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Contextualism: From Modernist Method to Post-analytic Historicism?¹

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Abstract

This article provides a critical history of the Cambridge School of intellectual history. Laslett's work on Locke appeared to vindicate modernist historicism. Laslett shunned the broad narratives of romantic developmental historicists. He relied on bibliographies, unpublished manuscripts, and other evidence to establish atomized facts and thus textual interpretations. Pocock and Skinner's theories defended modernist historicism. They argued historians should situate texts in contexts and prove interpretations correct by using modernist methods to establish empirical facts. They attacked approaches that read authors as contributing to perennial debates or aiming at a coherent metaphysics. I argue we should reject modernist historicism with its methodological focus; we should adopt a post-analytic historicism focused on philosophical issues arising from analyses of the human sciences as studying actions by attributing meanings to actors and showing how these meanings fit into larger webs of belief.

Keywords

Cambridge School, contextualism, historicism, modernism, Pocock, Skinner

“During the last ten years”, wrote J. G. A. Pocock in 1972, “scholars interested in the study of systems of political thought have had the experience

¹ Most of the papers in this special issue were originally presented under the auspices of the Society for the Philosophy of History at the American Philosophical Association (Pacific Division) in Pasadena in 2008. For a more detailed version of my arguments in this paper see M. Bevir, “The Contextual Approach” in G. Klosko, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

of living through radical changes, which may amount to a transformation, in their discipline.”² Some twenty years later Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner published a collection of essays in honour of Pocock. Their preface observed that “it now seems clear that the 1960s did indeed witness the beginning of a revolution in our ways of thinking about the history of political theory,” and that “it is even clearer that John Pocock himself was one of the most active and important of the revolutionaries.”³ Only modesty can have prevented them adding that Skinner himself has been at least equally important a revolutionary.

The revolution saw the triumph of a contextualizing historicism. Students of political thought increasingly treated past texts as historical documents with historically specific meanings derived from and addressed to particular historical contexts. Yet, the current standing of this contextualism seems paradoxical. On the one hand, Anglophone historians, especially intellectual historians, are producing ever more studies of ideas in historical contexts. On the other hand, the philosophical justifications for contextualism are fragile. Pocock and Skinner wrote their main philosophical papers in the 1960s and 1970s, and they have written very little on philosophy or method since. Moreover, their philosophical arguments relied on positivist – or at least modernist – themes that may look mistaken – or at least old-fashioned – now that Anglophone philosophy is dominated by post-analytic and holistic themes.

The time has come to rethink Anglophone historicism in order to break with modernism and draw inspiration instead from a post-analytic type of meaning holism that is nigh-on ubiquitous in Anglophone philosophy. This special issue of *The Journal of the Philosophy of History* pursues such a rethinking. The contributors certainly do not share any particular set of conclusions; rather, they sometimes dispute one another’s views. In this essay, I do not engage such disputes or try to establish a shared agenda. I concentrate instead on the historical background to the task of rethinking Anglophone historicism from a post-analytic perspective.

² J. Pocock, “Languages and their Implications: The Transformation of the Study of Political Thought”, in *Politics, Language, and Time* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 3.

³ N. Phillipson & Q. Skinner, “Preface”, to *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. xii.

1. Modernism and Method

Anglophone contextualism was inspired by the rise of modernist historicism, represented most importantly by Peter Laslett. This debt may get little attention but it is no secret. Both Pocock and Skinner have described Laslett's work as the inspiration for contextualism.⁴ Laslett got a double first in history at Cambridge, and after the Second World War, he returned there as a research fellow at St. John's College. He edited a collection of Sir Robert Filmer's writings, before taking up a permanent fellowship at Trinity College and beginning work on John Locke. Having discovered Locke's library, he used it to edit a critical edition of the *Two Treatises*.⁵

Laslett's approach draws on a modernist mode of knowledge. He shuns broad narratives of the development of ideas and institutions, relying instead on the systematic and rigorous use of bibliographies, unpublished manuscripts, and other evidence to establish particular facts and thus textual interpretations.⁶ The nineteenth century had been dominated by a romantic and developmental historicism: human scientists wrote grand narratives about the triumph of the principles of nation, character, and liberty. By the middle of the twentieth century, in contrast, modernist historians had begun to write detailed, even statistical accounts of industry, wages, political interests, and fluctuating birth and death rates. Modernist

⁴ See J. Pocock, "Present at the Creation: With Laslett to the Lost Worlds", *International Journal of Public Affairs* 2 (2006), 7–17; and Q. Skinner, "A Reply to Critics" in J. Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 233.

