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THE ERRORS OF LINGUISTIC CONTEXTUALISM

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ABSTRACT

This article argue against both hard linguistic-contextualists who believe that paradigms give meaning to a text and soft linguistic-contextualists who believe that we can grasp authorial intentions only by locating them in a contemporaneous conventional context. Instead it proposes that meanings come from intentions and that there can be no fixed way of recovering intentions. On these grounds the article concludes first that we can declare some understandings of texts to be unhistorical though not illegitimate, and second that good history depends solely on accurate and reasonable evidence, not on adopting a particular method.

CONTEXTUALISM

Introduction

Many scholars now emphasise the necessity of situating a text within the correct linguistic context if we are to recover the meaning of that text.[1] They argue that considerations in the philosophy of meaning show that we can understand an utterance only if we grasp the paradigm to which that utterance belongs or if we place that utterance within contemporaneous linguistic conventions. Consequently, if historians wish to understand a text, they must study the linguistic context of that text.

The injunction to consider linguistic contexts is not meant as a piece of useful advice but as a command. The study of linguistic contexts is seen as a prerequisite for writing good history in the history of ideas. If, the argument goes, historians stubbornly refuse to consider linguistic contexts then they will be bad historians since meanings depend on linguistic contexts and so historians who neglect linguistic contexts necessarily neglect the meanings of the very texts that they claim to be concerned with. Certainly J. G. A. Pocock has claimed that use of the method advocated by the linguistic contextualists is a necessary condition of sound historical scholarship: he has said that, "it seems a prior necessity [of historical understanding] to establish the language or languages in which some passage of political discourse was being conducted."[2] Likewise, Quentin Skinner has claimed that following the method of the linguistic contextualists may be not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition of historical understanding: he has said that he wants "to analyse the nature of the conditions which are necessary and perhaps sufficient for an understanding of any one of these [classic] texts"; and, more recently, he has suggested that "if we succeed in

identifying this [linguistic] context with sufficient accuracy, we can eventually hope to read off what the speaker or writer in whom we are interested was doing in saying what he or she said."[3] No wonder, then, that representatives of the school of linguistic contextualism argue that historians who just study the text, or historians who just study the text in its economic, political, and social contexts, write bad history precisely because their erroneous methodologies lead them to propagate sins such as the myth of coherence.[4] The historian must adopt a particular method.

Linguistic contextualists, however, are not all of a piece. There are hard linguistic-contextualists who argue that the meaning of a text derives from the paradigm to which that text belongs, and there are soft linguistic-contextualists who claim that to understand a text we must situate that text within the contemporaneous linguistic-conventions. Whereas hard linguistic-contextualists deny that authors are important on the grounds that paradigms determine meanings, soft linguistic-contextualists believe that authorial intentions matter, though authors must express their intentions conventionally. It is true that commentators often ignore the distinction between hard and soft linguistic-contextualists. Yet the linguistic contextualists themselves are well aware of the different emphases of their theories. Here, for instance, is Pocock, a hard linguistic-contextualist, criticising soft linguistic-contextualists for stressing authorial intentions, not forms of discourse:

The objection [to authorial intentions] with which we are

dealing . . . asks not only whether intentions can exist before

being articulated in a text, but whether they can be said to exist

apart from the language in which the text is to be constructed.

The author inhabits a historically given world that is

apprehensible only in the ways rendered available by a number of

historically given languages; the modes of speech available to him

give him the intentions he can have, by giving him the means he

can have of performing them.[5]

Likewise, here is Skinner, a soft linguistic-contextualist, attacking the hard

linguistic-contextualists for highlighting forms of discourse, not authorial

intentions:

If Greenleaf's stress on traditions or Pocock's on languages are

treated as methodologies in themselves, they are prone to generate

at least two difficulties. There is an obvious danger that if we

merely focus on the relations between the vocabulary used by a

given writer and the traditions to which he may appear connected

by his use of this vocabulary, we may become insensitive to

instances of irony, obliquity, and other cases in which the writer

may seem to be saying something other than what he means. The

chief danger, however, is that if we merely concentrate on the

language of a given writer, we may run the risk of assimilating

him to a completely alien intellectual tradition, and thus of

misunderstanding the whole aim of his political works.[6]

In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that the methodological claims of

the linguistic contextualists are unfounded. I will begin by considering hard

linguistic-contextualism and then move on to soft linguistic-contextualism. I

do not wish to suggest that historians can never profit from a study of the

linguistic context of a text; often they can. Rather I want to counter the

claim that historians must study the linguistic context of a text if they are

to recover the meaning of that text. Consequently I shall block certain

defensive manoeuvres open to linguistic contextualists, not by declaring them

unsound but by showing that they can not sustain the strong methodological

claims made by the linguistic contextualists themselves. Because I believe

that paradigms and contemporary conventions are useful sources of evidence for the historian, I certainly do not want to imply that historians should ignore the linguistic contexts of texts; but, at the same time, I maintain that neither paradigms nor contemporary conventions either give meaning to a text or provide a necessary backdrop to understanding a text, and so I claim that historians need not consider the linguistic context of a text in order to understand that text. After criticising both hard and soft linguistic-contextualism, I shall defend a modified version of the traditional emphasis on authorial intentions against those sceptics who insist that we should not concern ourselves with such intentions since we can not hope to recover them. Finally, I shall argue that we can declare some understandings of texts to be unhistorical though not illegitimate, but that good history nonetheless depends solely on accurate and reasonable evidence, not on adopting a particular method.

Against Hard Linguistic-Contextualism

Hard linguistic-contextualists assert that the meanings of texts derive from things variously described as 'forms of discourse' or 'linguistic paradigms' or whatever you will. Some hard linguistic-contextualists, notably Michel Foucault, maintain that the concept of an author is redundant since authors merely follow discursive practices.[7] Other hard linguistic-contextualists, such as Pocock, allow authors to creep back onto the historical stage but only to restrict them to bitparts as the mouthpieces of those script-writing paradigms that are constitutive of their conceptual frameworks. Even if authors remain the actors in our history, the units of the history that we study must be linguistic paradigms. All hard linguistic-contextualists argue, then, that meanings are not the expressions of the intentions of individuals but rather the products of linguistic contexts. On

this view good historians must concentrate on linguistic contexts for the excellent reason that linguistic contexts are what give meaning to texts. Thus, for instance, Pocock tells us that "we are to define political speech as controlled by paradigms," and that because paradigms control what an author can say, the task of the historian is "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."[8] Historians should concentrate on forms of discourse.

