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**QUENTIN SKINNER'S
ATTEMPT TO CLARIFY
COLLINGWOOD**

Abstract: *This paper examines the methodological propositions of Quentin Skinner, whose influence on intellectual history, including the history and philosophy of science (HPS), cannot be disregarded. It is well known that Skinner's method is based on John L. Austin's theory of speech acts. Nonetheless, the very idea of applying ordinary language philosophy to the subject matter of history rests on other assumptions that form Skinner's philosophy of historiography. The paper focuses on reconstructing this philosophy of historiography and especially on R. G. Collingwood as a primary source of inspiration. This famous British philosopher, historian, and archaeologist authored many inspirational texts concerning the historical craft. The complex and sometimes contradictory nature of his posthumously published texts requires careful interpretation, and many philosophers see Collingwood as an obscure thinker. The paper argues that even though Skinner openly denounces Collingwood's central concept of re-enactment, his philosophy of historiography is deeply influenced by a specific understanding of Collingwood's legacy.*


Keywords: *philosophy of history; methodology; intellectual history; Collingwood; Skinner*


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**Pokus Quentina Skinnera
o projasnění Collingwooda**

Abstrakt: *Tento článek se věnuje metodologickým předpokladům badatelské práce Quentina Skinnera, jehož vliv na intelektuální dějiny, včetně historie a filosofie vědy (HPS) nelze přehlížet. Je dobře známo, že je Skinnerova metoda založena na teorii řečových aktů Johna L. Austina. Samotná myšlenka aplikování filosofie přirozeného jazyka na předmět studia historie se nicméně opírá o některé další předpoklady formující Skinnerovu filosofii historiografie. Článek se soustředí na rekonstrukci této filosofie historiografie a zejména na R. G. Collingwooda jako na hlavní Skinnerův zdroj inspirace. Tento slavný britský filosof, historik a archeolog sepsal mnoho inspirativních textů věnovaných problematice výzkumných postupů historika, které však mnoho filosofů vnímá jako obskurní. Složitá a často protikladná povaha Collingwoodových posmrtně vydaných textů vyžaduje jejich opatrnou interpretaci. Článek tvrdí, že ačkoli Skinner otevřeně odmítnul Collingwoodův ústřední pojem re-enactmentu, jeho filosofie historiografie je výrazně ovlivněna specifickým porozuměním Collingwoodovu odkazu.*

Klíčová slova: *filosofie historie; metodologie; intelektuální dějiny; Collingwood; Skinner*

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1. Introduction

Quentin Skinner is one of the most influential theoreticians¹ and practitioners of intellectual history today. Since his early paper was published in 1969,² he has been influencing the fields of intellectual history, history of philosophy, or history and philosophy of science (HPS). His historical works examine especially the history of modern political thought (e.g., Thomas Hobbes) or a Renaissance thinker Niccolò Machiavelli. In his works on methodology, he criticized several historiographic traditions he found misleading: the history of ideas, the Marxist historiography, or the approach of Leo Strauss. He has identified and defined several historical mythologies that interfere with our understanding of the past and he proposed a methodology that should be able to steer away from similar perils. Skinner himself expressed sympathies for the hermeneutics.³ He is indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein, to ordinary language philosophy, and to John L. Austin in particular.

The preceding brief list may sum up the common knowledge about Quentin Skinner. The vast majority of his works either focus on specific historical issues and historical agents or on the theoretical issues of specific historical inquiries. However, one fundamental source of his inspiration remains unmentioned in the previous segment – British philosopher, historian, and archaeologist Robin G. Collingwood. Unlike Skinner, Collingwood is a dedicated philosopher of history whose books preceded the contemporary Anglo-American discussion of historical method and theory. Collingwood died in 1943 and many of his works resurfaced after his death when the discussion ensuing from Carl G. Hempel’s “The Function of General Laws in History” was in full swing. Although the importance of Collingwood is unquestionable today and he influenced the contemporary debates significantly, his intellectual heritage is notoriously difficult to interpret and

¹ His thoughts have inspired many followers among historians and philosophers. He is generally considered to be one of the founders of the Cambridge School of the History of political thought (including John G. A. Pocock, James Tully, John Dunn, etc.). His contributions to the intellectual history and to its theory are significant. Even though he has never provided a systematic overview of his underlying philosophy of history, this paper attempts to reconstruct it on the basis of his various remarks.

² Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.

³ Skinner discusses the contemporary reception of hermeneutics in Quentin Skinner, “Hermeneutics and the Role of History,” *New Literary History* 7, no. 1 (1975): 209–32.

understand. His texts on history are often unfinished and fragmentary.⁴ The way they are pieced together is contested and various interpretations of his ideas are often irreconcilable.⁵ Thus, when we claim that Collingwood has influenced Skinner's work and that Skinner has inherited some issues from Collingwood,⁶ it is necessary to ask:

(1) How does Quentin Skinner understand the philosophical legacy of Collingwood?

Our attempt to answer this question will necessarily lead us to another one:

(2) What is Skinner's philosophical conception of *historical inquiry in general*?

Some attempts to identify Skinner's approach call him a historical contextualist,⁷ conventionalist⁸ or even historical realist.⁹ I will argue that Skinner's approach could be understood in a constructivist framework since it helps avoid several obscure elements. For the purposes of this article, issues concerning "the correct" interpretation of Collingwood are secondary¹⁰ to the understanding of Collingwood by Skinner.

⁴ The most widely read book by Collingwood – *The Idea of History* – was edited by his pupil Thomas M. Knox and is not considered to be representative of Collingwood's original intention. See Robin G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History*, eds. Jan van der Dussen and William H. Dray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xv.

⁵ For an overview, see comprehensive works on Collingwood, e.g., William H. Dray, *History as Re-Enactment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), Jan van der Dussen, *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), or Giuseppina D'Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁶ Kenneth B. McIntyre, "Historicity as Methodology or Hermeneutics: Collingwood's Influence on Skinner and Gadamer," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 2, no. 2 (2008): 166.

⁷ See Christopher Fear, "'Was He Right?' R. G. Collingwood's Rapprochement between Philosophy and History," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 11, no. 2 (2017): 409.

⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of these terms and Skinner's complex relation to them, see David Boucher, *Texts in Context: Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985).

⁹ Traces of historical realism are identified and criticized by McIntyre, "Historicity as Methodology." However, other authors pit Skinner against realism, e.g., Ian Shapiro, "Realism in the Study of the History of Ideas," *History of Political Thought* 11, no. 3 (1982): 535–78, or call him a constructivist directly (see Christian Reus-Smit, "Reading History through Constructivist Eyes," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008): 395–414).

¹⁰ I will attempt to reference contemporary discussions concerning specific issues as much as possible given the limits of this paper.

First, we will briefly summarize Skinner's methodology in general and his inspiration from the philosophy of ordinary language. Second, we will identify the Collingwoodian motives in his approach and thus try to reconstruct Skinner's philosophy of historiography.

2. Speech Acts, Intentions, and Context

Skinner published his pivotal text in 1969 and influenced many historical fields with his criticism aimed at several contemporary approaches to writing intellectual history. He targeted historical and philosophical traditions that were portrayed as guilty of perennialism, triumphalism, or presentism. His proposed approach is often summed up in the form of a maxim:

No agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done.¹¹

Nonetheless, such a summary is often misleading. Skinner would not claim to possess a method to peer into historical agents' minds and ask them for ratification of his interpretation. At the same time, he does not maintain that historians cannot use *any* modern terms or anachronisms in their writing when appropriate. Instead, he aims to identify the intentions of historical agents using the scheme provided by John L. Austin and the philosophy of ordinary language.¹² This means it is impossible to look for some essential, necessary, or timeless subjects in historical texts and sources. If we start our inquiry by asking: "What does Machiavelli have to say about the nature of freedom?" then we are starting off on the wrong foot. Rather, we should ask: "What did Machiavelli intend to say (or to do) by this book?" This change in the way we ask historical questions about agents or historical evidence should influence our method and provide different results. A text (book, sentence) is comprehended as an utterance or a specific instance of a speech act (often seen as an intentional¹³ answer to a specific question).

