The contextual approach locates authors in their historical milieu. Contextualists argue that we typically get a better grasp of a text if we relate it to the influences and concerns of its author. This argument may intuitively appeal to intellectual historians, but it is notably more controversial when directed against less historical approaches to texts. Historical approaches to texts often stand in contrast to those literary and philosophical ones that treat texts respectively as idealized aesthetic objects and contributions to timeless debates.

There are several contextual, historical approaches to texts. They include much hermeneutics, reception theory, and the new historicism. Yet, in the history of political philosophy, the contextual approach is associated narrowly with J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and the Cambridge School they are often said to have inspired. In this chapter I will examine the rise of this contextualism, the theoretical arguments used to justify it, and its current standing and future prospects. I pursue several arguments. First, the label “Cambridge School” is highly misleading: Pocock and Skinner differ significantly from one another, while many of the other historians involved are suspicious of all theoretical statements and methodological precepts. Second, contextualism arose as a historical practice indebted to modernist empiricist modes of inquiry: contextualist theories arose only later, as Pocock and Skinner grabbed at philosophical vocabularies to defend that practice. Third, recent developments in contextualism involve a retreat from these vocabularies: in the absence of renewed theoretical debate, contextualism may lapse into naive empiricism or bland eclecticism.

Modernism and Method

We will better understand contextualism if we locate it in the context of Whiggish and modernist traditions in Cambridge. Skinner has written that his early work “owed an
obvious debt to the theoretical writings of Pocock and Dunn, and a still deeper debt to the approach embodied in Laslett’s scholarship on the history of political thought” (Skinner 1988d: 233). Today Peter Laslett is the forgotten man of contextualism. Yet Pocock, as well as Skinner, has described his work as the inspiration for contextualism (Pocock 2006). After the Second World War, Laslett returned to Cambridge, where he had earlier got a double first in history, to take up a research fellowship at St John’s College. He then edited a collection of Sir Robert Filmer’s writings, took up a permanent fellowship at Trinity College, and began working on John Locke. Having discovered Locke’s library, he used it to edit a critical edition of the Two Treatises (Laslett 1960).

In some respects Laslett’s work fitted well in Cambridge traditions of political theory. At Cambridge, politics was studied as part of the History Tripos. Cambridge Fellows and students typically studied political theory with a more historical and less philosophical focus than their Oxford counterparts. In other respects, however, Laslett looks more novel even in a Cambridge setting. His approach overlaps with modernist empiricist modes of knowledge. To be more precise, his work moves away from broad narratives of the development of ideas and institutions, and toward the systematic and rigorous use of bibliographies, unpublished manuscripts, and other evidence in order to establish particular facts and thus textual interpretations. In the nineteenth century, historians and political scientists typically wrote grand narratives about the triumph of the principles of nation, character, and liberty. By the middle of the twentieth century, many historians were writing detailed and even statistical accounts of industry, wages, political interests, and fluctuating birth and death rates. Modernist historians at Cambridge and elsewhere—historians such as Herbert Butterfield, Geoffrey Elton, Lewis Namier, and A. J. P. Taylor—believed that the rigorous application of empirical methods to historical and especially archival sources would generate secure facts on which to build an objective account of the past. They wanted to transform history from a Victorian romance into a professional discipline.

Laslett brought this modernist empiricism to the history of political thought. It is no accident that, soon after publishing his edition of the Two Treatises, he turned to more statistical studies of historical demography, eventually becoming co-founder and director of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. Even more importantly, it is no accident that, while working on Locke, he began to edit a series of books, entitled Philosophy, Politics, and Society, which he introduced with a modernist manifesto (Laslett 1956). Here Laslett famously pronounced the death of