   Contrary to first impressions, however, there is a contradiction between the claim that linguistic contexts determine meanings and the claim that historians must study linguistic contexts. The contradiction becomes apparent once we historicise the historian. If we apply the hard linguistic-contextualists' own theory of meaning to historians, then clearly we will find that historians must comprehend texts from within the confines of their own linguistic context. Historians can understand texts only in terms of the linguistic paradigms to which they themselves have access, for the simple reason that there are no meanings outside of such paradigms. The history of ideas therefore is a mere chimera. The meanings that historians find in a text can never be those of the text as a historical entity but only those given to the text by the forms of discourse of the historians themselves. The history of ideas concerns the present, not the past. It is not history. Now, if the history of ideas can not aspire to be anything more than a study of the way we today respond to texts, if it can not aspire to be history, then there is no reason why the historian should feel compelled to adopt a particular method in what can only be regarded as an entirely futile attempt to recover the historical meaning of a text. There is, for example, no reason why a historian should have to respond to a text in terms of the linguistic context of that text. The fact is that the supposed 'death of the author' leads

inexorably to the view that texts do not have determinate meanings and so what matters is either the meaning of the text to the reader or the uses to which the reader can put that text.[9] Further, such a consumer-oriented conception of the history of ideas implies that historians should feel free to approach a historical text in whatever way they choose: if texts do not have determinate meanings, there can be no correct method. There is, therefore, a contradiction between the belief that linguistic contexts give meaning to texts and a belief in the superiority of a particular historical method.

Certainly, if historians could have access to the linguistic paradigm that gave a text its historical meaning, then they could recover the historical meaning of that text; and, if historians could recover the historical meaning of a text, then it might make sense to insist on a particular historical method. Hard linguistic-contextualists, however, can not allow the historian such access to linguistic paradigms from the past. Their theory of meaning and their methodological claims combine to force us to conclude that paradigms are incommensurable, so that historians must remain trapped within their own linguistic paradigms, unable to gain access to those contexts that originally gave meaning to historical texts.

My point is that the incommensurability of paradigms is a logical corollary of the twin beliefs that paradigms determine the meaning of texts and that historians must study the linguistic context of a text. In the first place, to argue that paradigms determine meanings is to argue that there are no more basic meanings than those given by paradigms; which, in turn, is to argue that there are no fixed meanings outside of all paradigms in terms of which we can compare understandings inspired by different paradigms; which, finally, is almost to argue that paradigms are incommensurable. I say almost, because there remains the possibility that hard linguistic-contextualists might argue that paradigms overlap. Paradigms, they might say, share enough

common assumptions and features for debate and comparison between rival

paradigms to be a viable and worthwhile project. If this were so, then the

hard linguistic-contextualists indeed could argue that paradigms determine

meanings and yet that paradigms are not incommensurable. In the second place,

however, the idea of overlapping paradigms can not help the hard linguistic-

contextualists, since it would undermine their methodological claim that

historians must study linguistic contexts if they are to recover the meaning

of texts. Here the belief that paradigms overlap would suggest that

historians could grasp the meaning of a text through their own paradigms

provided only that there were sufficient common ground between their paradigms

and the paradigm to which that text belonged. Yet if historians can

understand a text correctly from their current paradigms, then it can not be

an essential prerequisite for such understanding that historians should study

the linguistic context of a text in order to familiarise themselves with the

paradigm to which that text belongs; and, if understanding does not presuppose

a knowledge of the linguistic context of a text, then we have no reason to

accept the methodological claims of the linguistic contextualists.

Perhaps, then, hard linguistic-contextualists can alter their theory of

meaning so as to be able to maintain their claim that historians should follow

a particular method. They might suggest, for instance, that certain neo-

Kantian categories underlie all linguistic paradigms so that different

paradigms can be compared in terms of these categories.[10] Such a view would

certainly open up the possibility that historians could have access to the

historical meanings of past texts. Yet if hard linguistic-contextualists

modified their theory of meaning then, once again, they would undermine the

very grounds on which they claim that historians must focus on linguistic

contexts. They argue that historians should study linguistic contexts because

these contexts determine meanings. Thus, if, on the contrary, paradigms do

not give meaning to texts, then they have no reason to insist on the study of paradigms. The introduction of neo-Kantian categories, for instance, would suggest that historians should study texts primarily in relation to these categories, not in relation to linguistic contexts.

Hard linguistc-contextualists, therefore, can not avoid the contradiction between their theory of meaning and their methodological claims. Nonetheless, they might try to argue that whilst there is a contradiction in their views, this contradiction is, in some sense, benign. It is to this possible response that we now turn.

My argument against hard linguistic-contextualism draws on the idea that the historian can not possibly escape from the hermeneutic circle if linguistic paradigms really do determine meanings. Here we can see how the hermeneutic circle affects hard linguistic-contextualists by imagining two historians debating the meaning of a particular text.[11] Our first historian understands the text to have a particular meaning on the grounds that the text belongs within a particular paradigm, whereas our second historian believes that the text means something different on the grounds that it belongs within a different paradigm. Hard linguistic-contextualists might try to avoid the emerging difficulty by arguing that texts have many different objective meanings, because the plurality of our political language enables any given text to operate within many different forms of discourse. Pocock, for instance, maintains that paradigms in political speech "must be thought of as existing in many contexts and on many levels simultaneously."[12] Let us suppose, therefore, that for a good reason, accepted by both of our historians, the text under discussion can not mean both things or belong within both paradigms. We can make such a supposition because if hard linguistic-contextualists can never outlaw any understanding of a text, then they can not demand that historians justify their understandings by discussing

texts in terms of linguistic contexts. Now, under these conditions, our two
historians will soon reach an impasse. Neither can justify his or her
particular understanding of the text to the other because their respective
paradigms are incommensurable.

Suppose, for instance, that our first historian tries to support his or
her understanding of the text by reference to three other texts which he or
she understands to have certain meanings on the grounds that they belong
within the paradigm that he or she places the first text within. Our second
historian might counter that, on the contrary, these three texts mean
something quite different since they belong within the paradigm that he or she
places the first text within. Clearly there is a vicious circle here. Both
historians justify their understanding of various texts by reference to a
paradigm, yet they defend the objectivity of their paradigms by reference to
their understandings of the very same texts. Our historians are trapped
within circles composed of their own interpretive assumptions. Further,
because our historians are so trapped, they can not hope to recover historical
meanings: if historians can not recover historical meanings, then there can be
no satisfactory reason for insisting on a particular historical method.

Given that my argument draws on the hermeneutic circle, perhaps hard
linguistic-contextualists can counter my criticism in the same way that
historicists regularly dismiss the hermeneutic circle. The historicist admits
that, in a sense, historians can not prove that all the evidence that they
muster is not a product of their ingenuity. But, the historicist adds,
neither can we prove that life is not a dream. Thus, just as we can
justifiably say that we know that life is not a dream even though we can not
prove that life is not a dream, so, in parallel fashion, historians can
justifiably claim that they know what a text means even though they can not
prove that their evidence is not the product of their imagination. The fact

is that those who would imprison the historian within the hermeneutic circle identify justified knowledge with absolute certainty and in doing so they insist on much too stringent an account of justified knowledge. The possibility of our being wrong does not establish that we are wrong. Besides, if historians go on and on producing relevant evidence for their understanding of a text, then sceptical critics will find themselves doing nothing more than constantly repeating the same old question, namely, 'how do you know you are not imagining this?' And, under these circumstances, everyone will recognise that the critics' position rests not on a serious disagreement but on an irrefutable and so pointless doubt.

