following.

To begin, Skinner relies on a conception of a history of ideas fairly far removed from the traditional historical perspective, with its methodological insistence on entities like bias, independence and closeness to the scene of action in time and space as necessary evaluative criteria. This may be a truistic and unmodern statement, but serves yet the purpose of showing where the road began for a theorist like Skinner. Observable is a preoccupation with discursive things, rather than with things of flesh or stone, water or fire, wars, honour or revenge (the stuff which politics and societal evolution in the old times was considered made of). It's not enough here to study movements of troops or diplomatic emissaries on missions or to count nuclear warheads or subs to understand why a certain evolutionary mode of historical (or political) performance came about and was maintained. Because the available scope at any given period (and particular context) in history of imaginable options for thinkers and politicians alike, is determined by the particular linguistic universe they inhabit. What we cannot imagine, we cannot perform, at least not rationally. So, Skinner moves in the linguistic mode. The occupation is with the discursivity of ideas.

Second, Skinner is impelled to state two things regarding the understanding of this discursive context and its function and relation to the historian. One is that the specific contextual substance of any historical discursive ply, needs be empirically investigated and elaborated, ideally as near to the all-comprehensive totality as is possible. If the discursive context has to be examined in order to reach an understanding of any given statement within it – that is, to grasp its 'point' – then we must cover a tremendous amount of historical discursive ground. Of course, this would prove extremely worthwhile for any scholar so inclined, as the insights and knowledge to be gained from such an endeavour in their own right would be magnificent. The other necessary statement is that in order to grasp the meaning of the individual utterance in a given linguistic context, we have to know exactly what the 'agent's primary *intentions* [were] in issuing that particular utterance'. (Ibid., p. 74) This, says Skinner, may be achieved by a 'focus on the writer's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs' (Ibid., p. 78). We see, then, that two dimensions, as it were, for research are identified by Skinner in relation to the discursive context; the one being the study of the empirical substance of the context in question and the other concerning the psychological interior of the writer of the historical text which one wants to examine. Three interpretive meetings are central to the careful scholarly study: that between the intentional creative act of the writer of a historical text and that historical text itself; that between the historical text and that discursive context of which it is a part; and that between the scholar him/herself

and the former two. Meaning is found by the scholar in approximating, or indeed uncovering the objective factuality of what has been going on in the head of the writer and in the (discursive) world at large.

Third, the skinnerian sense of the function and possibilities of historical science is based on the absolute commitment that there *is* in fact a demonstrably true version or account of a particular historical ply of discourse, which may be known and exhibited. Or, as Skinner himself puts it in his renowned study on Machiavelli: 'The business of the historian [...] is surely to serve as a recording angel' (*Machiavelli*, in *Great political thinkers*, 1992, p. 97). The actual story is there to be told, if only care is taken to proceed in telling it in the correct manner, i.e. in accordance with the investigatory rules mentioned above. Therefore, Skinner must be considered the narrator *par excellence*. By taking in his narrative, or ourselves narrating in the same way, we will understand at last, in the fullest attainable sense of the word.

Fourth, although the mode of understanding represented by Skinner is deep regarding the particular (con)text in question, it's of merely slight assistance when it comes to comprehending the meaning of and understanding longer term historical developments. The reason, naturally, has to do with the philosophical problem of the tension between the historically universal and particular, a problem of great relevance to Skinner's work and methodology. A further quote may be illustrative of where Skinner places himself in this respect:

[A]ny attempt to justify the study of the subject [in the history of ideas] in terms of the 'perennial problems' and 'universal truths' to be learned from the classic texts must amount to the purchase of justification at the expense of making the subject itself foolishly and needlessly naive. [...] [T]here simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners. (Skinner, in Tully [ed.], 1988, p. 65)

The obvious question begging to be asked here can be stated in the following fashion: To what degree is meaningful knowledge inhibited by the implied vision of history as temporally fragmented at work here? For any aspiration to wholeness in the understanding of historical currents of development or attempt to come to terms with questions like, say, that of how the Irish political culture over time has coped with the tension between the political centre and fringe can hardly be sustained if one is at one with the skinnerian point of view. If philosophical questions – like questions of meaning and meaningfulness – cannot have temporal constancy in any sensible way, then nor can discursive modes of knowledge, since these assumedly structure themselves around and in connection with precisely these sorts of basically contentious and temporally fairly constant (even if not *ad verbatim*) perennial problems.

Fifth and following from the above, since historical discourse may only be understood in its contextual particularity and no philosophical problems are perennial, the common view amongst more traditionally-minded historians or philosophers that scholarly study may on occasion be concerned with something in the way of a history of doctrines, is brutally dispensed with by Skinner. He makes the straightforward claim that such theory inevitably involves an

element of absurd reification of the subject analysed and refers pointedly to it as 'the mythology of doctrines' (Ibid., p.32).

The practice of the historian of discourse

To enable substantive conclusions to be drawn about the practical aspect of Skinner's methodology, I now turn to Skinner's historical work, represented by *The Foundations of modern political thought* and *Machiavelli*, in order that they form a background against which a picture may be construed.