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1 I first introduced the concept of modernist empiricism in Bevir (2001). Elsewhere I use it to refer not only to an atomistic approach to facts and inquiry, but perhaps more significantly to the rise of formal and ahistorical modes of explanation. Clearly modernist historians were less likely than social scientists to reject historical explanations. Thus, modernist empiricism in the study of history appears primarily as the attempt to use empirical evidence to establish secure, atomized facts that then could conclusively determine the validity of broader historical theories and interpretations. For more recent studies of modernism in political science and British history, see respectively Adcock, Bevir and Stimson (2007) and Bentley (2005).
philosophical studies of ethical and political principles. He aligned himself with a lingering logical positivism that equated knowledge with empirical science and that limited philosophy to the rigorous analysis of language use as exemplified by the work of Gilbert Ryle and, in political philosophy, T. D. Weldon. For Laslett, this logical positivism implied that we should answer questions about politics less by philosophy than by empirical social science and a new history of ideas. The new history of ideas would reflect logical positivism’s transformation of the identity and role of philosophers. Philosophers appeared here less as people searching for a comprehensive metaphysics and more as people expressing normative views in much the same way as might other citizens and politicians.

In his edition of the Two Treatises, Laslett provided a triumphant example of such a history. Laslett approached the Two Treatises not as moral philosophy but using the sources and techniques of modernist historians. He drew heavily on archival and primary documents—Locke’s library, lists of the books he owned, hand-corrected prints of the Two Treatises, his diary, and his personal correspondence. These sources provided facts on which to base historical reconstructions. For example, knowledge of the dates when Locke acquired and read books supported the claim that Locke wrote passages referring to those books only after those dates. Laslett thereby revolutionized our view of Locke. He showed that Locke had written most of the Second Treatise in 1679–80. Thus, he concluded, the Two Treatises could not possibly have been written as a defense of the Glorious Revolution; rather, it was “an Exclusion Tract” calling for a revolution (Laslett 1960: 61).

While Laslett brought modernist empiricism to the history of political thought, many Cambridge historians remained more committed to elder approaches to the subject. The nineteenth century was the great age of Whig history. Whig historians believed in the manly, decent, and practical character of the English. They thought that the unwritten constitution and the common law guaranteed practical liberties. They suggested that God (often a clearly Anglican God) was the scarcely hidden force behind Church, State, and history itself. Most importantly for us, they distrusted abstract statements of historical method, theological doctrine, or political principle. Even if the era after the First World War witnessed a broad shift from Whiggism to modernist empiricism, many historians retained a loose adherence to Whig themes. As an undergraduate, Skinner studied not only with Laslett but also with John Burrow and Duncan Forbes. Forbes, the elder of the two, taught a special subject on the Scottish Enlightenment that was a kind of capstone undergraduate experience for Skinner, John Dunn, and many other intellectual historians trained at Cambridge. Burrow and Forbes dismissed abstract methodological

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2 Laslett’s claim that “political philosophy is dead” became notorious (Laslett 1956: p. vii). Less well known is his use of this claim to open the way to new, modernist ways of approaching political questions: “The intellectual light of the mid-twentieth century is clear, cold and hard. If it requires those who undertake to answer questions about politics to do so without being entitled to call themselves political philosophers, we must answer them nonetheless” (Laslett 1956: p. xiv). Modernist forms of social science provided the way to answer them.

Recognition of the Whiggish and modernist traditions in Cambridge casts light on the complex contours of contextualism. When observers talk about a Cambridge School, they misleadingly associate all kinds of folk with the methodological positions of Pocock and Skinner. In fact many of the historians linked to the Cambridge School inherited a Whiggish distrust of abstract philosophical arguments and methodological precepts.

**Theoretical Justifications**

Skinner has written in various places of how he set out to do “for Hobbes what Laslett had done for Locke” (Skinner 2002b: 42). He too explored archival sources, most notably Hobbes’s private papers held by the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth. He even published “an unknown fragment” by Hobbes, arguing that it disproved deontological interpretations of his thought (Skinner 1965). Indeed, Skinner published at least six or seven papers on Hobbes before his first major article on methodology. Clearly, as Skinner and Pocock have often acknowledged, their theoretical writings attempted to justify an existing historical practice. They defended the history of political theory against both reductionists who dismissed ideas as mere epiphenomena and canonical theorists who approached texts as timeless philosophical works. Their battle against reductionism has as much to do with history as with political philosophy: they were employed in history departments at a time when these were dominated by social and political historians who denounced the history of ideas as intellectually irrelevant and politically conservative. Their battle against the canonical theorists was that initiated by Laslett. They wanted to promote an approach that: (1) situated texts in their contexts, and (2) proved interpretations correct by establishing empirical facts using modernist methods. They wanted to undermine approaches that read authors as: (1) contributing to perennial debates; or (2) aiming at a coherent metaphysics.