Pocock certainly seems to think that the argument of the historicist against the hermeneutic circle enables the hard linguistic-contextualist to demonstrate that historians can have access to past meanings. He writes:

Logically, perhaps, he [the historian] cannot prove that the whole mass of evidence he presents is not the fruit of his ingenuity as an interpreter, but neither can he prove that he is not asleep and dreaming the whole of his apparent existence. The greater the number and diversity of performances he can narrate, the more the hypotheses erected by those who seek to imprison him within the hermeneutic circle must come to resemble a Ptolemaic universe, consisting of more cycles and epicycles than would satisfy the reasonable mind of Alfonso the Wise; in short, the more it will exhibit the disadvantages of nonrefutability.[13]

It is surely the case that the arguments of the historicist are decisive against those sceptics who would imprison the historian within the hermeneutic circle. Nonetheless, these arguments will not do as a defence of hard linguistic-contextualism. In order to demonstrate their inadequacy we must distinguish between two types of doubt. Sceptical doubt involves someone

asking 'why should I accept that' of every piece of evidence that we offer him until eventually we reach a point at which we can offer him no further justification. Logical doubt, in contrast, involves someone complaining that we are defending two incompatible positions. Sceptical doubt is impossible to answer but also ineffective since the doubter merely questions everything that we tell him without giving us any reason to think that what we tell him is false. Logical doubt, however, is effective since the doubter begins from a belief that we accept as true and argues that if we accept this belief then we can not consistently maintain that such and such another belief is also true.

 The historicist's argument works against the hermeneutic circle because those who would imprison the historian within the hermeneutic circle offer only sceptical doubt. The same argument fails to rescue the hard linguistic-contextualists from my criticism because my criticism rests on logical doubt.

 I argue that the hard linguistic-contextualists' own theory of meaning precludes their insistence on a particular historical method. What is more, because my criticism entails logical not sceptical doubt, it is a strength and not a weakness that my doubt is irrefutable. If my criticism rested on a belief of mine, say, that historians construct their own evidence from their own assumptions, then my criticism would be weakened were the relevant belief shown to be unfalsifiable. But my criticism does not rest on a belief of mine. Indeed, my beliefs are irrelevant to my argument. My criticism rests on the belief - which I think false - that linguistic contexts determine meanings, and I do not need to defend this belief because my adversaries hold it to be true. Similarly, my criticism does not rely on an identification of justified knowledge with absolute certainty. My criticism presupposes only that justified knowledge, at the very least, must be internally consistent.

    If hard linguistic-contextualism is internally inconsistent why has it gained so many adherents? I believe that the popularity of hard linguistic-

contextualism rests on a failure to distinguish questions of hermeneutics from questions of semantics.

Gottlob Frege, the father of modern semantics, argued that predicates were analogous to functions.[14] He said that we could rewrite the predicate 'x is wise' as the characteristic function 'f(x)=1 if x is wise and f(x)=0 if x is not wise'. Thus, the proposition 'Socrates is wise' is a wisdom function with Socrates as argument - a function-argument is an object to which the function is applied - and the truth-value of the proposition 'Socrates is wise' is 1 or true if Socrates is wise and 0 or false if Socrates is not wise. In this way, semantics grew out of the analogy between predicates and functions as a discipline concerned with assigning truth-values to functions in an attempt to give an interpretation of a language.[15] With a natural language, for instance, we might assign objects to names and specify satisfaction conditions to indicate when we can predicate a property of an object. An example will make things clearer. The semantic meaning of the sentence 'Franz is a boche' derives both from the object that is named by the word 'Franz' and from the satisfaction conditions that determine when we may truthfully describe an object pejoratively as 'a boche'. Here, if we couch our satisfaction conditions in terms of criteria for the application of predicates, then we might say that the condition for applying the predicate 'boche' is that the named object should be a German national. If, on the other hand, we couch our satisfaction conditions in terms of the consequences of applying predicates, then we might say that the condition for applying the predicate 'boche' is that the named object should be "barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans."[16] Clearly, therefore, when we ask about the semantic meaning of a sentence we are asking about the truth-conditions in terms of which we assign a truth-value to that sentence.

Questions in hermeneutics concern another person's meaning, not the

truth-conditions of propositions. Imagine, for example, that you and I are on

holiday in a Mediterranean resort. We come down the stairs immersed in a

discussion that we hope to continue while sunbathing by the swimming-pool. As

we reach the pool you make a particularly contentious remark and

simultaneously notice that all the sun-beds are occupied by German holiday-

makers. I say 'boche'. Now, if you ponder the hermeneutic question of what I

mean by the exclamation 'boche', you are unlikely to wonder what I consider to

be the truth conditions for the predicate 'boche', but you might well wonder

whether I am dismissing your contentious statement as rubbish or moaning about

the fact that all the sun-beds are taken by Germans. We can see, therefore,

that hermeneutics and semantics concern different senses of a word's meaning.

 In hermeneutics we want to know what thought content a statement expresses,

what a particular individual meant when they said such and such, whereas in

semantics we want to know what state of affairs would have to be the case for

a particular statement to be true, what are the satisfaction conditions of a

given proposition.

     Consider another example. If someone says to me 'I have as many dogs as

cats' and someone else says to me 'the number of dogs I have is exactly the

same as the number of cats I have', then I will assume that they both mean the

same thing. Quite reasonably I will take both statements to mean 'I have as

many dogs as cats', though I might regard the second statement as rather a

long-winded way of expressing that thought. If, however, I consider the

semantic meaning of the two statements then I will reject the simple view that

they mean the same thing. In semantics, the statement 'I have as many dogs as

cats' need not involve a reference to numbers (the reasoning comes from

Frege), whereas the statement 'the number of dogs I have is exactly the same

as the number of cats I have' involves a reference to numbers as objects.

Thus, on a semantic reading the two statements differ because the latter, but

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not the former, entails an ontological commitment to numbers. Now, if we consider the hermeneutics of the two statements, presumably we will dismiss their different ontological implications as irrelevant. After all, it is extremely unlikely that either someone who says 'I have as many dogs as cats' or someone who says 'the number of dogs I have is exactly the same as the number of cats I have' is expressing a thought about the ontological status of numbers. Yet if we consider the semantics of the two statements, we necessarily will concern ourselves, not with what so-and-so meant by them, but with their truth-value and so their ontological import. Clearly, therefore, questions of hermeneutics are different from questions of semantics.