¹¹ Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 28.

¹² A comprehensive critical overview targeting Skinner's utilization of speech acts theory is, e.g., Shapiro, "Realism in the Study of the History of Ideas." Skinner addressed several critics in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹³ This is in stark contrast to competing lines of thought, e.g., Roland Barthes.

In order to recognize the illocutionary force of an utterance, we must identify the utterance itself and its context. Hence, Skinner's approach and the approach of his colleagues are often called "contextualist." We indeed need to identify the corresponding context to understand an utterance or any other action in terms of the agent's intentions. However, Skinner himself acknowledges¹⁴ that there is no definitive historical context that we can directly and confidently assign to a specific utterance. Skinner further specifies this underdetermination of context and he admits that we choose: "whatever context enables us to appreciate the nature of the intervention constituted by their utterances."¹⁵ He adds that the recovery of any context (one out of many possible) consists of various intellectual activities, i.e., historical research.

To say that we simply choose the context that allows for the most valuable (whatever the criteria are) interpretation of a given text seems like a glaring invitation of relativism. Alas, I do believe that here lies a dazzling ambiguity in Skinner's approach and the solution to this problem necessitates circular recourse to intentions. By understanding individual utterance as a speech act, we aim to identify its context (i.e., audience, situation, debate, intellectual environment, conventional framework) that the author himself consciously (intentionally) targeted. Therefore, the intentions of historical agents are the final determinant of the appropriate context we need to utilize to understand the same intentions. This is circular logic at its finest and even Skinner acknowledges this in a recent interview:

I would say that the context is whatever you need to reconstruct in order to understand some meaningful item in that context. This is circular, of course, but I am speaking of a hermeneutic circle.¹⁶

Furthermore, this problem may not be as fatal as it seems since it corresponds to historical practice, as we can often see in the field of intellectual history. Historians of different schools often take canonical texts of certain figures, and they interpret them in different contexts while stating the rea-

¹⁴ Skinner does it for the first time in his original article from ("Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 49) and he rephrases it significantly in a reprint (Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 87). There, the context is specified as a linguistic context.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁶ Hansong Li, "Ideas in Context: Conversation with Quentin Skinner," *Chicago Journal of History* 2, no. 7 (2016): 122.

sons and logic that guided their choice. Various attempts may yield different results, which could be compared and evaluated based on their fruitfulness.¹⁷

However, does it mean that historians must obtain the true knowledge of the intentions of the historical agents to produce a historical account that would satisfy Skinner's demands? Some texts contain a detailed examination of both Skinner's methodological and historical works, charging him with the downfalls of historical realism.¹⁸ Goodhart rightfully notices that Skinner often writes as if he determined the historical agent's real intentions with absolute certainty,¹⁹ although he denies such a possibility at other places. According to McIntyre, Skinner's method exhibits features of historical realism, which are taken over from Collingwood, who exhibits "a residual historical realism."²⁰ However, together with Boucher, we should at least allow that Skinner is "no crude historical realist."²¹

It should also be noted that Skinner maintains that the intentions of particular historical agents are not the ultimate goal for every historical discipline at all times. Skinner is fully aware that the methods he proposes are part of a specific framework of historical inquiries and that many legitimate approaches follow different principles and complement his methodology. One contemporary approach that competes with Skinner is Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*. Fortunately, there is a plethora of texts dealing with both methodologies and both scholars have exchanged their ideas over the years.²² Skinner himself appreciates *Begriffsgeschichte* and considers it as a viable coexisting approach that is fully legitimate, despite going in a different direction:

¹⁷ Martial Guérout has actually defended a similar thesis as well, based on his rich experience with the historiography of philosophy. See Martial Guérout, "La méthode en histoire de la philosophie," *Philosophiques* 1, no. 1 (1974): 8.