The most striking thing about *The Foundations* is its positively astounding breadth of scope. One is hardly able to turn away as the spectacle of discursive history unfolds before one's eyes. Skinner's accomplishment is in this respect great. The richness and nuance of the story of the discursive context of the Renaissance (and, later, of Martin Luther's agony) want rivals. Unfortunately, some of the other periods are not treated in quite the same lavishing way. Detail and width dwindle as the new eras, all the way on to and passing the Reformation, occur and become the next discursive contexts. It's obvious that Skinner feels most at home with the (early) Italian Renaissance period and the writers and writings of that time. The reader gets the feeling that the narrative is all-encompassing and that this is the ultimate account of the foundations of early modern political thought. But of course, this cannot be.

In assessing Skinner's practice as historian of ideas, it's perhaps vital to offer up a description of what he does when he examines those discursive contexts in their historical developments. In the part of *The Foundations* dealing with the Renaissance each and every page is virtually overflowing with references to what appears to be all the political books and pamphlets of the time. This is impressive, but very soon leaves all except the extremely specialised scholars in the field far behind and unable to follow the argument. As I've mentioned, detail diminishes as the narrative moves on and leaves that particular context behind. But here, all currents of thought seem to have a place. Scholasticism, gloss and humanism – in all their different pre-, high- and post-phases and variants – are all accounted for. Political theories and concepts are laid out and their lineage is traced, sometime back to ancient theoretical strands of ideas. Much of this part of the book is made up of the developments within the movement of the humanists, the most important writer amongst whom is, in Skinner's view, Machiavelli. But I realise the futility for me here to try and fully recount the skinnerian story. Instead I turn to the query: What can be said about the way Skinner goes about his business?

Were Skinner to quite believe in his own prescriptions for a historical science of discourse, it's seems doubtful if a work like *The Foundations* ever would have been accomplished. I shall present a number of reasons for holding this view.

As we're by now aware, the scientific journey takes place in the discursive mode. This certainly implies further questions, for instance about the role of structure, the scope of the individual historic agent's action-margin, the inter-relationship between the three different interpretative discursive meetings

mentioned above and the internal shape of and relation to meaning of discourse itself. For the moment, however, answers to these will not be sought. I shall return to these problems below, at the point where an evaluation of the contrast between the work of Skinner and that of Michel Foucault will be made.

Although Skinner bravely attempts in *The Foundations* to present us with the all-comprehensive picture of the discursive context of the period he's concerned with, he must fail. Not for lack of ingenuousness, but out of logical necessity. The simple reason is that the relationship of the skinnerian narrative to the actual historical discourse is analogous to that of the relationship of an ordinary map to the terrain. The map represents, symbolises, abbreviates and diminishes central aspects of the terrain. So, when Skinner maintains that:

[I]t is only when we have grasped the precise intellectual context within which he [Machiavelli] was writing that we can hope to recognise the points at which, and the extent to which, he was in fact concerned to challenge and repudiate its own humanist heritage. (1978, p. 129)

he stumbles and falls. Namely, in the sense that he uses the superlative form of the adjective *precise*. There is no such thing as precision in that, highest degree when it comes to describing or grasping something like a historical intellectual context, in the same way as there is no such thing when it comes to mapping a particular geographical terrain. This is contingent upon the inherent and automatic falling-short of representation. Of course, maps, as well as other representations, may be qualitatively graded according to their merits, but they *are* not what they represent and thus cannot conceivably be more than (sometimes more, sometimes less) inadequate shadows of it.

If we for a moment ponder upon the role played by the psychological interior of the individual writer of a historic text, we know that Skinner needs to affirmatively establish his or her intention in writing it to grasp its meaning. Its 'illo-cutionary force' or 'point' must be revealed. Unhappily, it has to be stated that there's none of that, barring the odd and very rare reference, throughout the massive bulk of text in *The Foundations*. The case of the *Machiavelli* is slightly different. Skinner here makes an effort to get under the skin of his subject and show the reader how the machiavellian moods were prone to change according to ulterior setbacks and successes, but it can hardly be considered a major characteristic of the study. (It may, however and furthermore, be appropriate here to wonder how, in practice, an undertaking of this kind would, in effect, be realised.)

Let's now turn to the alleged factuality of the historical narrative. I've demonstrated above that the question on a philosophical level of whether or not a true account of historical evolution may be at all accomplished is not a main preoccupation of Skinner's. The primacy of the possibility is simply taken for granted. Two aspects of this commitment need be mentioned. First, there is the general ontological dilemma. Can there be one account that is not exclusive of different, equally apt or powerful representations of the same historical process? It would be difficult indeed, to respond in the affirmative. Especially, I would take it, bearing in mind the ontologically pluralistic nature of the world of secularised social science inhabited by today's social scientific community.

Second, what of Skinner himself? It is only if his own thesis – that what is going on on the inside of the writer's head may be positively established by subtle methods of analysis – holds, that it would be possible to establish Skinner's own intentions or the 'point' of his writings. If Skinner's proposition does not hold water, then *The Foundations* might equally likely be the result of an idea that occurred to him one fine morning that he ought to exercise his index-fingers more on the type-writer, to try to preempt a potential attack of rheumatism later in life. And would this be the case, then a multitude of normative problem-complexes would appear which would severely threaten the convincing power of the narrative in the book. Even if Skinner himself would be at pains to convince us that this were not the case, there's no way we could know, is there? We simply cannot establish in any truly affirmative sense what is going on inside of a writer's, or anybody's head.