A critic might reply that we can not divorce hermeneutics from semantics since we can not understand what thought a statement expresses if we do not know what state of affairs would be the case if that thought were true. This, however, is not so. Let us return to the statement, 'the number of dogs I have is exactly the same as the number of cats I have'. We can imagine someone saying this and someone else understanding this without either utterer or hearer ever having thought about the ontological status of numbers. Clearly, in such cases, the hearer understands the hermeneutic meaning of a statement for which he can not give a semantic interpretation. Further, it also is possible that we could know what state of affairs would have to be the case for a statement to be true without knowing what thought that statement expresses on any particular occasion. This conclusion follows from the ambiguity of much of our language. In our 'boche' example, for instance, even if you had known what had to be the case for the exclamation 'boche' to be true, say, either that German nationals were present or that somebody was talking rubbish, you still would not have known whether I meant 'German nationals are occupying all the sun-beds' or 'you are talking rubbish'. Clearly, in such cases, the hearer does not understand the hermeneutic meaning

of a statement for which he can give a semantic interpretation. We can conclude, therefore, that hermeneutic questions about how we should understand a statement made by a particular individual at a particular time are different from semantic questions about how we should interpret a statement abstracted from all particular uses.

Unfortunately, hard linguistic-contextualists often neglect the distinction between hermeneutics and semantics and draw conclusions about the study of texts from recent arguments about the nature of truth-conditions. Because semantics concerns the relationship of statements to reality, some philosophers analyze semantic meanings in terms of confirmation theory. They argue that certain experiences confirm certain propositions, so that the semantic meaning of those propositions is given by those experiences, since those experiences are what would have to be the case for those propositions to be true. Semantic holists such as Thomas Kuhn and W. V. O. Quine, in contrast, argue that no experience can ever force us to reject a single proposition since we can always introduce an auxiliary hypothesis to reconcile that experience with our proposition.[17] According to semantic holists, in other words, we can never specify truth-conditions for single sentences since what experiences we would accept as showing such sentences to be true always depends on our broader theoretical outlook. Semantic holists conclude, therefore, that single sentences have no meaning, that semantic meanings depend on a theoretical context. Now, over the last twenty years or so semantic holism has become increasingly popular and a number of hard linguistic-contextualists have tried to defend their views about hermeneutic meanings and historical method by appealing to the powerful and prestigious arguments of the semantic holists. Pocock, for instance, originally grounded his linguistic contextualism on the philosophy of science of Thomas Kuhn: Pocock suggested that "the most valuable single contribution to its [the

methodology of linguistic contextualism's] establishment has been made indirectly by . . . Thomas S. Kuhn . . . [who] has accustomed readers to think of the history of science as essentially a history of discourse and language."[18] Hard linguistic-contextualists, then, typically imply that because semantic meanings depend on a theoretical context, therefore the hermeneutic meaning of a text derives from the paradigm that constitutes the theoretical context of that text. In truth, however, questions of hermeneutics are different from questions of semantics so semantic holism does not support hard linguistic-contextualism.

My point is the following: to accept that if we take a sentence out of all particular use-contexts, then the state of affairs described by that sentence will depend on a theoretical context, is not to imply that we can not know what thoughts an utterance expresses unless we locate that utterance in its linguistic context. As an example consider the statement, 'values determine prices'. The semantic holist will deny that this statement has any meaning since the term 'value' has no fixed reference, since the meaning of 'value' is a moot theoretical issue. There is, however, no reason why historians who find that, say, Jevons said 'values determine prices' should not conclude that Jevons meant 'values determine prices' and leave open the question of what exactly Jevons thought about values. Suppose now that our historians want to extend their understanding by discovering what precisely Jevons believed to be the nature of economic value. One might think that here we have an example tailor-made for the hard linguistic-contextualists. Our historians want to elucidate the meaning of a sentence by unpacking the theoretical assumptions underlying that sentence. The only difference between our historians and the semantic holists is that our historians ponder the meaning of a particular instance of the sentence 'values determine prices' whereas the semantic holists contemplate the meaning of the sentence 'values

determine prices' in itself. Yet this difference turns out to be crucial.

Because our historians want to know what Jevons thought about economic value,

they must look at Jevons's writings, where they will discover that Jevons held

a marginal utility theory of value. For Jevons the statement that values

determine prices could be construed as meaning that "the ratio of exchange of

any two commodities will be the reciprocal of the ratio of the final degrees

of utility of the quantities of commodity available for consumption after the

exchange is completed."[19] The crucial point is that the context that

interests our historian is Jevons's other beliefs, not a linguistic paradigm.

 Historians need to recover Jevons's beliefs and they can do so by studying

Jevons's writings alone. They need not concern themselves with the linguistic

context. Indeed, our historians could spend years searching through the works

of Jevons's near contemporaries, such as J. S. Mill, or of people who

influenced Jevons, such as Bentham, without thereby discovering that Jevons

held a marginal utility theory of value; at most they might form a hypothesis

that Jevons held a marginal utility theory of value, though even this seems

unlikely in our example. The fact is that in order to understand what Jevons

meant by economic value, we have to unravel the theoretical assumptions of

Jevons himself, not of Bentham or Mill. The relevant context is Jevons's

beliefs, not a contemporary paradigm. Paradigms matter only because they

sometimes provide evidence of an author's unstated beliefs.[20] Thus, even if

the semantic holist is right to say that the statement 'values determine

prices' has no meaning in itself, that alone is no reason to insist that a

historian must study the relevant linguistic context in order to discover what

a particular author meant by the statement 'values determine prices'.

Against Soft Linguistic-Contextualism

        Soft linguistic-contextualists, such as Skinner, happily accept that

meanings are transparent, so that we need not study linguistic contexts in order to grasp the meaning of texts. For instance, they say, the meaning of Defoe's tract on 'The Shortest Way with the Dissenters' is clear: Defoe said that we should regard religious dissent as a capital offence; what this means is that we should regard religious dissent as a capital offence. Soft linguistic-contextualists will add however that meaning and understanding are not correlative terms. Thus to have grasped the meaning of Defoe's tract is not necessarily to have understood Defoe's tract. In order to understand a text we must comprehend not only the meaning of the text but also the illocutionary intention of the author in writing that text. In order to understand 'The Shortest Way With the Dissenters', for instance, we must recognise that Defoe was being ironic, that his intention in writing the tract was to parody and so ridicule contemporary arguments against religious toleration. Defoe was not recommending that society hang dissenters: he was mocking religious bigots by making fun of their arguments. Now, according to soft linguistic-contextualists, the communication and understanding of illocutionary intentions requires a background of shared conventions. Soft linguistic-contextualism, in other words, presupposes that communication and understanding can occur only if an author expresses his or her intentions conventionally and if readers grasp the conventions used by the author. It is on the basis of this presupposition that soft linguistic-contextualists conclude that if historians are to understand a text, then they must focus on the prevailing conventions that governed discussion of the issues raised by that text. A simple non-textual example will illustrate their argument. If we hear a climber blow a whistle, then we know that someone has blown a whistle; but before we can understand that someone wants help, we first must grasp the convention whereby blowing a whistle on a mountain constitutes a call for help.

Clearly, soft linguistic-contextualists avoid the contradiction that bedevils hard linguistic-contextualism simply by allowing that the historian can have direct access to the meaning of past texts. Neither past authors nor historians are trapped within paradigms. Rather, historians will find that if they want to communicate, then, like past authors, they will have to express their intentions conventionally.