¹⁸ Historical realism usually refers to the various theories which maintain that the veracity of historical statement would be derived from the correspondence to the past reality. Naïve historical realism is often used as a strawman against specific philosophical positions. More complex philosophical versions of historical realism usually avoid subscribing to the classical correspondence theory, e.g., Murray G. Murphey and his constructivist realism in *Truth and History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), 12.

¹⁹ Michael Goodhart, "Theory in Practice: Quentin Skinner's Hobbes, Reconsidered," *The Review of Politics* 62, no. 3 (2000): 554.

²⁰ McIntyre, "Historicity as Methodology or Hermeneutics," 166.

²¹ Boucher, *Texts in Context*, 215.

²² For a comprehensive overview of this extensive debate, see Davide Perdomi, "Melvin Richter's Contribution to the Reception of *Begriffsgeschichte* and to Its 'Contextualization,'" *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 10, no. 1 (2016): 76–97.

Koselleck is interested in nothing less than the entire process of conceptual change; I am chiefly interested in one of the techniques by which it takes place. But the two programmes do not strike me as incompatible, and I hope that both of them will continue to flourish as they deserve.²³

Koselleck himself understands the difference between both historical methodologies as a difference between the synchronic and the diachronic approach to the historical record.²⁴ He also states that any fruitful diachronic account must be preceded by a careful synchronic examination of historical evidence and Skinner's intellectual history provides such treatment. According to Koselleck, both "modes are inseparable."²⁵

The idea of deducing authorial intentions from historical texts (sources, pieces of evidence) is also criticized by the narrativist philosophers of history. Most notably, Frank Ankersmit sees this as an inherited issue that can be traced back to Hempel and he argues that history and historical writing does not concern only intentional actions but also unintended consequences.²⁶ However, it must be pointed out that even Ankersmit allows for distinguishing between the intentional and the unintentional; therefore, there must be some historical method enabling us to draw this distinction.²⁷ We must be able to know what a historical agent intended in order to label some consequences as unintended. The narrativist philosophy is not usually preoccupied with the general methodology of history and the same holds for Skinner. Nonetheless, each approach to intellectual history presupposes a more general philosophy of historiography that could be identified and analyzed.

²³ Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 187.

²⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, "Social History and Begriffsgeschichte," in *History of Concepts: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Iain Hampsher-Monk, Karin Tilmans, and Frank van Vree (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 31–32.

²⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, "A Response to Comments on the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe," in *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts*, eds. Melvin Richter and Hahrtmut Lehmann (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1996), 63.

²⁶ Frank R. Ankersmit, "The Dilemma of Contemporary Anglo-Saxon Philosophy of History," *History and Theory* 25, no. 4 (1986): 13. Another revealing text concerning Ankersmit's treatment of intentions is his correspondence with Mark Bevir (Mark Bevir and Frank Ankersmit, "Exchanging Ideas," *Rethinking History* 4, no. 3 (2000): 351–72).

²⁷ It might be trivial to state that the failure of Operation Barbarossa, which has greatly contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany, was an unintended consequence. However, such a statement implies that we do know the original intention of the Nazi leadership (e.g., a defeat of USSR) and that we view the offensive as a purposive act. A narrative of unintended consequences can be established after we learn of the original intention.