**Quentin Skinner**

Skinner gave by far the most philosophically interesting defense of contextualism. He drew on the same new philosophy to which Laslett appealed in pronouncing the death of elder approaches to political philosophy. Like Laslett, he took Weldon to have shown

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3 Skinner has now published a three-volume collection of his papers, but the versions in this collection often differ in important respects from the originals, and some of the differences are accentuated by the choice of papers for inclusion (Skinner 2002a).
that much political argument was vacuous. Again like Laslett, he associated Weldon with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who at the time was generally placed alongside Ryle and J. L. Austin and so was read as offering a kind of linguistic version of logical positivism. While Skinner rightly pointed to Collingwood as a background influence, it was these analytic philosophers who gave him his arguments.

We can begin to reconstruct Skinner’s justification of contextualism by unpacking his theory of meaning. Skinner is often, and rightly, described as an intentionalist. But his intentionalism does not derive from his theory of meaning. To the contrary, far from identifying meaning with the beliefs or other intentional states of the author, he defines it squarely in terms of sense and reference. He thereby implies that texts have meanings in themselves based entirely on their semantic content. Indeed, he draws a sharp distinction between what a text means and what an author meant by it.

Skinner’s move to intentionalism depends on his use of Austin’s speech-act theory. He argues that, to understand an action, we have to grasp not only its meaning but also its intended illocutionary force. Skinner here treats meaning as transparent in a way that makes the main task of the historian, at least in theory, the recovery of illocutionary intentions. Consider one of Skinner’s main examples: Defoe’s tract _The Shortest Way with the Dissenters_. Defoe wrote that we should treat dissent as a capital offense, and the meaning of that is simply that we should treat dissent as a capital offense. However, to understand Defoe’s tract, we have to grasp that its intended illocutionary force is parody: far from recommending that we hang dissenters, Defoe was ridiculing contemporary arguments against religious toleration.

We can now explore how Skinner uses these ideas to defend contextualism. He argues, most importantly, that to grasp illocutionary intentions we have to situate them in their historical contexts. He draws on Austin to argue that illocutionary intentions have to be recognizable as intentions to do a particular thing in a particular context. As he thus concludes, “to understand what any given writer may have been doing in using some particular concept or argument, we need first of all to grasp the nature and range of things that could recognizably have been done by using that particular concept, in the treatment of that particular theme, at that particular time” (Skinner 1988b: 77). In addition, Skinner constantly argues that contextualism is a modernist method in that it is a way of securing facts and thus textual interpretations. His methodological essays consistently claim that his particular contextualist method is a “necessary and perhaps even sufficient”—or, more colloquially, “essential”—requirement of understanding a historical text. His argument here is that, because the expression and reception of illocutionary force requires shared conventions, historians must know the relevant conventions if they are to understand what an author was doing. His broader claim is that meticulous archival and primary research can enable historians to build up a body of factual knowledge that conclusively establishes what an author intended to do. As Skinner wrote, “if we succeed in identifying

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4 Skinner’s use of philosophical argument to support modernist themes and proposals is even stronger in his earliest philosophical essay (Skinner 1966).
this context with sufficient accuracy, we can eventually hope to read off what the speaker or writer in whom we are interested was doing” (Skinner 1988b: 275).

The details of Skinner’s justification of contextualism are less well known than his attack on canonical approaches (Skinner 1988a). Skinner challenges approaches that read past theorists as addressing perennial problems. He argues that authors cannot have intended to contribute to debates that were not around when they wrote: to understand a text, we must grasp the author’s intention to address a particular question at a particular time. Skinner thus rejects the very idea of perennial problems in favor of an emphasis on the individual questions that a particular theorist intended to address at a particular time. He concludes that we should approach texts assuming that each is dealing with its own question, not that they all contribute to a common enterprise.