Once again, I have no quarrel with the opinion that a historian can gain inspiration or find relevant evidence by looking at the linguistic context in which a text was written.[21] Yet soft linguistic-contextualists say more than this. They argue that we can recover an author's intention in writing a text only by situating that text within the contemporaneous linguistic context. Skinner, for instance, claims that recovery of the illocutionary intention of an author requires "a separate form of study, which it will in fact be essential to undertake if the critic's aim is to understand 'the meaning' of the writer's corresponding works."[22] This I do not accept.

Obviously shared conventions, in a weak sense, are necessary for communication since ultimately, with no shared conventions, utterer and hearer would speak different languages. Yet the mere necessity of conventions can not on its own sustain the methodological claims of the linguistic contextualists. In order to show that historians can understand a text only if they study the linguistic context of that text, soft linguistic-contextualists must demonstrate that the historian can come to share the requisite conventions with the author only by studying the relevant linguistic context. Here soft linguistic-contextualists invoke two arguments. In general terms, they maintain that understanding can occur only when the historian approaches a text already having knowledge of the conventions in terms of which the author expressed his intentions. Hence the historian must acquire prior knowledge of these conventions by studying the linguistic

context of the text. As Skinner explains:

> My first suggested rule is: focus not just on the text to be
> interpreted but on the prevailing conventions governing the
> treatment of the issues or themes with which the text is
> concerned. This rule derives from the fact that any writer must
> standardly be engaged in an intended act of communication. It
> follows that whatever intentions a given writer may have, they
> must be conventional intentions . . . It follows in turn that to
> understand what any given writer may have been doing in using some
> particular concept or argument, we need <u>first of all</u> 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.[23]

In more concrete terms, soft linguistic-contextualists claim that the
illocutionary intentions of authors are intentions to contribute to
contemporary arguments. Hence historians can not grasp illocutionary
intentions unless they have studied the texts that constitute the argument
that the author is addressing. As Skinner explains:

> The types of utterance I am considering can never be viewed simply
> as strings of propositions; they must always be viewed at the same
> time as arguments. Now to argue is always to argue for or against
> a certain assumption or point of view or course of action. It
> follows that, if we wish to understand such utterances, we shall
> have to identify the precise nature of the intervention
> constituted by the act of uttering them.[24]

Clearly, therefore, we can undermine the methodological claims of the soft
linguistic-contextualists by showing that both of these arguments are
fallacious.

Soft linguistic-contextualism depends on the suggestion that the historian must approach a text with a prior theory that covers the conventions in terms of which the author expressed his illocutionary intentions in writing that text. Now clearly, when someone expresses an intention unconventionally, the hearer can not have prior knowledge of the conventions in terms of which the utterance is made. Thus, if I can show that we can understand intentions which are not expressed conventionally, then we can dismiss the soft linguistic contextualists' argument that historians have to study linguistic contexts in order to understand the intended meaning of texts. A simple example will show that we indeed can discern intentions even when they are not expressed conventionally.[25] Consider Mrs Malaprop's slip of the tongue such that she said 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' when she intended to say 'a nice arrangement of epithets'. Mrs Malaprop did not express herself conventionally: when we want to say 'a nice arrangement of epithets' we conventionally say 'a nice arrangement of epithets' not 'a nice derangement of epitaphs'; conversely when we say 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' we conventionally mean 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' not 'a nice arrangement of epithets'. Yet surely we must accept that someone could have understood that Mrs Malaprop intended to say 'a nice arrangement of epithets' even though she did not express her intention conventionally.

The existence of malapropisms shows that we should distinguish the prior theories concerning linguistic conventions that a listener brings to individual statements from the passing theories concerning the meaning of particular utterances by which a listener comes to understand individual statements. There is, for instance, a distinction between what our linguistic conventions suggest Mrs Malaprop intended to say - 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' - and what we understand her to have intended to say - 'a nice arrangement of epithets'. Soft linguistic-contextualists, though, ignore this

distinction between prior and passing theories. They insist that for

understanding to occur, historians must have a correct prior theory. They

imply that historians can not approach a text with a faulty prior theory and

nonetheless reach a satisfactory passing theory. Only on these grounds can

they maintain that historians will misunderstand the text unless they have

already studied the relevant linguistic context so as to acquaint themselves

with the specific conventions deployed by the author. Soft linguistic-

contextualists, in other words, have a mechanical view of the process of

understanding such that the prior theory we bring to a text determines the way

we understand that text. In reality, of course, understanding is a creative

process in which we can compensate for any disparity between the meaning of a

text and the prior theory we bring to that text by a leap of understanding

that results in a correct passing theory. Further, once we master the crucial

distinction between prior theories and passing theories, then we can reject

the reason given by soft linguistic-contextualists for their insistence on a

particular method. Here, because people can arrive at satisfactory

understandings despite having faulty prior theories, historians might be able

to comprehend texts even if they do not approach them with knowledge of the

precise conventions in terms of which the authors communicated their

intentions; and, if historians can come to understand a text even when they

have a faulty view of the conventions that apply to that text, then clearly

they need not necessarily study the linguistic contexts of texts.

The fact is that prior theories do not determine passing theories; they

only condition them. Consequently, as malapropisms show, correct prior

theories are neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure understanding on any

particular occasion. Because we understand Mrs Malaprop, and more generally

because we regularly surmise the meaning of unfamiliar phrases, it can not be

necessary for understanding that intentions should be expressed

conventionally, let alone that speaker and listener should have common prior theories. Similarly, because Mrs Malaprop's intention was not the intention that we would have expected her words to convey, and more generally because we regularly understand words or phrases when they are used in unexpected ways, it cannot be sufficient for understanding that speaker and listener should share common prior theories. Now, if shared prior theories are not necessary to ensure understanding, then clearly historians might grasp the intention of an author in writing a text even if they do not consider the linguistic context of that text: a historian might arrive at a correct passing theory despite having a faulty prior theory. Likewise, if shared prior theories are not sufficient to ensure understanding, then a historian who studies the linguistic context of a text still might misunderstand that text: a historian might arrive at a faulty passing theory despite having a correct prior theory.

What, though, of the soft linguistic-contextualists' claim that intentions refer to contemporary arguments, so that to understand an intention the historian must first study the relevant argument? Here too I will argue that an awareness of the linguistic context of a text is neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure understanding of that text.

Annie Besant opened a work on four different religions with a clear statement of intent. She wanted "to help members of each of the four religions to recognise the value and beauty of the three faiths which are not their own, and to demonstrate their underlying unity."[26] Perhaps some of my readers have never heard of Besant and so can have no knowledge of the linguistic context in which she wrote. Nonetheless, they probably will have gathered that Besant wanted to promote religious toleration by suggesting that all religions share a common set of core beliefs. Clearly, therefore, it is not necessary for the understanding of an author's intention in writing a text that historians should know about the linguistic context of that text. I am

not suggesting that Besant communicated unconventionally or that a historian could not illuminate her work by telling us about the works that influenced her or about the state of comparative religion at the time when she wrote. I am pointing out simply that we can understand her intention in writing even though we know nothing of the contemporary context. We can recognise that she hoped to advance the cause of inter-religious dialogue and harmony. The fact is that authors typically want to be understood, so typically they say quite clearly exactly what they are doing in writing a text. Perhaps, like Besant, they intend to say something that can be understood without reference to other texts. Or perhaps they want to subvert a particular convention, but rather than leaving the reader to deduce their intention, they openly say that they hope to subvert such and such a convention. My point is that authors are not always out to contribute to contemporary arguments and, what is more, when they do intend to engage contemporary disputants, they themselves often clearly state what position they are taking in relation to these disputants. In either case a historian would not need to locate the text within a linguistic context in order to secure uptake of the authors intention in writing that text.