3. Skinner's Philosophy of History

It is commonly accepted that Skinner's idea of history is inspired by Collingwood and by his claim that "all history is the history of thought." Nonetheless, I wish to argue that the inspiration runs deeper and hinges on a quite specific interpretation of Collingwood's legacy. Skinner writes mostly about intellectual history and the history of political thought, but his conception of history is more robust than that. Our pursuit of reconstructing such a conception will lead us to one particular Skinner's text that is often overlooked by his critics and admirers. This text was initially published as "Sir Geoffrey Elton and the practice of history" in 1997 and reprinted in *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method* in 2002 as "The practice of history and the cult of the fact." This text exhibits features contrary to the idea of historical realism and strongly reminiscent of Collingwood's thinking about history. At the same time, it is notable that Collingwood is not referenced at all in this paper, even though his influence permeates the entire text. If we apply Skinner's method to his own book and if we try to recover his intentions in placing the study as the first chapter of this publication, we may suspect that Skinner is trying to do something with it. This paper serves as a foundation for his historical methodology, and it is the most direct expression of his philosophy of history.

The study in question is a direct criticism of Sir Geoffrey Elton's approach to the task of history,²⁸ composed as a rumination of a historian-disciple who attempts to start historical research following Elton's influential works like *The Practice of History* and *Return to Essentials*. Skinner clearly dislikes the idea of history as straightforward craftsmanship that must be learned by the students of history.²⁹ Above all, the first lesson young historians are supposed to learn is questioned by Skinner – that history concerns events and explanations. Skinner counters this idea of history by highlighting the works of art history or history of philosophy, which are allegedly preoccupied with interpretation and "placing texts and other such objects within the fields

²⁸ As Skinner mentions in the first line: "British historians are notoriously suspicious of philosophical reflections about the nature of their craft." Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 8. The text was originally delivered as a speech when Skinner assumed Elton's chair of Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. I am very grateful to anonymous reviewer for bringing this piece of context to my attention.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

of meaning from which their own individual meanings can arguably be inferred.³⁰

From this very first caveat against Elton's claim, we might be reminded of two significant aspects of Collingwood's intellectual legacy:

- a) Any general philosophical theory of history should encompass all historical disciplines.
- b) History concerns actions (including instances of being acted upon), not events.

Ad a) Various philosophers of history tried to introduce further distinctions between historical disciplines according to their methods, subjects, or form. A perfect example of this approach is Maurice Mandelbaum's distinction between general history (history focused on a continuous entity in time, e.g., a civilization) and special histories (historical disciplines concerning subjects like the history of French literature, the history of English philosophy, etc.), i.e., the subjects that are constructed by contemporary historians.³¹ Collingwood, on the contrary, is inclusive in his approach. All history is the history of thought and he aimed to prove it by listing various historical disciplines that share this feature: political history, history of warfare, history of economy, and history of morals.³² A very similar passage can also be found in *An Autobiography*,³³ which is often referenced by Skinner. One of the most glaring (and exaggerated) statements of this principle is:

The study of Plato was, in my eyes, of the same kind as the study of Thucydides. The study of Greek philosophy and the study of Greek warfare are both historical studies.³⁴

It seems that Skinner agrees with this inclusive account of history given that Elton's conception of history fails to account for diverse historical disciplines is seen as its defect, which should dazzle young historian-apprentice reading Elton's book. While Collingwood's insistence on the thoughts of the historical agents could be interpreted as a certain kind of historical es-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹ See Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

³² Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. Jan van den Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 308–10.

³³ Robin G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 110.

