

Ideologies and Symbols
*A Voegelinian Critique of Quentin Skinner's Approach to the
History of Political Thought*

by

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Quentin Skinner has acquired his share of both critics and disciples. His well-published historical methodology has been thoroughly scrutinized by scholars from an impressive number of perspectives and backgrounds. Yet no one has confronted his method from the vantage point of one of the twentieth-century's most neglected and erudite philosophers of intellectual history, Eric Voegelin. In this paper I compare and contrast Voegelin's philosophy of history and the history of political thought with Skinner's history of ideologies. This contrast between the two figures will provide a more comprehensive picture of what Skinner's method neglects, what it obscures, and particularly the way in which it overlooks the position of the human *person* in history.

More precisely, the analysis inquires as to the status of the person in Quentin Skinner and Eric Voegelin's accounts of the history of political thought. While Skinner may arguably treat thinkers more fairly than Voegelin at times, his account is incomplete and subordinates existence to a problematic preoccupation with ideologies. Voegelin, on the other hand, is deeply suspicious of ideology and did much more to shift the focus to existence, and thereby to persons.

Quentin Skinner and the History of Ideologies

The history of ideas, Quentin Skinner observed, has been dominated by two methodological “orthodoxies.”¹ On the one hand are those who give primacy to historical, religious, political and economic context as a way to understand a given text or concept. On the other hand are those considering the text as “autonomous,” in Skinner's words. This latter method subordinates context to the text itself as its own best interpreter. These two approaches,

¹ Skinner's critique of the historical methodologies he is responding to can be found in his seminal article, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas.” *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1969), pp. 3-53.

in Skinner's estimation, misrepresent the texts and the authors' intentions by focusing primarily on abstract ideas divorced from political life and practice as it was at the time of the text's composition and publication. Instead, Skinner emphasizes ideological contexts or "the more general social and intellectual matrix out of which [classic texts] arose."² He argues that this approach is more "genuinely historical" because it appreciates the determinative character of the "normative vocabulary" which an author draws on and does not impose contemporary prejudices on past utterances. Instead, the historical author or agent is constrained both by his or her particular circumstances as well as the words and concepts constitutive of the given ideological context. As Skinner explains:

Thus the problem facing the agent who wishes to legitimate what he is doing at the same time as gaining what he wants cannot simply be the instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects. It must in part be the problem of tailoring his projects in order to fit the available normative language.³

This focus on the constraints of vocabulary narrows the possibilities for an accurate historical interpretation of a given text, and zeroes in on what a given author was "*doing*," politically and socially, in writing. "We can begin to see," Skinner claims, "not merely what argument they were presenting, but also what questions they were addressing and trying to answer, and how far they were accepting and endorsing, or questioning and repudiating, or perhaps even polemically ignoring the prevailing assumptions and conventions of political debate."⁴

Accessing this wider ideological context, however, requires an inquiry beyond major texts and thinkers, and entails reading many lesser known figures and influences of a given period. Skinner's method also demands a considerable amount of discipline on the part of the

² Skinner. *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) p.x.

³ Skinner. *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) p.xii-xiii.

⁴ Skinner. *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) p.xiii.

historian, who must constantly be on guard against one's own linguistic prejudices and historical parochialism. He is particularly adamant about resisting the tendency to look for ways in which past thinkers address "perennial problems," or contribute to current tendencies. For Skinner, such perennial problems do not exist, and intellectual lineages laying blame and credit in various places – the association of Jean-Jacques Rousseau with the French Revolution, for example – are "mythological" claims at best. The thinkers and writers of the past did not intend to answer our questions or to solve our problems, and to use them in this instrumental manner is unhistorical. As Skinner writes,

[A]ny attempt to justify the study of [the history of ideas] in terms of the 'perennial problems' and 'universal truths' to be learned from the classic texts must amount to the purchase of justification at the expense of making the subject itself foolishly and needlessly naive. Any statement, as I have sought to show, is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend.⁵

By constantly trying to use or adopt historical thinkers and texts to our circumstances we risk becoming "grave robbers," in a sense.⁶ Put another way, the dead should not rule the living nor vice versa. "We must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves,"⁷ Skinner asserts. The value of past thinkers then is not in what they share with contemporary circumstances. Their value is in their peculiarity, diversity and on their own terms.