Another historical example will show that even if we grasp the linguistic context in which an author expressed his intentions we still might not understand the relevant text. E. M. Forster signed-off a novel with the words "Weybridge, 1924". Now, if historians studied the contemporary conventions that governed the signing-off of novels, then they would discover that writers often signed-off with a romantic flourish such as James Joyce's "Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914-21". Thus, if our historians were soft linguistic-contextualists, they might infer, as does Skinner, that in writing "Weybridge, 1924" Forster intended to deflate a pretentious habit of his fellow novelists.[27] Yet I for one do not think that the evidence is strong

enough to warrant such an understanding of Forster. Further, if my doubts are at all reasonable, and I maintain they are, then it is not sufficient for understanding that a historian should know about the linguistic context of a text. My point is that if historians study the linguistic context of a text and conclude that the author had such and such an intention in writing that text, then they have done no more than form a hypothesis about the author's intention; they still have to show that such and such was indeed the author's intention, and to show this they will have to refer to things other than the linguistic context of the text. If, for instance, someone discovered that Forster wrote his novel in Cambridge and India from 1922 to 1924 - something they could not discover from the linguistic context of the novel - then I would be much more ready to accept that Forster intended to satirize his fellow novelists. A knowledge of the relevant context does not guarantee an understanding of an author's intention.

If the study of linguistic contexts is neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure the recovery of authorial intentions, why has soft linguistic-contextualism acquired such a following? I believe that the popularity of soft linguistic-contextualism rests on a failure to distinguish the prerequisites that must be met for language to be possible at all from the prerequisites that must be met for understanding to occur on a particular occasion.

Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that language depended on social conventions. He maintained that there could not be a private language, that is, that a person could not refer successfully to his or her private sensations using terms whose meanings were known only to him or her.[28] Suppose, Wittgenstein said, I decide to write 'S' in my diary every time I have a particular sensation. Here we will have no adequate criteria by which to decide whether or not I use 'S' correctly; we will be unable, for instance, to distinguish

between the case in which I write 'S' in my diary every time I have that sensation and the case in which I write 'S' in my diary if I have that sensation on a weekday or if I have a completely different sensation on a Saturday or a Sunday. Further, Wittgenstein continued, if we can not distinguish between the case where I stick to the rules and the case where I merely seem to stick to the rules then there are no genuine rules, and if there are no rules limiting the reference of my terms, then the use of my terms is arbitrary and so there is no genuine language. Without social conventions there can be no language.

Soft linguistic-contextualists often argue from Wittgenstein's belief that language presupposes social conventions to the conclusion that communication presupposes that utterer and hearer share a prior theory. In truth, however, to establish that shared conventions are necessary for a language to exist is not to establish that shared prior theories are necessary for communication to take place given the existence of a language. If Wittgenstein is right, then the fact that there is a language implies that there are social conventions concerning that language. Further, the existence of such conventions suggests that both listener and speaker will have prior theories about what the speaker's words mean. None of this, however, establishes that communication can occur only if speaker and listener have the same prior theories. It remains possible that a listener could understand a speaker even if the listener had no prior knowledge of the particular conventions that the speaker adopted or if the speaker failed to express his intentions conventionally. Consequently, my argument against soft linguistic-contextualism does not require that I deny that language presupposes a background of shared conventions.[29]

In order to illustrate further the distinction between the requirements of language in general and the requirements of understanding on a particular

occasion, we need only to look once more at the respective roles of prior theories and passing theories. Language might presuppose shared conventions, but these conventions are part of our prior theories; and, if our prior theories do not quite tally with the conventions used by an author, then the creative nature of understanding means that we can bridge the gap by means of suitable passing theories, thereby coming to grasp the intention of the author. In the case of Mrs Malaprop, for instance, we had a prior theory about what her words meant - they meant 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' - but during the process of understanding, our prior theory was superseded by the passing theory that her intention in speaking was to praise the arrangement of epithets. More generally, we can say that while the existence of prior theories might well rest on shared conventions, passing theories nonetheless outstrip prior theories, so our prior theories need not be accurate: we can understand authorial intentions even when we are unaware of the precise conventions used. Wittgenstein's view of language, therefore, does not support soft linguistic-contextualism since we can accept that language presupposes conventions and still deny that a prior knowledge of the precise conventions used by an author is either necessary or sufficient for understanding on any given occasion.

It is important to reiterate that to criticise the methodological claims of the soft linguistic-contextualists is not to deny that linguistic contexts can provide the historian with useful evidence about the meaning of a text. While historians might grasp the intention of an author without paying any heed to the linguistic context, they also might not. The linguistic context might even provide a crucial piece of evidence that will lead a historian to see the meaning of a particular text. Further, there is a sense in which the fact that the linguistic context might provide a crucial piece of evidence means that prudent historians always will examine the linguistic context of

texts that interest them.[30] Such a role for linguistic contexts is, however,

quite different from that proposed by the linguistic contextualists

themselves. In particular, on my view, linguistic contexts are relevant only

as possible sources of evidence or inspiration as to the meaning of texts, not

as constitutive, directly or indirectly, of the meaning of texts. Linguistic

contexts have no greater claim on the historian than do other possible sources

of evidence, such as other texts by the author, or the biography of the

author, or the social and political context of the text in question.

Historians will consider as much of the evidence as they can, selecting

therefrom whatever they think most relevant. Linguistic contexts have no

privileged status. More broadly, on my view the creative nature of the

process of understanding means that we can not specify in advance what

evidence either historians in general or any particular historian will have to

consider in order to come to understand a text correctly. We can not lay down

methodological requirements for good history.

On the Recoverability of Authorial Intentions

Although I have linked meanings to authorial intentions, I have said

nothing about the nature of intentions themselves: we can regard intentions

either as observable behaviour or as mental states, though I have a slight

preference for the latter. My stress on authorial intentions serves,

therefore, primarily as a reminder of the fact that the location of meanings

is the individual. Utterances are always made or understood by individuals.

Here, just as soft linguistic-contextualism ignores the creative nature of

understanding, so hard linguistic-contextualism ignores the creative nature of

communicating. Social conventions can no more determine how an individual

will make a particular utterance than they can how another individual will

understand that utterance. Authors say what they want to say. They are not

the slaves of paradigms. Yet hard linguistic-contextualists are not alone in

dismissing an emphasis on authorial intentions. Some methodologists argue

that we should not concentrate on the author since we can never know what an

author meant to say precisely because intentions - or at least historical

intentions - are unknowable. It is to these critics that I now turn.