³⁴ Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 72.

sentialism (i.e., there is a certain property that all historical texts must have), Skinner is more lenient and accepts causal explanations in other cases. On another occasion, Skinner explicitly states that various historical disciplines sport different methodologies, but he chiefly focuses on those interested in motives and intentions in the same way Collingwood was.³⁵

Ad b) This aspect encompasses Collingwood's famous claim that "all history is the history of thought." Collingwood held that objects of historical (or archaeological) inquiry (i.e., historical evidence, including texts as well as non-textual artefacts) must be understood in terms of purposes.³⁶ Just listing events (or copy-pasting historical records) is not a true aspiration of a historian and events must be understood as purposeful actions of historical agents. Collingwood considers this to be *the second principle of history* he discovered during his archaeological practice.³⁷ This also echoes the famous "logic of question and answer." During the historical inquiry, we should understand various actions of historical agents as attempts to answer specific questions or meet specific challenges. Historians must identify the question to understand the action historically. Collingwood makes it clear that the questions and answers should be understood in a very broad sense. A certain military maneuver is an answer to a specific situation on the battlefield. A philosophical conception is an answer to a particular state of philosophical discourse.

On the one hand, Skinner shares Collingwood's belief that the goal of historical inquiry is to understand the purposeful actions of historical agents in terms of their intention. However, on the other hand, he is reluctant to subscribe to the notorious re-enactment, which he understands as Collingwood's method of history.³⁸ This view led Skinner to substitute Collingwoodian re-enactment for the speech act theory, which narrows the field of intentions sought by Skinner. Unlike Collingwood, Skinner was more interested in the intentions pertaining to verbal communication and less in the intentions that could be extracted from material artefacts (like remnants of the Roman fortification or the Celtic art that Collingwood found fascinating).

³⁵ Quentin Skinner, "The Place of History in Public Life," in *History & Policy*, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-place-of-history-in-public-life>.

³⁶ Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 128.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁸ Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 120. For a more detailed look, see below.

It should be noted that Collingwood's logic of question and answer later permuted into *the first principle of history*, following his experience as an archaeologist. According to Collingwood, an archaeologist or a historian:

must first of all decide what he wants to find out, and then decide what kind of digging will show it to him. This was the central principle of my "logic of question and answer" as applied to archaeology.³⁹

Even this first Collingwoodian principle is reflected in Skinner's text. Elton's insistence on the historian's task to recover "true facts"⁴⁰ about the past led Skinner's imaginary historian, who is writing a study of Chatsworth house,⁴¹ to a dead end. Should the disciple just report measurable and tangible properties of the building in a straightforward manner and thus exhaust all his potential as a historian? Skinner rushes to the rescue and allows the historian to do more:

I would expect the apprentice to have some views about why it might be of some value – here and now, to himself and others – to know more about Chatsworth and its history. Just as the value of factual information depends on what the historian wants to understand, I would argue, so the attempt to uncover new facts needs to be guided by a sense of what appears to be worth understanding.⁴²

It is clear that, according to Skinner, historians should approach evidence (text, artefact,⁴³ present empirical data) with a particular question in mind. They must have a current interest in the historical inquiry they are conducting. This allows us to formulate the third aspect of Collingwood's thinking about history that has clearly manifested in Skinner's writings:

³⁹ Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 122.

⁴⁰ Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 12, 14.

⁴¹ The choice of the example is peculiar because it is a subject far removed from intellectual history. Apparently, Skinner aims to show that his conception of historical inquiry holds even for more mundane cases. Even Collingwood defends his choice of examples from archaeology by stating that they are more illustrative of his point than more complex written sources. Nevertheless, his conception supposedly applies to both history and archaeology (Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 133). Collingwood did not discuss differences between history and archaeology, since he considers both of them as historical sciences; thus, following the same principles – artefacts are seen as a product of purposeful human thought.

⁴² Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 20.

⁴³ In an interview, Skinner explicitly states that by "texts" he means a broader range of historical evidence, e.g., "films, paintings, buildings, and other such artifacts" (Li, "Ideas in Context," 119).

- c) The practice of history is conditioned by the present interest in the present empirical data (be it texts or artefacts) that require historical understanding.