Skinner similarly challenges approaches that read authors as offering a coherent metaphysics. He argues that the mythology of coherence leads to “a history of thoughts which no one ever actually succeeded in thinking, at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained” (Skinner 1988b: 40). In his view, authors intend to contribute to different fields of inquiry and to address different questions in the several texts they write over a number of years, and their intentions are thus too varied to constitute a coherent system.

**J. G. A. Pocock**

Pocock never exhibited the philosophical interests or sophistication of Skinner. He typically grabbed at more sociological vocabularies to provide a theoretical defense of contextualism. What is more, Pocock’s sociological vocabularies lead to a contextualist theory very different from the one that Skinner built out of speech-act theory. Skinner presents language as a set of conventions that authors use in intentional acts. In contrast, Pocock has consistently adopted more structuralist vocabularies to suggest that language gives authors their very intentions. As Skinner recently expressed it: “he [Pocock] stresses the power of language to constrain our thoughts, whereas I tend to think of language at least as much as a resource to be deployed” (Skinner 2002b: 49). This difference appears not only in their theoretical justifications of contextualism but also in their historical studies. Skinner’s historical works typically detail what an author was doing in the intellectual context of the time; he writes of how Machiavelli subverted the “advice to princes” genre, how Bolingbroke appealed to Whig principles to challenge the Whigs, and why Hobbes returned to the classical theory of eloquence. In contrast, Pocock pays more attention to languages that persist and develop over time: he traces the language of the ancient constitution across sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France and Britain, the language of civic humanism from renaissance Italy by way of Puritan Britain to America and its revolution, and the clash between languages of ancient virtue and modern commerce.

Unsurprisingly Pocock’s theoretical justifications of contextualism focus on aggregate concepts such as paradigm, tradition, and language. These concepts capture the
similarities and links between texts and authors that are so prominent in his historical studies. In many respects he seems less interested in providing a philosophical analysis of these concepts than in using them descriptively to give an account of his own historical practice. Nonetheless, like Skinner, he often tried not merely to describe a type of contextualism, but also to uphold it as a modernist method that alone could result in properly historical interpretations of texts.

Pocock suggests that paradigms (or languages) constitute the meanings of texts, since they give authors the intentions they can have (Pocock 1972, 1985). This suggestion leads directly to his emphasis on situating texts in their context. He argues that the historian must study paradigms precisely because they control political speech. The task of the historian is, in this view, “to identify the ‘language’ or ‘vocabulary’ with and within which the author operated, and to show how it functioned paradigmatically to prescribe what he might say and how he might say it” (Pocock 1972: 25). In addition, Pocock, like Skinner, implies that his variety of contextualism resembles a modernist method in that it is a way of securing facts and thus textual interpretations. Pocock allows that historians might be unable to prove that all their evidence is not a figment of their imagination, but, he adds sharply, neither can they prove they are not asleep and dreaming; for all practical purposes, contextualism secures the factual evidence that then secures interpretations. Thus, if historians do not adopt a contextualist method, they simply cannot reach an adequate understanding of a text: “it seems a prior necessity [of historical understanding] to establish the language or languages in which some passage of political discourse was being conducted” (Pocock 1985: 7).

Like Laslett and Skinner, Pocock contrasts a contextual approach with those that read theorists as contributing to perennial debates or seeking a coherent metaphysics. For Pocock, a focus on perennial problems falls foul of the emphasis of modernist empiricism on factual evidence. He argues that we cannot assume that political thought took place at the level of abstraction of some perennial problem. On the contrary, he continues, “the strictly historical task before us plainly is that of determining by investigation on what levels of abstraction thought did take place” (Pocock 1962: 186). Again, for Pocock, a focus on the coherence of an author’s thought falls foul of recognition of the role played by paradigms and languages. He argues that languages are not unified but polyvalent structures that facilitate “the utterance of diverse and contrary propositions” (Pocock 1985: 9). Texts are, he continues, the products of these languages, inheriting their ability to say contrary things on many levels.