If an appeal to perennial issues and intellectual lineages will, at best, provide an unhistorical meaning, how then is one to recover an historical meaning of a given text? Skinner argues that:

⁵Skinner. "Meaning and Understanding." *Meaning and Context* on p. 65.

⁶ This reference is to a phrase by Derek Parfit which Skinner quotes in Howard Burton's interview with him in Princeton, NJ on June 5th, 2014. *Question for Freedom: A Conversation with Quentin Skinner*. E-Book. Ed. By Howard Burton. Open Agenda Publishing, 2015. Ch. 7b, Location 898

⁷ Skinner. "Meaning and Understanding." *Meaning and Context* on p. 66.

...the key to excluding unhistorical meanings must lie in limiting our range of descriptions of any given text to those which the author himself might in principle have avowed and...the key to understanding the actual historical meaning of a text must lie in recovering the complex intentions of the author in writing it.⁸

The identification of these intentions, as distinct from motivations, is critical to understanding Skinner's approach. An author's motivation is defined as "a condition antecedent to, and contingently connected with, the appearance of his works."⁹ As such, the motive is external to the text and does not contribute to a given work's meaning. Intention, on the other hand, is what a writer means by what he or she says. Whether or not the author achieves their intended goal is less important to Skinner than asking what that intention was in the first place. To get a better sense of these intentions, whether they're explicitly stated or not, the historian must look beyond the text to the ideological and linguistic conventions which an author must employ, as well as what Skinner refers to as an author's "mental world." Though Skinner does not use the term, we might think of this second area of focus as an author's "imagination," as a kind of repository of empirical beliefs about the world around them. Once these contextual elements are recovered, the historian can begin to interpret not merely what the given words mean or what the particular argument might be, but *what* the author was doing *in* writing something in the first place.

Quentin Skinner's controversial methodology has inspired a number of well-known political theorists and intellectual historians to apply his principles to their own inquiry and to explore many lesser known historical events and thinkers. His evaluation of alternative approaches has also provoked a formidable community of critics who, in turn, frequently put Skinner on the defensive. Scholars have alternatively referred to him as excessively secular, narrow, reductionist, as misunderstanding human nature, neglecting the importance of motives,

⁸ Skinner. "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action." *Meaning and Context*. p. 102.

⁹ Skinner. "Motives, intention and interpretation." *Meaning and Context*. P. 73.

as “bracketing” questions of truth and of being guilty of the anachronism he claims to resist. Still, many of these criticisms often misread Skinner’s argument (a charge Skinner seems to have to reiterate over and over again) and, with the possible exception of strict textualists, seldom depart in any radical way from what Skinner himself is doing. This is, in part, because Skinner and his critics’ focus is primarily on questions of historical procedure as opposed to the very nature of history itself. This is not to say that procedure is irrelevant, but it is ultimately secondary to the questions of order and human nature critical for a grasp of historical meaning. The same could be said of Skinner’s preoccupation with ideas and intentions which, though by no means insignificant, are ultimately of less concern than the experiences from which they originate. Few have understood these complexities and priorities as well as Eric Voegelin.

Voegelin and the History of Political Thought

As far as I can tell, there is no evidence that Eric Voegelin ever read or knew of Quentin Skinner’s work. Voegelin passed away in 1985, less than two-decades into Skinner’s career and just as the latter’s reputation and influence was burgeoning among political theorists and intellectual historians. When Skinner was asked if he had read Voegelin, he replied, candidly:

When I was first studying political theory as an undergraduate, we were strongly warned to keep away from Voegelin’s work. (Too metaphysical, too politically reactionary.) I don’t think of myself as having been a notably obedient student, but I certainly seem to have been so in this case, for I’m afraid I scarcely know his work. I may have been additionally put off by its extraordinary voluminousness, and what looked like a rather repetitious set of questions that he seemed to ask.¹⁰

While a political theorist can seldom account for all the thinkers of relevance to their area of inquiry, it is unfortunate that Skinner neglected Voegelin’s work during his development. Given his preoccupation with questions of hermeneutics, intentionality and the philosophy of

¹⁰ Quentin Skinner. Email message to author. 16 June, 2016.

history, Skinner would have found Voegelin a formidable, but enlightening alternative to his perspective.