⁵ P. Laslett, ed., *John Locke's Two Treatises of Government: A Critical Edition with an Introduction and Apparatus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

⁶ I first introduced the concept "modernist empiricism" in M. Bevir, "Prisoners of Professionalism: On the Construction and Responsibility of Political Studies", *Public Administration* 79 (2001), 469–489. There I used 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. Because historians are less likely than social scientists to reject historical explanations, modernism in the study of history appears primarily as the attempt to use empirical evidence to establish secure, atomized facts that then can conclusively determine the validity of broader historical interpretations. For more recent studies of modernism in political science and history see respectively R. Adcock, M. Bevir, and S. Stimson, eds., *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and M. Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

historians throughout the Anglophone world – 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 modernism to the history of political thought. He edited a series of books, entitled *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, which he introduced with a modernist manifesto.⁷ There Laslett famously pronounced the death of 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.⁸ 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 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 Locke owned, hand-corrected prints of the *Two Treatises*, and Locke's diary and personal correspondence. These sources provided facts on which to base historical reconstructions. For example, knowledge of the

⁷ P. Laslett, "Introduction", in P. Laslett, ed., *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956).

⁸ Laslett's claim that "political philosophy is dead" became notorious. 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." Modernist forms of social science provided the way to answer them. See Laslett, "Introduction", pp. vii and xiv.

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, they were “an Exclusion Tract” calling for a revolution.⁹

2. Theoretical Justifications

Skinner has written of how he set out to do “for Hobbes what Laslett had done for Locke.”¹⁰ Skinner too explored archival sources, most notably the private papers of Hobbes held by the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth. Skinner even published “an unknown fragment” by Hobbes, arguing that it disproved deontological interpretations of Hobbes’s thought.¹¹ Indeed, Skinner published at least six or seven papers on Hobbes before his first major article on methodology.¹²

Clearly, as Skinner and Pocock have often acknowledged, their theoretical writings attempted to justify an existing historical practice. They defended a modernist history of political theory against both the reductionists, who dismissed ideas as mere epiphenomena, and canonical theorists, who approached texts as timeless philosophical works. Their battle against reductionism was largely one within history: 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 against political philosophers. They promoted an approach that situated texts in their contexts, and proved interpretations correct by establishing empirical facts using modernist

⁹ Laslett, ed., *Locke’s Two Treatises*, p. 61.

¹⁰ Q. Skinner, “Interview by Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrämäki”, *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6 (2002), 42.

¹¹ Q. Skinner, “Hobbes on Sovereignty: An Unknown Discussion”, *Political Studies* 13 (1965), 213–218.

¹² 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. See Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

methods. They attacked those approaches that read authors as contributing to perennial debates or aiming at a coherent metaphysics.

2.1 *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 that much political argument was vacuous. Also 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 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 somewhat idiosyncratic 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.”¹³

Skinner also 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” condition – or, more colloquially, an “essential” requirement – of a correct understanding of a historical text.¹⁴ Skinner’s argument 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 this context with sufficient accuracy, we can eventually hope to read off what the speaker or writer in whom we are interested was doing.”¹⁵

The details of Skinner’s justification of contextualism are less well known than his attack on canonical approaches. Skinner challenges those approaches that read past theorists as addressing perennial problems. He argues that authors can not 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.

¹³ Q. Skinner, “Motives, Intentions, and the Interpretation of Texts”, in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 77.

¹⁴ Skinner’s use of philosophical argument to support modernist themes and proposals is even stronger in his earliest philosophical essay. See Q. Skinner, “The Limits of Historical Explanations” *Philosophy* 41 (1966), 199–215.

¹⁵ Skinner, “Reply to Critics”, p. 275.

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.”¹⁶ In his view, authors intend to contribute to different fields of enquiry and to address different questions in the several texts they write over a number of years; their intentions are thus too varied to constitute a coherent system.

2.2 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 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 expresses the difference: “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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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

¹⁶ Q. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, p. 40.

¹⁷ Skinner, “Interview with Koikkalainen and Syrämäki”, 49.

¹⁸ Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Q. Skinner, “The Principles and Practice of Opposition: The Case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole”, in N. McKendrick, ed., *Historical Perspectives: Essays in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (London: Europa Publications, 1974), pp. 93–128; and Q. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

from renaissance Italy by way of Puritan Britain to America, and the clash between languages of ancient virtue and modern commerce.¹⁹

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 characteristically 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.²⁰ This suggestion leads directly to his emphasis on situating texts in their context. He argues that the historian must study paradigms precisely because paradigms 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."²¹

Here 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 that they are not asleep and dreaming; for all practical purposes, contextualism secures the factual evidence that then secures interpretations. Thus, Pocock concludes that if historians do not adopt a contextualist method, they simply can not reach an adequate understanding of a text: "it seems a prior necessity [of historical

¹⁹ J. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the 17th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); J. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and J. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²⁰ Pocock, "Languages and their Implications"; and J. Pocock, "State of the Art", in *Virtue, Commerce, and History*.

²¹ Pocock, "Languages and their Implications", p. 25.

understanding] to establish the language or languages in which some passage of political discourse was being conducted.”²²

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, Pocock continues, “the strictly historical task before us plainly is that of determining by investigation on what levels of abstraction thought did take place.”²³ 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.”²⁴ Texts are, he continues, the products of these languages; they inherit the ability of the languages to say contrary things on many levels.