Debates and Revisions

Skinner and Pocock’s theoretical justifications of contextualism aroused far more controversy than had contextualist histories. It was one thing to adopt a historical stance toward texts, and quite another to argue that a particular method was the sole route by which anyone, historian or not, could grasp the historical meaning of a text.
The mere adoption of a historical stance leaves open the choice of whether to adopt that stance, and the choice of how to study history if one does so. The justifications of contextualism subordinate such choices to the claims of a modernist method. They imply that historians can do good work only if they follow a particular set of methodological precepts. Again, they imply that political theorists who adopt less historical approaches simply are not in the business of understanding texts: even if these other political theorists make interesting arguments, the arguments cannot be historical, so they may as well forgo discussions of past texts—as Skinner polemically pressed the point, “we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves” (Skinner 1988a: 66).

Most criticisms of contextualism focus on the strong methodological claims of Skinner and Pocock. Even historians associated with the so-called Cambridge School would not uphold these strong claims. Many of them simply continue the long-standing Cambridge tradition of the historical study of political philosophy without committing themselves to a historicist philosophy let alone modernist method—I suspect Richard Tuck is one prominent example. Others follow Forbes, with his Whiggish proclivities, in that they conceive of history as a practical art that resists formulation in any philosophical language let alone a set of methodological precepts—I am pretty sure Stefan Collini is one example (Collini 2000).

Political theorists with weaker associations to Cambridge have been more vocal in criticizing Skinner and Pocock. Their complaints also focus on the contextualists’ strong methodological claims. Critics complain that general prescriptions for historical study are unhelpful—but unfortunately they do not distinguish between philosophical and methodological prescriptions (e.g., Minogue 1981; Tarcov 1982). Similarly, critics bemoan the sterile antiquarianism of contextualism; they argue that our legitimate interests in historical texts go beyond the recovery of historical meanings to include reading them in relation to our problems (e.g., Leslie 1970; Tarlton 1973).

How have the contextualists responded to their critics, and perhaps more importantly to the erosion of modernist ambitions in the human sciences? To some extent, the answer is that they have not responded; they have concentrated on writing histories. Pocock’s theoretical writings always resembled descriptions of his practice more than a sustained philosophical justification of it. Increasingly, he has acknowledged as much. What he is after, it now seems clear, is just a vocabulary that conveys the type of historical objects he studies—“idioms, rhetorics, specialised vocabularies and grammars” all considered as “a single though multiplex community of discourse” (Pocock 1987: 22). Even Skinner, the most philosophically engaged of the early contextualists, has written very little since the 1970s on the philosophical justification of contextualism: he published a restatement of his views in 1988 in reply to early critics (Skinner 1988d), but the volume Regarding Method in his recent collected papers contains just two other essays written after 1979—a polemical attack on Elton and a retrospect relating his views to the history of concepts (Skinner 2002a).

While the early contextualists have done little to rework their theories, a pattern does emerge. First, contextualists are less committed to their modernist methods and the vocabularies with which they originally justified them. Sometimes they suggest that
their approach rests less on particular analyses of speech-acts, paradigms, or *langue* than on a broad historicist sensibility. They distance themselves from their hegemonic claims for a particular method as a way of securing factual evidence and thus textual interpretations. Skinner has explicitly said, “I used to think far more in terms of correct interpretations, and to suppose that there is usually a fact of the matter to be discovered,” whereas “I now feel that . . . the process of interpretation is a never-ending one” (Skinner 2002b: 50). Second, contextualists flirt with new theoretical vocabularies. In Skinner’s case, the influence of meaning holism appears in his recasting discussions of sense and reference and illocutionary force in terms of the ascription of systems of belief, while the influence of anti-foundationalism appears in his recasting speech-acts as a concern with rhetoric and in his newfound hostility to facts. Finally, when the contextualists recast their theories in terms of a broad historicism or new vocabularies, they do perilously little to show how their later positions relate to their earlier ones. Do they still want to defend the strong methodological claims for which they are best known, and, if so, how would they now do so? Do they still believe in the analyses of speech-acts and paradigms that they once offered, and, if so, how would they reconcile those analyses with the very different vocabularies found in their more recent theoretical writings?