Voegelin maintained different assumptions about reality and inquiry from Skinner, and, in general, was preoccupied with a very different set of questions (and a much larger diversity of questions than Skinner was apparently aware of). Where Skinner was concerned with what a given thinker was *doing* in writing a particular text, Voegelin inquired as to what the “engendering experience” was that gave birth to a given idea. In a sense, there is an overlap here between the two thinkers. As Voegelin was working through his posthumously published, eight-volume *History of Political Ideas*, he realized he had been mistaken about the nature of ideas themselves. Like Skinner, Voegelin wanted to get away from abstractions and anachronisms that distorted the historical account and which lost sight of what was actually happening. As Voegelin recalled in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, “While working on the chapter on Schelling, it dawned on me that the conception of a history of ideas was an ideological deformation of reality. There were no ideas unless there were symbols of immediate *experiences*.”¹¹ This shift to experiences, like Skinner’s aversion to a strictly textualist approach, required greater recognition of the overall context within which a given text emerges. Like Skinner, Voegelin also appreciated more and more the influence which linguistic conventions and individual intentions had on a given text and the development of various symbolizations of order. There is, then, a sense in which both Skinner and Voegelin recognized similar problems in the methods of analysis employed in the history of political thought, and while their diagnoses shared some common ground, they part company in the way they responded.

¹¹ Eric Voegelin. *Autobiographical Reflections*. Edited by Ellis Sandoz. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Univ., 1989) . p. 63.

Skinner claims to avoid an unhistorical and abstract account of intellectual history by writing a history of ideologies, and by appreciating the determinative character of a given language and concepts by which an author or agent is constrained in a given time, place and situation. By retaining a focus on ideologies, however, Skinner neglects elements of human existence and experience. "It was becoming increasingly clear to [Voegelin]," William C. Havard observed, "that ideas are not entities in history; the real entities are societies, which express their existence in history through an enormously complex set of symbols."¹² Ideologies and ideas are not, then, irrelevant, but they are subordinate, and descriptive of, the individual and community's experience of existence and order. Instead, Voegelin focuses on *symbols*, by which he means "the language phenomena engendered by the process of participatory experience."¹³ In a sense, this emphasis on participation brings the analysis back into an overlap with Skinner and the question of what a writer was *doing* in composing a particular text. Yet, in another, and more important, sense the "speech-act," in Skinner's phrase, is not strictly social or political for Voegelin. Instead, what an author may be *doing* in a given text is describing an internal or personal struggle that is less about social meaning or action, and more about how to effectively symbolize the order or disorder of one's own soul and community.

Voegelin's focus on symbolization allows him to do several things. First, Voegelin recognizes that the determinative and constraining nature of linguistic conventions and ideological contexts is not insurmountable. Neologisms abound in Voegelin's own work as a way of saying what, at times, is either extremely difficult or impossible to say in any conventional linguistic sense. This is why myths, for example, are not necessarily unhistorical, as

¹² William C. Havard. "Voegelin's Changing Conception of History and Consciousness" in *Eric Voegelin's Search for Order in History*. Ed. by Stephen A. McKnight. Expanded Edition (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987) p. 15.

¹³ Voegelin. *Autobiographical Reflections*. p. 74.

they often penetrate to both the immanent and transcendent elements of reality more successfully and comprehensively. As persons participate in being they construct symbolizations of the order in which they find themselves as a way to make sense of the mysteries of existence. Experiences then, become much more determinative than language, as Skinner suggested.

A second achievement, related to the first, is a recognition of the mystery and openness within which the author of a given text participates. Ideologies, as Voegelin understands them, are deformations of reality constituted by ideas oversimplifying the truth of existence. Loyalty to an ideology may stifle questioning and encourage one to close themselves off to the possibility of reality – in the broadest sense – being different from preconceived notions. This openness and the understanding of the mysteriousness of history also points to the centrality of freedom. As Eugene Webb summarizes