Neither Collingwood nor Skinner approaches the historical enterprise as pure antiquarianism. They are not interested in the history for the past itself and they are not “a kind of cultural necrophile, that is, one who finds in the dead and dying a value he can never find in the living.”⁴⁴ The task of history is not to describe “the true reality of the past,”⁴⁵ and historians are not mere servants of their evidence.⁴⁶ The past that a historian is interested in is not the dead past, but the past which is “still living in the present”⁴⁷ and, as Collingwood states:

All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparatively recent past, but in the strict sense: the consciousness of one’s own activity as one actually performs it.⁴⁸

Both Skinner and Collingwood fully realize that it is the task of present-day historians to identify some objects as historical evidence and make them the centerpiece of some theory or narrative the historians pursue.

Collingwood’s *third principle of history* is the claim that no historical problem should be studied without studying “its second-order history,”⁴⁹ i.e., a surrounding historical discourse. Therefore, Collingwood understood the practice of history as a professional discourse and he held that the bulk of preceding historical work could not be overlooked by historians. This is made especially clear when Collingwood discusses the battle of Trafalgar – in order to examine the tactics employed by the generals properly, historians must be aware of the ships and equipment used.⁵⁰ Such knowledge comes from many different types of historical research, distinct from the study of military orders and reports of the event itself and could be understood as a broader historical context.

⁴⁴ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 41.

⁴⁵ Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁷ Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 97.

⁴⁸ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 202.

⁴⁹ Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 132.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

A significant part of *The Idea of History* is dedicated to the examination of the history of historiographical discourse. Though Skinner aims to recognize the intentions of the historical agents, he does not deviate from the proposition that each historical research is part of a larger continuous discourse. He often references (both critically and respectfully) other historical theories and narratives, and he does not refrain from using modern terms and constructs like the Renaissance, which is, in essence, an anachronism. Historians should not abandon their contemporary concepts. Quite the opposite: in the preface of *Renaissance Virtues*, he directly defends the custom of using such otherwise controversial colligatory concepts as the Renaissance.⁵¹ This constitutes another meeting point of both thinkers:

- d) The discipline of history is a discursive, continuous, and argumentative practice of professionals that is open to revisions.

This position has multiple consequences for history. Historical narratives and theories (even those apparently referencing the intentions of the historical agents) are always open to revisions, provided that those revisions are backed by the proper historical inquiry and evidence. Therefore, there are no perennial questions, only contemporary constructs conforming to the standards of the historical inquiry. Collingwood made this point quite clear in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* when he was defending Hegel against charges of omitting important aspects of the world history:

Hegel was talking not about the past as known to us but about the past as known to him; and that because the past is altogether ideal, Hegel had a perfect right to treat his knowledge of the past as exhausting what there was to know.⁵²

This may be one of the most glaring statements by Collingwood that even the most venerated historians and philosophers are constrained by evidence and the current state of the historical enterprise and that the past they are referencing is just a transient ideal construct.

Skinner's text contains many remarks that could be possibly identified as inspired by Collingwood and, more precisely, by reading *An Autobiography*. As mentioned before, the paper does not contain any reference to Collingwood. Let us look at other famous studies reprinted in *Visions of*

⁵¹ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume II: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–4.

⁵² Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 418.

Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method. We will encounter multiple direct references to Collingwood and especially to *An Autobiography*, which lends further credence to the conclusion that this was the primary text through which Collingwood influenced Skinner (although Collingwood's *The Idea of History* and *An Essay on Metaphysics* are sporadically referenced as well). The most praised aspect of Collingwood's intellectual legacy is his logic of question and answer⁵³ as well as his opposition to the perennial problems in history.⁵⁴ Skinner takes a significantly more negative stance against the notoriously confusing concept of *the re-enactment*:

Nothing I am saying presupposes the discredited hermeneutic ambition of stepping empathetically into other people's shoes and attempting (in R. G. Collingwood's unfortunate phrase) to think their thoughts after them.⁵⁵