A few words need to be said about Skinner's view on the universal, the particular and the meaningfulness of historical study. The earnestness and importance of the skinnerian claim that 'there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy' merits appreciation for its attempt to steer (discursive) historical social science away from its tendency to attribute motives, arguments and characteristics to texts alien to their discursive context. I see no reason to regard Skinner's point of view with less than respect. Doubtlessly, this manner of attributing involves perpetuating grave intellectual and historical falsities and we shall all be the better for it when we manage to keep this in mind. But is it really realistic to unflinchingly hang on to this standpoint in the practice of historical research? I shall let Skinner himself reply:

As we have already observed, there were two perennial issues which, in the main tradition of Italian political theory, had always been treated with special seriousness: the need to preserve political liberty, and the dangers to liberty represented by the prevalence of standing mercenary armies. (Ibid., p. 200)

The related skinnerian claim about the mythological nature of doctrines is illuminated by this same quote, by its presupposition of the existence of phenomena like 'traditions'. To all intents and purposes, I cannot see that it would be possible to maintain a sharp distinction between traditions in this sense and doctrines. The difference would be semantic rather than substantial.

So Skinner, like all of us, is obliged to make use of something in the way of perennial questions, traditions and doctrines. And how could he not? The whole social scientific discursive mode relies on – indeed, revolves around and around – concepts like these and the modes of societal evolution which they denote. Their mutation over time and the way that they fill and drain themselves of contextually specific meaning is (or would be), in effect, the prevalent field of research for the (discursively oriented) social historian. Of course, it's necessary not to ascribe properties and characteristics to past concepts and discourses that they do not have and try to sort out such as are present under false pretences, but we will nevertheless be forced in the end to retain some notion of continuity if we are to entertain a meaningful mode of communication. We simply cannot do without conceptual continuity over time, lest we

want to linguistically isolate ourselves from each other, the past and the future. The world was not invented this morning, nor yesterday.

Having said all this, one question remains: Is meaningful historical discursive work conceivable? The question shall be returned to in the finishing, evaluative part of the paper. For the time being, I shall have to turn to the next historian and historical theorist on line: Foucault.

Michel Foucault assessed

Historical discourse & the archaeological mode of meaning

If Quentin Skinner adheres to a methodological viewpoint where the mode of meaning is constituted by the contextual understanding of historical texts, then Michel Foucault represents a partly altogether different (yet partly, and surprisingly, similar) stand. Exploring their differences will form the major part of this section of the paper. As to their similarities, suffice it to say that they, in relation to the initial remarks made above, share a passion for trying to leave behind the traditional perspective of those textualist historians who contend themselves with studies of face-value historical occurrences, evolutions and phenomena. The difference, roughly taken, between the two is on another level. Agreeing on both the paramount role of discursive and intellectual contextual practice and the value of linguistically-oriented analysis in (historical) social science, they differ in their respective positions on the question of how to consider and approach the subject, as well as on the issue of the constitution of meaning. (Now, of course there's the possibility that their different techniques are a result of their basically doing different things. For my present purposes, though, they will be treated as if this were not the case, at least not in the respects that I'm interested in.) An evaluation of these differences will not be presented just yet. They shall be returned to in the next and concluding section of the paper.

The concept of 'discourse' may be approached in a number of different ways. As we've seen, Skinner assumes that it's composed of those discursive 'signs' consisting of historical texts with a, for the scholar, retrievable and understandable intentionary 'point' or 'force'. Foucault maintains in *The archaeology of knowledge & the discourse on language* another view, namely that of regarding linguistic signs, for instance in the shape of historical texts, as manifestations of that discursive world-view and rationality under which they were produced. Discursive 'things' are not only what is apparent to the eye:

Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to the language (*langue*) and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe. (1972, p. 49)

And, what's more:

It is supposed therefore that everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that precedes it, which continues to run obstinately beneath it, but which it covers and silences. The manifest discourse, therefore, is

really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this 'not-said' is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said. [Which leads to the later brave declaration that] We must renounce all those themes whose function it is to ensure the infinite continuity of discourse and its secret presence to itself in the interplay of a constantly recurring absence. (Ibid., p. 25)

One cannot help realising the obviousness of Foucault's need of a fuller and deeper account of the nature of discourse, a need larger than most other historical social scientists'. He needs to be, as it were, *inside* the form of the language itself to establish its regularities and come to terms with its basic functional and (meta-) conceptual workings and the way changes in these come about. It is not enough to linger at the level of conceptual denotation of objects and face-value occurrences in the world of 'real' empirical fact, even when these are considered as of a discursive nature. It's necessary to move further and enclose in the social scientific (historical) analysis the inherent character and functional basis of that same discursive nature itself. Gazing back through the ages, filled with a desire to understand, we must make an effort to reach *within* discourse and to accomplish that endeavour we have to refrain from creating yet another narrative from *outside* of it, since if we do, we necessarily silence those murmuring, alternative voices that are wording doubt and differences in a subtler language.

The skinnerian move from textualism to contextualism as a means of constituting meaning would not be satisfactory to Foucault. He would take it only to be the making of a new angle from which to produce ever more instances of 'manifest discourse', 'repressive' in character. He does pass that way, but goes on to study the substance of the discursive interior itself. His curiosity is as to the restraints and possibilities created by a, if you will, particular historical paradigm of rational or scientific knowledge, or 'episteme', instead of following the meanderings of various (yet distinguishable) streams of influence of historical texts in a given historical context.

