

***Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics.* Edited by James Tully. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988. Pp. xii, 353. \$49.50 U.S. Paper, \$19.50.**

The general reader might think that the history of ideas and political philosophy ought to bear a close family resemblance. Quentin Skinner's gradual working out of his method for studying the history of ideas, over the course of two decades, has influenced political philosophy without making their family resemblance much clearer than before he began. His now famous essay, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," chipped several of the most treasured teacups in which successive generations of political philosophers had served up the brew that passed for the only beverage to quench a thirst. What began as a clever young academic's flouting of traditional wisdom has since become a way of life, with the result that the history of ideas is now more discussed than done. Methodologically sophisticated historians and philosophers are kept so busy tracking the current literature that there remains precious little time (it seems) to make the time-consuming survey of particular linguistic conventions that Professor Skinner recommends.

This collection of thirteen previously published articles has been brought together into one volume by James Tully, a self-proclaimed admirer of Skinner. He provides a succinct if rather brief overview of the volume's content that may not succeed in piquing the interest of anyone who is not already familiar with Skinneriana. The selection of articles wisely surveys the spectrum of debate rather than focusing on a few themes. Tully's article, "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword," provides a fine introduction to Skinner's method for anyone unfamiliar with that point of departure, even though it does not bear directly on all the criticisms that Skinner's detractors raise.

Skinner's method is fleshed out in four other essays. These articles provide the detailed background that helps the reader to assess the objections of his critics who include Martin Hollis, Keith Graham, Joseph Femia, Kenneth Minogue, Nathan Tarcov, John Keane, and Charles Taylor. Minogue's defense of traditional political philosophy, with its emphasis on the internal coherence of the text (as opposed to the Skinnerian interest in linguistic context) provides an opportunity for a fresh discussion of the relationship between political philosophy and the history of ideas. Femia maintains that Skinner's form of historical explanation obfuscates the lessons that the past has for us, while Taylor questions whether the relation between inquirer and the object of study is actually disinterested.

Skinner's reply to his critics reaffirms and clarifies his position on several important points. It is especially gratifying to see Skinner acknowledging in print his intellectual indebtedness to historians such as J.G.A. Pocock. This final essay will no doubt generate fresh grist for the

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