At the same time, this passage implies that Skinner understands "re-enactment" as a method that historians are supposed to use. This is admittedly a very one-sided and controversial interpretation of the re-enactment. It is certainly possible that Skinner's treatment of this doctrine would change if he understood it "from within the context of a transcendental analysis of the universal and necessary characteristics of the science of history."⁵⁶ According to this currently prevailing view, the re-enactment is not the method proposed by Collingwood. However, it is a metaphysical presupposition that makes understanding texts and artefacts as the outcomes of a purposeful thought possible and is a necessary condition for any historical knowledge and understanding, regardless of a specific method. It can be argued that Skinner's work proves that he believes in the possibility of historical knowledge, and thus he accepts (perhaps without being aware) this notion of the re-enactment in some form. Nonetheless, it seems that Skinner understands this doctrine as a methodological proposition and as an implication of his-

⁵³ Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 85, 88, 115. See also Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki, "Quentin Skinner on Encountering the Past," *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6, no. 1 (2002): 34–63, 45–46 for another explicit praise of Collingwood's contribution by Skinner.

⁵⁴ Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 88.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 120. The similar point is made even more clearly in: Quentin Skinner, "The Rise of, Challenge to and Prospects for a Collingwoodian Approach to the History of Political Thought," in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, eds. Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 185–86. This explicit denial of "rethinking thoughts of historical agents after them" may also echo criticism of Derrida and Gadamer, as stated in Boucher, *Texts in Context*, 32.

⁵⁶ For the overview of the debate, see Dussen, *History as a Science*, 292.

torical realism (i.e., re-enacting the real thoughts of historical agents in the mind of a historian), which he wishes to escape by recourse to the speech act theory⁵⁷ that allows only for recovering “range of the illocutionary acts that the writer may have been performing in writing in a particular way.”⁵⁸ Skinner’s method is thus less ambitious than Collingwood’s vision of history and it is focused on the instances of communication. Therefore, Skinner’s denial of the re-enactment doctrine (seen as a methodological prescription) clearly represents the most significant divergence of both philosophers.

4. Conclusion

Quentin Skinner often expresses his debt to Collingwood throughout his texts and staunchly defends some aspects of his philosophy of history (especially the importance of intentionality).⁵⁹ However, on many other occasions, he declined the notion of re-enactment as a method for recovering those intentions: “Of course we cannot hope to re-enter the minds of historical agents.”⁶⁰ As such, authorial intentions have to be thought of as constructs that best explains the available empirical data (most notably texts, but Skinner agrees that it concerns even other types of evidence⁶¹).

Austin’s theory of speech acts is meant to circumvent the problem of empathetic re-enactment and to recover the intentions. However, Skinner is fully aware that the choice of relevant context is non-trivial and theory-laden and that any context a historian can use is a construction on its own.⁶²

The presented interpretation of Skinner’s philosophy of historiography highlights his debt to Collingwood and his divergence from other theories of historiography. In the end, however, Skinner denounced the idea of re-enacting the real thoughts of historical agents as too obscure to follow. Given this, it seems plausible to read Skinner’s method along the line of historical constructivism, whereby the intentions of historical agents function as hypothetical entities that can help us explain historical texts and other evi-

⁵⁷ Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 120.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁹ Skinner, “Rise, Challenge and Prospects,” 181; Koikkalainen and Syrjämäki, “Quentin Skinner on Encountering the Past,” 35; Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I*, 88. The trace of Collingwood’s influence can be also found in texts that do not reference him directly (most notably “The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact”).

⁶⁰ Skinner, “Rise, Challenge and Prospects,” 185.

⁶¹ Li, “Ideas in Context,” 119

⁶² *Ibid.*, 122.

dence. Interestingly, this divergence may have been caused by Skinner's particular understanding of Collingwood's re-enactment as a methodological thesis, which is a widely contested claim mostly denounced by Collingwood scholars.⁶³ It is perhaps possible that in insisting on removing perceived obscurantism from Collingwood's text, Skinner himself fell into the trap of misunderstanding the intentions of his predecessor.

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⁶³ Dussen, *History as a Science*, 294.

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