Many people, following Hans-Georg Gadamer, claim that we can not hope to

recover an author's intentions since the historicity of our being means that

we can not escape from our own historical horizons.[31] Such sceptics argue

that historians necessarily read texts in the light of their own

presuppositions, so that the meanings historians find in a text are not those

intended by the author, but rather meanings conditioned by the beliefs,

values, and concerns of the historians themselves. Here, then, we return to

the difficulties posed by the hermeneutic circle. Yet, as I have argued,

these difficulties need not concern us provided only that we reject the theory

of meaning of the hard linguistic-contextualists, and clearly I do reject this

theory of meaning. True, historians approach their material with

presuppositions, but of itself this is no reason to assume that historians can

not make more or less accurate statements about the intentions of historical

authors. On the contrary, the fact that we could understand Mrs Malaprop

demonstrates that although we approach utterances with presuppositions or

prior theories, these presuppositions do not determine the passing theory in

terms of which we come to understand an utterance, for we could go beyond our

presuppositions to grasp Mrs Malaprop's actual intention. The fact that

historians approach texts with given beliefs, values, and concerns does not

mean that they can not recover authorial intentions.

Other methodologists, notably Jacques Derrida, attack authorial

intentions from a stance somewhat akin to methodological behaviourism. They

argue that all intentions, not just historical intentions, are "in principle

inaccessible" since we can never know anything about other people's minds.[32]

One possible response to such sceptics draws on analytical behaviourism. Here the historicist will argue that we can define psychological concepts by reference to actual or possible behaviour, and so that we can have knowledge of intentions for the simple reason that we can observe behaviour. In short, the fact that we can not know other minds is irrelevant because intentions are not mental states. On this view, then, authorial intentions must be observable as behaviour: authorial intentions must be, as Skinner insists, intentions-in-doing rather than intentions-to-do.[33] If, for instance, Defoe had intended to write a series of pamphlets on religious toleration, then he would have intended to do something, he would have had a disposition to behave in such and such a manner, and so we would not be able to observe his intention in his behaviour. Since, however, Defoe intended to ridicule religious intolerance in the pamphlet that he did write, he had an intention in doing something, he behaved in such and such a manner, and so we can observe his intention in the pamphlet itself.

An alternative response to critics such as Derrida is to reject the sceptical empiricism that lies behind their belief that if intentions are mental states, then intentions must be inaccessible. The idea that we can not have knowledge of other people's intentions usually derives from the twin assertions that we only can have knowledge of the immediate content of our own experiences, and that other people's mental states can never provide the immediate content of our own experiences. In addition, the sceptical belief that we can have knowledge only of our private sensations typically leads to the conclusion that we can not move legitimately from statements about what we experience to statements about what really exists. Our critic, in other words, relies on the dubious idea that a veil of appearance separates us from external reality. Yet such sceptical empiricism does not do justice to our

everyday notion of experience. When we say that we have had experience of a particular thing, we normally suggest that that thing really exists and that we have had sensations that we could not have had if that thing did not exist. If, for instance, I say that I have experience of radio waves, then I imply that radio waves exist and that I have listened to the radio, but I do not imply that radio waves have formed the immediate content of some private sensation of mine - I might have heard the sounds the radio waves cause in my ear but I have not heard the radio waves themselves. Thus, historicists who remain content with our everyday understanding of experience can claim, by analogy with radio waves, both that intentions exist and that we can have knowledge of intentions, even though intentions never constitute the immediate content of our private sensations. My point is that if we reject sceptical empiricism for a more relaxed empiricism, and why should we not, particularly in the light of the semantic holists' attack on pure experience, then we can argue that we have indirect knowledge of other people's minds and so of intentions.

There is one other popular argument against authorial intentions that pops up periodically in the fashionable circles of literary theory. Here sceptics, such as Derrida, condemn intentions on the grounds that they are unstable. "Suppose," the sceptic says, "I ask what an author's intention means, and then what the meaning of the author's intention means, and so on."[34] The objection seems to be that intentions can not be constitutive of meanings since intentions themselves have meanings, and, further, that the infinite regress unmasked by this argument suggests that we should give up our futile quest for fixed meanings. Yet this naive objection disappears as soon as we consider what exactly we refer to when we talk about the meaning of an intention. Briefly put, my argument is that intentions are behaviourial or mental facts that do not have meanings in the sense that utterances have

meanings; that is to say, that we can ask someone what a particular

description of an intention means but not what an intention itself means. In

the first place, if we adopt analytical behaviourism, to ask about the meaning

of an agent's intention is to ask about the meaning of an agent's action. Yet

the analytical behaviourist considers it a mistake to ask about the meaning of

an action as though there is something behind the action when we should assume

that there is not. Indeed, the whole point of analytical behaviourism is that

we should talk solely in terms of actions. In the second place, suppose we

identify intentions with mental states so that to ask about the meaning of an

intention is to ask about the meaning of a mental state. Here to describe a

mental state is of course to make an utterance, and obviously it will be

possible to ask what we mean by this utterance. But, asking about the meaning

of an utterance that describes a mental state is not the same as asking about

the meaning of a mental state itself. Thus, for instance, it would be a

mistake to ask what Mrs Malaprop meant by 'a nice arrangement of epithets' for

she made no such utterance: we can ask only what we mean when we say that she

meant 'a nice arrangement of epithets'. Utterances have meanings; mental

states do not.

Methodological Implications

A particular view of language emerges from my arguments against

linguistic contextualism. I accept that language is a social phenomenon to

which individuals have access only by virtue of being members of a linguistic

community. I accept that the words that a speaker uses already have

conventional meanings and that these conventional meanings form the subject of

our prior theories. None of this, however, says anything about the meaning

and understanding of actual utterances. Here, contrary to hard linguistic-

contextualism, I have identified hermeneutic meanings with authorial

intentions; I have implied that individuals are creative agents who use or misuse language for their own ends, that speakers choose words from among those made available to them by the linguistic community in order to express their own intentions. Further, contrary to soft linguistic-contextualism, I have argued that understanding does not presuppose prior knowledge of the relevant linguistic context; I have implied that individuals are creative agents who can formulate passing theories that go beyond the limitations of their prior theories.

To summarise, I have argued that intentions fix hermeneutic meanings, that intentions are recoverable, and that there is no definite procedure that historians must follow in order to recover intentions. Do these arguments and the associated view of language have any implications for the practising historian? Let us begin by considering the significance of my defence of authorial intentions against hard linguistic-contextualism. Here my view of language indicates that hermeneutic meanings have no existence apart from individuals, that utterances have certain hermeneutic meanings only because individuals intend or understand them to have such meanings. My view of language, in other words, supports methodological individualism in the history of ideas. Indeed, my arguments against hard linguistic-contextualism represent an attempt to press a methodological individualism concerned with intentions over and against a methodological holism concerned with paradigms.