**The Contemporary Scene**

The contemporary standing of contextualism might seem paradoxical. Skinner and Pocock continue to write magisterial histories at an impressive rate. To some extent their battles have arguably been won. Certainly, historical studies of political theory are flourishing, and it is tempting to add that they are squeezing out studies that mine past texts for jewels of wisdom without bothering with either historical or philosophical defenses of the alleged jewels. Nonetheless, historical studies are flourishing in the absence of any sustained theoretical exploration of their nature, and long after the elder justifications for them have lost plausibility. Skinner and Pocock appear, quite rightly in my view, to have retreated from the strong methodological claims of their early work, but they have never explicitly repudiated these claims, nor provided anything like a clear statement of where their retreat leaves the philosophy of contextualism and historicism more generally.

Contemporary work on the theory of contextualism contains three main positions, which we might label “anti-methodological empiricism,” “homogenizing eclecticism,” and “post-analytic hermeneutics.” Each position has its advocates. Skinner himself has made occasional comments that alternatively point toward and then pull away from each of them.

The retreat from strong methodological claims sometimes leads the contextualists to suggest that their approach is common sense or standard historical practice. This view is received enthusiastically by historians indebted to the more Whiggish strand in the so-called Cambridge School. For example, Bryan Young, who followed Burrow and Collini into the program in Intellectual History at the University of Sussex, restates the Whiggish
view that philosophical concerns, let alone methodological ones, are a hindrance to the practice of history. Like Forbes, whom he credits as his inspiration, Young describes intellectual history as an art, a way of seeing, and an aesthetic (Young 2002). If Young is merely cautioning us claims about the sufficiency or necessity of any method, then his point is well taken. But there is no reason why a rejection of strong methodological claims should entail withdrawing from philosophical analysis. To the contrary, if invocations of “common sense” or “the art of history” are juxtaposed to philosophical reasoning, they are liable to lapse into naïve empiricism; they are likely to imply that historians can engage in their empirical studies without any need to reflect philosophically on the nature of what they do, whether it is justified, what forms of explanation they should adopt, or what kinds of justification they should offer for their conclusions.

As the contextualists retreated from their strong methodological claims, so there arose not only anti-methodological empiricism but also homogenizing eclecticism. This eclecticism appears as a tendency to equate contextualism with several other historical approaches to political philosophy: James Tully flattens the distinctions between contextualism and the critical post-structuralist legacy of Foucault (Tully 2002), and Melvin Richter and Kari Palonen flatten the distinctions between contextualism and the history of concepts as developed by Reinhart Koselleck (Richter 1995; Palonen 2003). If such homogenizing is merely drawing our attention to a broad historicism in the human sciences today, then once again the point is well taken. But we should not mistake the identification of a broad historicism for a philosophical analysis of it. The contextualists, post-structuralists, and conceptual historians generally offer different and even incompatible philosophical analyses of their historical practice. If we ignore these differences, we are in danger of promoting a bland eclecticism that elides important philosophical issues instead of confronting them.

Finally, the retreat from strong methodological claims has led contextualists to a broader historicism based on post-analytic hermeneutics. Skinner has long identified with the historicism of Collingwood, as well as drawing on arguments derived from analytic and post-analytic philosophers. In doing so, he and others raise the possibility, implicitly or explicitly, of moving from the vocabularies of speech-act theory and paradigms to meaning holism and, more specifically, analyses of the human sciences as exploring actions by attributing meanings and showing how these meanings fit into larger patterns of belief and rationality—analyses including the anti-naturalist emphasis on interpretation of Charles Taylor and Peter Winch, and the more naturalist account of explanation offered by Donald Davidson. Skinner first wrote about these analyses in a 1972 article, “‘Social Meaning’ and the Explanation of Social Action,” in which he drew on speech-act theory to provide a critical alternative to both the anti-naturalist account of interpretation and the naturalist commitment to explanation.5

5 The only time Skinner returned to these philosophers, along with Davidson, Quine, and Taylor, was in a lengthy 1988 “Reply to Critics,” in which he still staked out differences from them but with less emphasis on the ways in which his speech-act theory defined the key feature of understanding in terms opposed to the attribution of beliefs (Skinner 1988d).
Today, in sharp contrast, a rejection of his strong methodological claims may enable contextualists to rethink their theory and perhaps even their histories in terms of just such philosophical analyses.