Foucault's discursive focus emanates from the double conviction that (i) it's impossible to attain a narrative of historical discourse in the post-traditional, contextualist sense and (ii) yet it's possible (maybe even imperative) to make an effort to go underneath all that is said and thereby recover the linguistic mode of options viable at a given time in a given place. This amounts to Foucault's archaeological methodology of the social sciences and it enables the scholar to constitute meaning in a manner analogous to that of the student of archaeology proper. In the words of Boyne, commenting on Foucault's historical methodology:

The archaeologist finds traces of the past in the present. These remnants were left by those who are no longer with us, but the archaeologist assumes that it is possible to make some sense of them. (1990, p. 66)

In Foucault, the piecing together of retrieved epistemic fragments from the past lays the foundation for fuller images, which little by little increases the scope of what may be understood. In the same way as for the archaeologist, the emphasis is on a capability of making unexpected intellectual flings between areas of investigation that don't at first seem to have much to do with each other. Creativity and artfulness lie at the centre of foucauldian archaeology. The

openness is adamant and the striving towards what was formerly unthought the rule. As Foucault himself has it:

[M]y discourse, far from determining the locus in which it speaks, is avoiding the ground on which it could find support. It is a discourse about discourses; but it is not trying to find in them a hidden law, a concealed origin that it only remains to free; nor is it trying to establish by itself, taking itself as a starting-point, the general theory of which they would be the concrete models. It is trying to deploy a dispersion that can never be reduced to a single system of differences, a scattering that is not related to absolute axes of reference; it is trying to operate a decentring that leaves no privilege to any centre. (1972, p. 205)

The difficulty of the project would seem to be apparent. But, then, it's the price that has to be paid for moving in the direction of uncompromising understanding, instead of clinging to illusions of coherence. The most important aspect of historical research is negative, that is: not to present an image that reduces other accounts into oblivion.

To be sure, there's a commitment to a sort of contextualism in Foucault's writings that may be considered even stronger than in the skinnerian methodology. In his discussion of economics in the classical period he points out that:

This domain, the ground and object of 'economy' in the Classical age, is that of *wealth*. It is useless to apply to it questions deriving from a different type of economics – one organized around production or work, for example; useless to analyse its various concepts (even, and above all, if their names have been perpetuated in succeeding ages with somewhat analogous meanings), without taking into account the system from which they draw their positivity. (1973, p. 166)

But it's a commitment introvertly conceptual in nature, underlining the fact that there is no way that we can free ourselves from discourse. It's not only that we inhabit a certain discursive-cultural environment: we are ourselves inhabited by the particular episteme of our times.

Meaning must be sought within the positivities of the archaeologically reconstructed discursive period we're interested in, by grouping together parts of it to larger wholes, sometime using guerrilla-like techniques of unexpected, surprise-attack reasoning to make our points. But there may in the end be no way to assertively establish whether or not we're right.

Archaeological practice & the historian as an artist

With Foucault, we're confronted by a very subversive theory of historical science indeed. By its explicit claims to forgo any attempts at the traditional favourite pastime of historians, i.e. to uncover or recover the coherence and thereby inherent meaning of the past, it leaves itself open to severe criticisms for relativism and unscientificity. It even comes under fire for being – socratically – downright immoral. Connolly voices the complaint (though only in the context of refuting it):

How can you have a morality without grounding it in the Law or the Good, or, at the very least, in the Contract, the Rational Consensus, the Normal, or the Useful? [He takes to be the epitome of the critique and supplies the answer himself, by

claiming that these queries] too often reflect a transcendental egoism that requires contestation. Each is egoistic because it silently takes its own fundamental identity to be the source that must guide moral life in general; it is transcendental because it insists that its identity is anchored in an intrinsic Purpose or Law or potential consensus that can be known to be true. (1993, p. 368)

Again, Foucault's work is characterised by dispersion, fragmentation, decentredness and an obstinate unwillingness to create or support versions of the Great Narrative. To ponder for an instant on the reason why the foucauldian perspective is met with such vehement resistance (as it no doubt is within mainstream historical social science), it's necessary to recall and elucidate what Foucault is in fact implying.

By opposing the traditional standpoint that there is – if not in fact, then at least potentially – somewhere, a more or less consensual standard to measure scientific endeavours by, he creates a situation where it's as impossible for his opponents to win the argument as it is for himself to lose. In fact, from a foucauldian perspective, the issue can not be represented in terms of winning or losing, nor is the substance of the argument retrievable by the use of such categories. It's not retrievable at all, it would seem, except perchance by future generations of discursive archaeologists distanced enough in time from the current controversy and its specific modes of discourse and meaning to enable them to start piecing together the fragments that have survived. Foucault simply drops any aspirations to rationalistic truthhood and in the same movement lets go of rationalistic, truth-based legitimation for the social (historical discursive) sciences. Small wonder if the alarm-bells go off frantically! The substantial difference between the arguing perspectives may be captured in terms of two turns of language used in relation to each of our two theorist's respective methodologies: (i) Skinner's narration is concerned with establishing a 'precise intellectual context' and (ii) Foucault's archaeology is happy with trying to 'make some sense' of the remnants of the past.