A principle of methodological individualism enables the historian of ideas to declare certain understandings to be unhistorical, though not illegitimate. Methodological individualism requires that if we want to say that a particular text has a particular meaning, then, as a matter of principle, we must be able to specify to whom exactly the text had, or has, that meaning. Consequently, an understanding of a text is necessarily unhistorical if the person or people to whom the text had or has that meaning

are not historical figures. There is, of course, nothing wrong with saying that a text has a definite meaning to me or to a number of my contemporaries; it is just that such meanings are purely contemporary and so unhistorical. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with finding interesting ideas in a text and writing about those ideas with reference to that text; it is just that unless we give evidence to suggest that some historical figure or other understood the text to express those ideas we will be considering contemporary, not historical, meanings. More generally, there is no reason why we should not treat texts as something other than historical phenomena, but if we treat texts in unhistorical ways then we should be quite clear that we are not doing history. As historians, we must study meanings that actually were intended or understood in the past.

Nonetheless, methodological individualism does not imply that we can reduce the historical meaning of a text to the intentions of the author of that text. A text can have unintended meanings. Suppose that an author intended a text to mean one thing but a reader understood the text to mean something else. In these circumstances, the historian will say that as a matter of historical fact the text meant what the reader understood it to mean, though, of course, it meant what the reader understood it to mean to the reader and not to the author. The qualification is important. Because unintended meanings must be meanings for specific individuals, we can demonstrate that a text actually did have such and such an unintended meaning only by showing that someone actually understood the text in such and such a way. Further, the evidence we present to demonstrate that a historical figure understood the text to mean such and such surely must be the writings, or possibly the actions, of that historical figure, so generally we must concern ourselves with the intended meanings of the writings of that historical figure. Consequently, the attribution of an unintended meaning to a text

typically will depend on an analysis of the intended meaning of at least one other text.

Let us turn now to the significance of the view of understanding that emerges from my arguments against soft linguistic-contextualism. Here my view of language highlights the creative nature of the process of understanding: when historians develop a passing theory as to the meaning of an utterance, they are not bound to replicate the mistakes contained within their prior theories. Now, the fact of human creativity means that there can be no fixed method for understanding texts. We can not specify any prerequisites for adequate passing theories: we can not say that a historian must have such and such prior knowledge in order to understand a text, since he or she always might come up with a satisfactory passing theory whatever the deficiencies of his or her prior theory. There can be no methodological rules, only rough guidelines and helpful hints. Further, because there is no such thing as a correct method, it must be wrong in principle to claim that unless we adopt a particular method we can neither be good historians nor write good history. The test of good history, therefore, lies solely in the accuracy and reasonableness of the evidence that historians offer to support their understanding of a text.

1. I read an earlier version of the section of this essay that deals with hard linguistic-contextualism to the 1988 Graduate Seminar on "Political Theory as History and Ideology" at Oxford University. I thank those present for their helpful criticism.

2. J. Pocock, "State of the Art", in Virtue, Commerce and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985), p. 7.

3. Q. Skinner, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action" and "A Reply to my Critics", in J. Tully, ed., Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), pp. 99 & 275.

4. For an attack on the myth of coherence see Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", in Tully, ed., Meaning, pp. 29-67.

5. Pocock, "State of the Art", pp. 4-5.

6. Skinner, "Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought", p. 106.

7. See especially M. Foucault, "What is an Author?", in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, trans. D. Bouchard & S. Simon (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1977), pp. 113-138.

8. J. Pocock, "Languages and their Implications: The Transformation of the Study of Political Thought", in Politics, Language and Time (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 17-18 & 25.

9. For a clear statement of this conclusion see S. Fish, Is there a Text in this Class? (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1980).

10. For such an interpretation of Pocock see R. Buel, "Review Essay: Politics, Language and Time", History and Theory 12 (1973), p. 255.

11. For a debate somewhat akin to that described, consider the discussion on the republican and

juridical paradigms and their relevance for understanding Baruch Spinoza and Pieter de la Court that emerges from J. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment (Princeton: Princeton University, 1975); D. Kelly, "Civil Science in the Renaissance: Jurisprudence Italian Style", The Historical Journal 22 (1979), pp. 777-94; E. Haitsma Mulier, The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century (Assen: Van Gorum, 1980); and R. Tuck, Natural Rights Theories (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1980).

12. Pocock, "Languages and their Implications", p. 18.

13. Pocock, "State of the Art", p. 10.

14. G. Frege, "Function and Concept", in Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy, ed. B. McGuiness (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1984), pp. 137-156.

15. Throughout I use the term 'interpretation' to describe the semantic process of assigning truth-values to a language, and the term 'understanding' to describe the hermeneutic process of grasping another person's meaning.

16. See M. Dummett, Frege: Philosophy of Language (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 454-455.

17. See T. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970); and W. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", in From a Logical Point of View (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1961).

18. Pocock, "Languages and their Implications", p. 13.

19. W. Jevons, The Theory of Political Economy, ed. R. Collison Black (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 139.

20. Paradigms also become important when we want to understand not just the text itself but also the significance of the text; after all, the significance of a text depends on its relationship to earlier

and later works. To recognise, for instance, that Jevons marks the transition from classical

economics to neo-classical economics, we have to relate his work to the relevant linguistic contexts.

21. I also think that we can <u>explain</u> why an author held the beliefs he did by referring to an

intellectual tradition, but that is different from the linguistic contextualists' point that we can

<u>understand</u> a text only by placing it in its linguistic context.

22. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts", in Tully, ed., <u>Meaning and</u>

<u>Context</u>, p. 75.

23. <u>Ibid</u>., p. 77; my italics.

24. Skinner, "Reply", p. 274.

25. I am indebted for the example and much of the argument to D. Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of

Epitaphs", in E. Le Pore, ed., <u>Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald</u>

<u>Davidson</u> (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), pp. 433-446.

26. A. Besant, <u>Four Great Religions</u> (London: Theosophical Publishing, n.d.), p. 1.

27. See Skinner, "Reply", p. 285.

28. L. Wittgenstein, <u>Philosophical Investigations</u>, trans. G. Anscombe (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1972).

29. I am defending my position against an argument suggested by M. Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of

Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking", in Le Pore, ed., <u>Truth and Interpretation</u>, pp. 459-

476.

30. The linguistic contextualists therefore have performed a valuable service in so far as they have

attacked the belief of the strong intentionalists that one ought to study texts as self-sufficient

objects, or the belief of the epiphenomenalists that one ought to study texts solely in their

political context. On my view, a historian might, or might not, find important evidence in one or all

of the text itself, other works by the same author, the actions of the author, the social and political context of the text, and the linguistic context of the text. Above all else, however, the creative nature of understanding means that we can not lay down rules of historical method.

31. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, trans. W. Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed & Ward, 1979).

32. J. Derrida, <u>Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles</u>, trans. B. Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), p. 125.

33. For such a response see Skinner, "Reply". The classic statement of analytical behaviourism is G. Ryle, <u>The Concept of Mind</u> (London: Hutchinson, 1949).

34. See T. Eagleton, <u>Literary Theory: An Introduction</u> (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1983), p. 69.