**Conclusion**

When somebody offers you three alternatives before labeling one “naive” and another “bland,” they are probably steering you toward the third. My own commitment is indeed to the use of post-analytic philosophy and especially meaning holism to rethink the nature of historicist approaches to political philosophy (Bevir 1999). What does this involve? Some commentators defend Skinner from critics by rereading him as a broad historicist rather than a proponent of a modernist method justified by speech-act theory (Palonen 2000; Stern 2002). Recently Skinner himself has even suggested—implausibly if not disingenuously—that his early methodological writings relied on the meaning holism of Davidson, W. V. O. Quine, and Wittgenstein, barely mentioning the speech-act theory that was actually so prominent in his writings.6

It is especially important, therefore, to say that a turn to post-analytic philosophy and meaning holism is not an easy option. We cannot just pretend that the contextualists have always been using these vocabularies. Nor can we pretend that these vocabularies are straightforwardly compatible with those they did in fact use—speech-act theory and paradigms. Nor, finally, can we blithely assume that these vocabularies are capable of supporting the main claims once made by the contextualists.

Quite the contrary: once we move from speech-act theory and paradigms to post-analytic philosophy and meaning holism, and once we move from strong methodological claims to a broad historicism, then we undermine, or at least strongly modify, all of the main positions associated with the early contextualists. Consider briefly the emphasis on linguistic contexts, the rejection of perennial problems, and the dismissal of concerns about coherence (Bevir 1994, 1997, 2000). First, if the study of linguistic contexts is not a necessary or sufficient method for understanding, there is no absolute requirement that historians pay attention to it. “Study the linguistic context” is just a useful heuristic, and, as such, it is no different from other maxims that sensible historians will follow, including “study the social and economic context” or “explore the biography of the author.” Second, if we are not seeking the single correct

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6 That means that, when we find Skinner suggesting that he drew on “post-analytic philosophy” and “meaning holism” to analyze interpretation as the ascription of networks, systems, or webs of “belief” in accord with a presumption of rationality, we might suspect him of projecting later and largely unformulated arguments back onto his early published views (Skinner 2002a: 4–5). We search his work in vein for any sustained discussion of terms like “post-analytic” or “meaning holism.” Moreover, we can but wonder how he now would reconcile the suggestion that interpretation is the ascription of beliefs and desires with his clear and oft-repeated belief that understanding consists in grasping the sense and reference of words and securing uptake of illocutionary force.
interpretation of a text, but ascribing beliefs to its author, then there seems no reason to suppose that we must do so at a particular level of abstraction. Yet, if we can couch past beliefs at a sufficient level of abstraction, we can often make them relevant to our concerns and even problems that have persisted more or less perennially throughout history. Finally, if interpretation involves the ascription of beliefs, we will be far more interested in their coherence than we would if interpretation were about identifying the particular speech-act being made. Indeed, if the ascription of beliefs depends on a presumption of rationality, then, far from a concern with coherence being a myth, it is an unavoidable aspect of every act of interpretation.

Of course, a post-analytic hermeneutics might sustain modified versions of the claims once made by Skinner and Pocock. We may argue that linguistic contexts are crucial to explanations of people’s beliefs, that there is no cosmic agenda philosophers are bound to address, and that historians may conclude that people were not rational. Yet, these modified claims are not those for which the contextualists argued. There is, moreover, no sign that Skinner or Pocock themselves have much interest in deploying meaning holism to argue in defense of these modified claims, let alone to assess where a retreat to these modified claims would leave their earlier accounts of contextualism. In short, while historicist studies of political philosophy flourish, there is a woeful lack of philosophical analysis of their logic.

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