A major consequence of the above is that the individual scholar becomes at the same time restricted and liberated in two quite unusual ways. First, since he/she is fettered by the restraints of a particular episteme and is unable to make more than extremely modest, if any, attempts to approach it from 'the outside' and relate to it in neutral language, no true (in the sense of being universally valid) narrative of historical events may ever be put forth. In fact, no true narratives may be put forth full stop. Which would, however, not be the equivalent to claiming that no such useful works may be accomplished. (Obviously, Foucault's own work is more in the way of a feverish frenzy of production, than characterised by listless moods of no-avail.) Only lead to a curbing of the teleological bent of that historical scholarship, be it textualist or contextualist, which aims to recover or discover history in a neutralistic fashion. Second, since it doesn't, then, seem to be either necessary or possible to uphold the truth-finding rationalism of main-stream historical (discursive) social science, the individual scholar is suddenly stripped off the straitjacket of having to squeeze the empirical universe into pre-moulded rosters. If new ways of constructing order and comprehension are perceived as valuable then the choice

is the scholar's. In this way the Foucauldian perspective on the role and function of social scientific knowledge turns out to be of a profoundly academic spirit in the best sense of the word, since it allows for knowledge to assume an ever-expanding, never complacent structure.

In accordance with this political view of knowledge, Foucault in *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* takes on the fairly unconventional task of describing and laying out what he perceives to be the epistemic structure underlying and manifesting itself in the bodies of systematic knowledge making possible the birth and sustenance of the seventeenth and eighteenth century sciences of, in turn, general grammar, natural history and the analysis of wealth. Naturally, in an undertaking of this kind, Foucault has to rely on the assumption that it's meaningful to create ordered tables and presentations of these intertwined yet not identical representations of a supposedly common episteme. But if one were to wonder how he went about this task, in terms of historical scientific criteria, then one would have to conclude that it was all nonsense. There is no such thing as an epistemic order or a disciplinary practice, to mention another of Foucault's central concepts. He certainly didn't conceive of this ordering of history and discourse through the episteme by a strict reading of all the relevant historical texts, nor by paying meticulous attention to the larger intellectual contexts in which they were produced. The question is: does it matter? Isn't the strength of the presentation that it gives the reader an opportunity to systematically approach areas of (discursive) history in a manner previously undone, or unthought of? The historian seen as an artist, naturalistically sculpting or manufacturing images of the world.

Interpretation in this context becomes essential. As we saw, it turned out to be central to Skinner's methodology what took place in three abstract meetings. First, that between the intentional creative act of the writer of a historical text and that historical text itself. Second, that between the historical text and that discursive context of which it is a part. Third, that between the examining scholar and the former two. Clearly, the respective content and evaluation of each of these theoretical rendezvous' may only be approached hermeneutically. The first meeting may be referred to as interpretation in the creative/psychological mode. The second as in the cultural/historical. The third as in the epistemological/philosophical. We cannot claim to positively know what has taken place in either relationary respect. We're substantially guessing. This is not because our analytic tools lack perfection, but for the simple reason that we cannot be elsewhere in time than where we are and not other people than ourselves. (Possibly it's not even enough to be where and who we are in order to give uncertainty the slip.) We have to rely on indirect methods of analysis mediated through discourse. Our historical knowledge will therefore of necessity always be imperfect. Realising which, we're lead to two conclusions. Namely, that we shall be fools as long as we stubbornly refuse to give up our ambitions to achieve the Great Historic Narrative (with its inherent and inescapable truth-establishing thrust) and that when we eventually do we shall have to begin to conceive of ourselves as social scientists in the artistic mode.

This is the light in which Foucault has to be seen. By relinquishing the ideal of hegemonic narration; by no longer paying tribute to the authoritative voice of mainstream social scientific dogma, he sets out to colonise lands formerly unclaimed by the social science of things-said and knowledge-rationalistically-legitimated. His stance towards it may be illustrated metaphorically by the following (admittedly far-fetched) quote from that great American nineteenth century novel, *Moby Dick*:

'[Y]es, you'll soon see this Right Whale's head hoisted up opposite that parmaceti's [Viz.: another genus of the whale species.]' As before, the Pequod [Viz.: the whale ship commanded by captain Ahab.] steeply leaned over towards the Sperm Whale's head, now, by the counterpoise of both heads, she regained her even keel: though sorely strained, you may well believe. So, when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds forever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunderheads overboard, and then you will float light and right. (Melville, 1964, p. 270)

Which appears to be a commendation taken to heart by Foucault, when it comes to coping with the context of the scientific environment.

Having thus far made an attempt to assess the historical methodologies of Quentin Skinner and Michel Foucault, it's time to move on and find out what can be made of it.

Modes of meaning and discourse

Seeing, as we have, in what light the historical methodologies of Skinner and Foucault may be approached, a number of remarks on central differences between the two can be made. First, I shall occupy myself with trying to systematically outline their respective relationships to that entity called discourse and demonstrate what I take to be the most important aspects of these. Having done this, I shall go on to trying to connect this to the problem of the constitution of meaning.