2.3 *Debates and Revisions*

Pocock and Skinner’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 to 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 scholars who adopt less historical approaches simply are not in the business of understanding texts: even if these other scholars make interesting arguments, the arguments can not be historical,

²² Pocock, “State of the Art”, p. 7.

²³ J. Pocock, “The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry”, in P. Laslett and W. Runciman, eds., *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, 2nd Series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 186.

²⁴ Pocock, “State of the Art”, p. 9.

so they may as well forego discussions of past texts – as Skinner polemically pressed the point, “we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves.”²⁵

Most criticisms of contextualism focus on the strong methodological claims of Skinner and Pocock. The critics complain that general prescriptions for historical study are unhelpful – but unfortunately they do not distinguish between philosophical and methodological prescriptions.²⁶ Similarly, critics bemoan the sterile antiquarianism of contextualism; they argue that our legitimate interests in texts go beyond the recovery of historical meanings to include reading them in relation to our problems.²⁷

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 Pocock 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.”²⁸ Even Skinner, the most philosophically engaged of the early contextualists, has written very little since the 1970s on the philosophical analysis of contextualism: he published a restatement of his views in 1988 in reply to his early critics, but the volume *Regarding Method* in his more 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.²⁹

While the early contextualists have done little to rework their theories, a pattern does emerge. First, contextualists are less committed to their

²⁵ Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding”, p. 66.

²⁶ Examples include K. Minogue, “Method in Intellectual History: Quentin Skinner’s Foundations”, in Tully, ed. *Meaning and Context*; and N. Tarcov, “Quentin Skinner’s Method and Machiavelli’s *Prince*”, *Ethics* 92 (1982), 692–710.

²⁷ Examples include M. Leslie, “In Defense of Anachronism”, *Political Studies* 18 (1970), 433–47; and C. Tarlton, “Historicity, Meaning and Revisionism in the Study of Political Thought”, *History and Theory* 12 (1973), 307–28.

²⁸ J. Pocock, “The Concept of a Language and the Métier d’Historien: Some Considerations on Practice”, in A. Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 22

²⁹ Skinner, “Reply to Critics”; and Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, Vol. 1: *Regarding Method*.

modernist methods and the vocabularies with which they originally justified those methods. 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 then textual interpretations. Skinner writes explicitly, “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,” but “I now feel that . . . the process of interpretation is a never-ending one.”³⁰ Second, the contextualists flirt with new theoretical vocabularies. In Skinner’s case, his flirtation with meaning holism appears in his recasting his discussions of sense and reference and illocutionary force in terms of the ascription of systems of belief, and his flirtation with 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?

So, the contemporary standing of contextualism is paradoxical. Historical studies of political theory are flourishing, but they are doing so in the absence of any sustained philosophical exploration of their nature, and long after the elder justifications for them have lost plausibility. Skinner and Pocock appear, quite rightly, to have retreated from the strong methodological claims of their early work, but they have never explicitly repudiated these claims, nor provided anything resembling a clear statement of where their retreat leaves either the philosophy of contextualism or Anglophone historicism more generally.

3. After Modernism

This special issue explores the possibility of rejecting modernist methodological claims, and turning to a post-analytic historicism. Most of the

³⁰ Skinner, “Interview with Koikkalainen and Syrämäki”, 50.

essays focus, even more specifically, on philosophical issues that arise from analyses of the human sciences as studying actions by attributing meanings to actors and showing how these meanings fit into larger patterns of belief and rationality – analyses of the human sciences that would include the anti-naturalist emphasis on interpretation of Charles Taylor and Peter Winch as well as the more naturalist theory of explanation provided by Donald Davidson.³¹ Skinner himself wrote about these analyses in an article, “‘Social Meaning’ and the Explanation of Social Action”, in which he tried to use speech-act theory to provide a critical alternative to both the anti-naturalist account of interpretation and the naturalist commitment to explanation.³² Today, in sharp contrast, a rejection of his strong methodological claims may enable us to rethink contextualism in terms of just such philosophical analyses.

It is important to say, finally, that this special issue thus aims at revolution as much as reform. The move from modernism to post-analytic historicism is dramatic. We cannot pretend that the contextualists have always been using post-analytic vocabularies. Nor can we pretend that these vocabularies are straightforwardly compatible with those they did in fact use. Nor, finally, can we blithely assume these vocabularies are capable of supporting the main claims once made by the contextualists. To the contrary, when we move from a modernist method to a post-analytic historicism, we undermine all 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. 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 interpretation of a text, but ascribing beliefs to its author, then there seems

³¹ See respectively C. Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge, 1964); P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1958); and D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

³² The only time Skinner returned to these philosophers, was in Skinner, “Reply to Critics”. There 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.

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.