Outside of discourse looking in

With Skinner, the story of the discursive history is told from the perspective of the spectator, looking back through the ages on the torrent of historical texts pouring forth more or less wildly in any given historical period, for instance during the Italian Renaissance. The feeling of the reader is akin to the feeling one gets when one is, say, sitting back on a veranda on the first floor of a sheltered building opposite Victoria Station in Bombay, watching the flood of life, turmoil and action gushing by at noon. At first, one is quite bewildered, even exasperated. There's no way to make out details to any substantial extent and individual characters disappear in the madding crowd. But given time and the possibility of getting used to the spectacle, one starts to get the major drift of what's going on. The single mass of moving people is broken up into smaller segments, flowing from and moving in slightly different directions, together

making up what first appeared to be a coherent, albeit incomprehensible whole. The particularity and intent of individual people becomes clearer as the study deepens. Office-workers, Brahmins, policemen and beggars, suburban, country- and all sorts of people materialise and take on group- and individual shapes. The healthy and the sick, the well-off and the destitute, the working and the idle – all are distinguishable aspects of that one great whole mass which one initially encountered. There's a certain dynamic at work, not discernible until one really gets down to observing intensely and making systematic efforts to intellectually understand.

In a similar way, Skinner looks at discursive history. He leans back on the imagined veranda and takes count of the river below and all the fish in it. He even manages to make out the intentions of the individual fish, i.e. people (i.e. texts) he sees before him. By noticing where they were an instant ago and then recording where they took a left or a right turn or blocked the way for or pushed in a particular direction others, he assumes that there must be independent wills at work. By studying and describing intimately the structure of the streets; their directions, magnitudes and the system of their interconnections; the architecture and functional style of the buildings; the labour market, the political and cultural arenas and the infrastructure and many more facets of all conceivable environmental levels of the imagined city in subtle nuance, Skinner at last grasps what, precisely, is going on.

Succinctly put: Skinner places himself outside of or at an analytic distance to discourse. The account he presents is a magnificent tableau of the era he's interested in portraying. We're shown a great picture where currents of influential thought are tracked down and displayed, only to learn that they in turn generate new currents to be traced. In *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Skinner records the meanderings of influence through time and between different intellectual (and linguistic/geographical/cultural) contexts for what he perceives to be the early modern period in Europe. For instance, writing about 'the theory of popular sovereignty developed by Marsiglio and Bartolus', he traces the developmental line thus:

It was only necessary for the same arguments to be applied in the case of a *regnum* as well as a *civitas* for a recognizably modern theory of popular sovereignty in a secular state to be fully articulated. This development was of course a gradual one, but we can already see it beginning in Ockham, evolving in the conciliarist theories of d'Ailly and Gerson, and finally entering the sixteenth century in the writings of Alman and Mair, passing from there into the age of Reformation and beyond. (1978, vol. 1, p. 65)

The silence with which the problems of interpretation and choice of relevant contexts are met rings painfully loud. There doesn't seem to be any difficulties intrinsic to the project of tracing discursive history either through time or across the European continent. We will simply be blessed with divinations of brute causal facts once we're sufficiently well informed.

But there's reason to have second thoughts about this scheme of things. Skinner surely has a point when he stresses the value and importance of contextual study, but is the way that he handles diachronic lines of development defensi-

ble? Mustn't there be an element of arbitrariness in the lines he chooses? Why have, for instance, the lines of discursive development in the 16th century Scandinavian context to be, in the assertive skinnerian way, results of southern and central European Renaissance thinking? What of other discursive sources? In the context of that specific political culture, the role of the old Nordic sagas springs to mind. And when it comes to legal politics, the ancient regional laws in use since centuries at the time definitely had nothing to do with continental Renaissance political philosophy. Likewise in other contexts. What if the discursive meanderings identified by Skinner go left when he supposes that they go right?

The general interpretational problem embarrassing Skinner here has to do with his lack of ambition to problematise either the relationships between historical/discursive occurrences/concepts or the nature of these *per se*. He theorises very conventionally from the presupposition that concepts (such as humanism and republicanism) and historical periods (such as the Renaissance and the Reformation) own undoubted and unquestionable existence. There's no hint of desire to treat concepts or relationships like these with caution. They're real and let's take it from there.

Another case in point is that of the Lutheran breakaway from Catholicism. The reformative movement is shown as springing from the tension within the Catholic church and necessary to understand in that precise context. But once the bonds have been severed, the new Lutheran church constitutes its own context and no further mention is made of that which came before and which, more importantly, continues to exist in the same world, fighting for politico-religious hegemony. Again, one wonders: why?

The answer must be twofold. One, Skinner is dependent on his narrative historical science and that in turn relies on the assumption that there's a rationally true story to tell. So he tells one story: *the* story. In this he resembles very much all those (textualist and contextualist alike) historians he's at great pains to position himself against. Other contemporary historians of social ideas who proceed in related ways, but with different objects, include writers like Charles Taylor (1989), Alasdair MacIntyre (1993) and Michael Walzer (1993), to mention some. They all situate themselves on imagined verandas, similar to the one on which Skinner is perched. They more or less urgently need it to be possible to tell one authoritative tale, not five or a dozen. And they're consequently open to the same charges for dogmatic one-eyedness as Skinner is. Two, and following the above, Skinner can't do without *not* problematising the basic concepts and traditional labels of those historic layers he works with. If he did, it would be a matter rather like that of committing an ontological suicide. The whole thrust of his work concentrates on factual concept-tracing and context-elaboration.

By standing on the outside of discourse looking in and by relying on the narrative mode of meaning, Skinner's in fact making a strongly political statement. The implication of his work is a *depoliticisation of the history of politics*. He simply lets the position of the conventional dominant perspective on what characterises a given historical context reign.

Inside of discourse trying to make sense

In Foucault, we're confronted with a different perspective. If we return to the chaotic commotion outside the Bombay Victoria Station at noon and instead imagine Foucault on the veranda at the first floor of the building opposite, we will witness a scene different from the previous. In one leap, monsieur Foucault clears the balustrade and nimbly lands on his feet on the pavement beneath. He cannot stand the relative comfort of the privileged vantage-point and is furthermore of the opinion that there's not a penny's worth of social scientific good he can do as long as he remains there. So he disappears from sight and starts mingling with the crowd, letting himself be carried back and forth by its throngs, talking with people, buying snacks from street vendors and haggling with the hawkers. He travels the suburban trains, spits jets of betel-nut juice about with the street-cleaners, learns Hindi, gets into hanging out with the brothers and sisters of the people he makes friends with and when a substantial amount of time has passed, ceases to think of himself as alien to the place or the people. Then he begins to systematise what he's seen. But realising that he may be the first to set out on an undertaking of this sort, he quickly learns that none of the available preconceived models and theories for explanation will suffice to make sense of what he experiences. He has partly to invent a new language, as well as a new mode of attributing meaning to (theories about) the world.

At this point, Foucault comes up with the idea of an archaeology, to enable him to analytically capture the subject. He thinks of it thus:

Archaeology, however, must examine each event in terms of its own evident arrangement; it will recount how the configurations proper to each positivity were modified [...]; it will analyse the alteration of the empirical entities which inhabit the positivities [...]; it will study the displacement of the positivities each in relation to the others [...]; lastly, and above all, it will show that the general area of knowledge is no longer that of identities and differences, that of non-quantitative orders, that of a universal characterization, of a general *taxinomia*, of a non-measurable mathesis, but an area made up of organic structures, that is, of internal relations between elements whose totality performs a function. (1973, p. 218)

Although this is an extremely complex scheme, I believe that the gist of it and its application in the present context lies in its attempt to go beyond the boundaries of available discursive historiography and leave to one side its perceived shallowness or insufficient technical subtlety. When the skinnerian narration is satisfied with describing the billiards' ball-like movement of intellectual influence of texts through the historical discursive context, Foucault's archaeology wants to de- and reconstruct the very basis of a particular historical episteme. For that, Foucault needs to move within discourse itself. And since this has not formerly been done, he needs to invent a new language, as well as a new way to order things.

Foucault holds the view that in order to enable the scholar to come closer to the discursive scene of action, it's of central importance to cut the constraints of traditional method and take the plunge from a focus on the 'real' discursive history to the 'virtually real' simulation of it. We have to remake the (discur-

sive) world in order to come to grips with it. It's not a matter of reporting. Therefore Foucault leaves the pretence of a, if you will, positivist process of approximating the historically real presentation and makes his assault in the virtual mode. The loss he incurs in the process is that of external criteria for success, but since, as I've tried to show, these tend to be of a fairly empty nature, the question is whether or not this is a matter for grief. The gain he makes is that of larger freedom in ordering the subject matter of the analysis according to its own merits.

We all simulate in our respective views of the world. Possibly all the time and of necessity when we approach it in linguistic terms. The human reflective faculty does exactly that. To Foucault, this is obvious and must be a constitutive fact of our scholarly methodological starting points. This virtual mode of reality may also in itself be a (possibly even the) central empirical field for social research.

Granting this foucauldian view on language and the nature of scientific knowledge, the proposition comes rather naturally that there is implicit in the foucauldian project a fairly sharp emphasis on a certain conception of the nature of politics and the scientific discourse negotiating it. If the skinnerian approach may be characterised as depoliticising, then Foucault *repoliticises the history of politics*.

Meaning as seen from the outside and the inside of discourse

We're dealing with two distinct methodologies. One works in the narrative mode and the other in the archaeological mode. Each constitutes meaningfulness in a different way. The narrative mode may be understood as one where meaning is external to discourse (and to knowledge itself) and, in some sense, found. Its focus is therefore on a rationalistic understanding of historical processes, where actors, intentions and environments are of strategic importance. This is carried over when the transition is made from textualism to contextualism. It handles discourse, but only in the indirect way of taking into account texts and contexts. The linguistic challenge is not carried through. The assertiveness of a traditionally neutral analytic language and a conception of social science as of a different order than the subject matter which it examines is still understood as absolutely central. The attempt Skinner makes to resolve the difficulties stemming from the underlying tension between the 'real' and the 'virtually real' is to put forth the thesis that analysis may only be historically particularist. We recall his adamant claim that 'there are no perennial problems in philosophy'. But this has monstrous implications! Any seriously-minded science of social historical discourse surely has to give up in the face of such an obstacle. There can hardly be any point in systematically pursuing the regularities of the past (or even the present), would this be all the results of such endeavours could amount to. The narrative mode relies on a singular methodology, but ends up in absurd plurality, temporal fragmentation and even disintegration of history. Whatever historical things that are possible to know are absolutely isolated from other historical things possible to know.

The archaeological mode understands meaning as integral to discursive interpretation (and knowledge) and in a decisive sense made. The tilt of its work can therefore move away from the verificationary obsessions of earlier methodologies. It can focus on ways to systematise the stuff of its historical examinations in ways deemed appropriate by the scholar. It can use generalisation, analogy and signification in a different and freer way. It doesn't need (indeed opposes) the neutrality of scientifically analytic language and treats it as just another form of dependent representation. If its conception of meaning may be characterised as within the bounds of any social scientific paradigm at all, it must be understood in a hermeneutic sense. It assumes that of course there are, or may be, perennial problems in philosophy, as well as in life. It moves from a pluralist methodology to an inevitably pluralist account of the universe, or maybe rather to a pluralism of singular accounts. Foucault's archaeological method sees and uses a backdoor out of the dilemma that goes unnoticed by Skinner, namely that of letting go of that cherished fetish of the Enlightenment: rationally attainable (historical or discursive) truthhood. By so doing, it begins to recover those alternative modes of meaning that have all but perished under the repressive yoke of rationalistic dogma. It also successfully resurrects a faint light of hope to those brought up unable not to doubt the use and constitution of meaning expressed through rationalistic scientific discourse.

In addition to our formerly established perspectives on discourse, namely the ones of the inside or outside approach, we now have two modes of constituting meaning. It may be found or it may be made. This enables us to construct a doubly dichotomical table to help clarifying the relationships and substantiate what alternative stances there may logically be on the question of discourse and meaning.

Figure 1. Modes of meaning and discourse

	<i>Discourse approached from the outside</i>	<i>Discourse approached from the inside</i>
<i>Meaning is found, i.e. real</i>	Skinnerian narrative methodology	?
<i>Meaning is made, i.e. virtually real</i>	?	Foucauldian archaeological methodology.

A few comments have to be made. It is clear that both Skinner and Foucault are discursivists. They're also both contextualists. Neither of the two would agree to letting go of the discursive framework. It's reasonable to believe that Skinner would be happy wherever he found himself along the top horizontal stratum of the table above. And possibly Foucault wouldn't mind being put in either of the positions of the bottom horizontal section. Their respective inclinations, however, tend to drag Skinner to the left column and push Foucault to the right. But this would seem to have to do more with preferred focuses than to be a potential bone of philosophical contention. (Possibly it also has consequences for what can in fact be accomplished, but this has more of the character of a technical question.) But neither Skinner nor Foucault, would enjoy the idea of any vertical movements in the table. As the reader is well aware by now, the

central point of this paper has been an attempt to demonstrate this. Skinner adheres firmly to the view that meaning is – in some respect – found and Foucault is equally firmly a defender of the view that meaning is made. As is by now clear, this is the bottom line of my argument and I assume that the case I've made for this interpretation is, taken overall, fairly stable. Now, to return to the question of what is the function and use of a historical social science posed at the beginning of this essay, I believe that an evaluative conclusion may be put forth.

Concluding

Seeing that skinnerian methodology prefers to consider itself moving in the horizontal dimension of 'real' meaning above, it's necessary to think again and remember what's been discussed previously. We know that Skinner (as well as most other historians of action and of ideas) depends on the implicit assumption that there is one story to narrate and that therefore the work of the historian of discourse is to approximate this 'real' tale. But as I've shown, this is an indefensible position. Any historical story there is to tell may be challenged by others. There are no strong and hard criteria to determine degrees of truth in the historical context. Skinner is under the influence of the powerful spell of the myth that reason is all encompassing and rational understanding possible, if only the techniques of scientific analysis are subtle, clear and sophisticated enough.

In the case of a history of discourse, it seems as though Skinner ends up with the short end too. He's already handicapped by having to approach discourse from the outside. With his constitution of meaning in the 'real' mode, things begin to look rather serious. If both these commitments are untenable, then can anything at all be salvaged and rendered useful from Skinner's endeavours? It appears to me that it will have to be his theoretical emphasis. By fusing his contextualist emphasis with more fruitful analytical approaches, we may yet stand to gain. Now, let's turn to Foucault.

Foucault's archaeological historical methodology does not leave the bottom horizontal section in figure 1. Archaeology constitutes meaning in the 'virtually real' mode. This presupposes a range of things and has a number of implications. The stumbling block of narration – namely its rationalist epistemology – is avoided by archaeology altogether. Since scientific and historical meaning is considered made, those (impossible) external criteria it usually is presented as in desperate need of all of a sudden become obsolete. The central question of scientific analysis, namely: How do we know? is handled by moving away from the singularity of rationalist legitimation. Instead a position is approached where epistemological legitimation is sought in a manner akin to that represented by the relationship between the artist's work and its critical reception, in which modes of interpretation are clearly considered valid, although not always rational. It's simply part of the business that legitimate historical accounts are non-singular.

Instead of relying on the traditional mode of scientific 'reality', 'virtual reality' is acknowledged as the best we can achieve. In this sense, archaeology necessarily has to be conceived of as better equipped or more equal to the task of analysing social (discursive) history. Of course, its method rests on simulation, but so does narration. The difference is that in the former case it's explicit and acknowledged, whereas in the latter it's implicit and denied.

It would thus seem that the more realistic mode of the constitution of meaning is found (or maybe one should say 'made') with foucauldian archaeology than with skinnerian narration. It's no doubt also more fruitful in its attempt to approach discourse from the inside when it comes to establishing closer accounts of linguistic contextuality. Which would appear to be a feasible observation with which to close this examination of modes of meaning and discourse.

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