[Voegelin] does not seek to identify determining forces that would enable a philosopher to explain or predict an immanent course of events. Rather he conceives of history as a function of the life of man, which means that there is always in history an irreducible element of freedom, both the possibility and the obligation of choice on the part of the historical agent, the individual human being. His choices may be either more conscious and rational or less so, depending on the degree of clarity with which the individual responds to the values of truth and responsible action, but nonetheless a measure of freedom always remains. For Voegelin the philosophy of history is the analysis of human life in its historical dimension, that is, of human life as a process in which choices are made and in which, through the values that are served or not served, one may not live up to the calling of one's potential humanity. History is an enterprise, in other words, in which one may succeed or fail, and what the philosophy of history must offer is criteria by which that success or failure may be measured.¹⁴

There is, Voegelin observes, an order to human life and to human nature. That order and existence itself, however, is not an object one can stand above and analyze, but is something humans participate and move within. “The order of history emerges from the history of order,”¹⁵

¹⁴ Webb. (1981) p. 10.

¹⁵ Voegelin. *Order and History Vol. I: Israel and Revelation*. Ed. by Maurice Hogan in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 14. (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri, 2001) p. 19.

Voegelin claimed, emphasizing how the order of human nature was revealed by humans' free participation in it. That participation constitutes existence itself, and humans' inescapable place within existence reinforces the mysteriousness of being itself. As Voegelin writes:

Participation in being, however, is not a partial involvement of man; he is engaged with the whole of his existence, for participation is existence itself. There is no vantage point outside existence from which its meaning can be viewed and a course of action charted according to a plan, nor is there a blessed island to which man can withdraw in order to recapture his self. The role of existence must be played in uncertainty of its meaning, as an adventure of decision on the edge of freedom and necessity.¹⁶

Notions of an order to human nature and the ability to overcome the determinative character of a normative vocabulary are absent in Skinner's historical approach. Instead, Skinner's account describes *what* a given author or agent was *doing* in choosing the words he or she employed. The historian need only answer this question descriptively to provide an adequate account. A relationship to truth, order and human nature are irrelevant, and likely "dangerous" under Skinner's methodological paradigm. Since perennial problems and universal truths do not exist for Skinner, a question of order or truth inevitably results in an imposition of our notions of truth on past agents. Voegelin's historical account, from Skinner's viewpoint, would rob the grave and rule over it. Skinner seeks to recover a given text and interpret the words on the author's terms. Voegelin looks to a text as subject to the same universal and transcendent truths he himself must answer too. Skinner sees the historian's task as a recovery of meaning and interpretation as solving a mystery. Voegelin understands that the historian is part of the mystery of existence itself, and any claim of "meaning" is tentative at best.

Voegelin also differs from Skinner in emphasizing not merely subjective experiences, but experiences of transcendence. As Voegelin moved from an account of the history of ideas to a

¹⁶ Voegelin. *Order and History Vol. I: Israel and Revelation*. Ed. by Maurice Hogan in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 14. (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri, 2001) p. 39-40.

preoccupation of the symbolization and representation of order, this experience of transcendence remained a difficult element to articulate and explain. Methodologies and modern systems of inquiry, such as positivism, do more to distort and obscure truth and transcendence than to illuminate it. Instead, an account of the history of political thought that was sensitive to the transcendent was better described as a struggle to understand and be attuned to transcendence. As such, Voegelin found considerable value in the myths and art of a given period as representative of that struggle – as ways of trying to say something that could not be said. Skinner, to his credit, has been prolific, particularly in more recent years, in examining works of art and drama especially. But where Skinner sees linguistic and rhetorical activities shaped by ideological contexts (such as in his recent treatment of Shakespeare), Voegelin sees a struggle to symbolize human experience and to become more attuned to the transcendent. As Michael Federici summarizes: “Voegelin states that ‘history is the process by which man articulates his own nature.’¹⁷ History, then, is the discovery of self-understanding. And self-understanding is understood as knowledge and insight about the nature of human existence, which includes man’s attunement to transcendent reality.”¹⁸ But as Voegelin’s thought developed, even this definition of history proved to be provisional. In order to account for transcendence, a turn toward the transcendent had to be taking place within the human consciousness. Such a turn is challenging since consciousness cannot be objectified. Reality, however, can be objectified by the consciousness itself, and history becomes the unfolding of “the structure of consciousness.”¹⁹

At the heart of Voegelin’s development is always what he called Plato’s anthropological principle. That is, the order of the political community is the order of the soul writ large.

Whether addressing ideas, symbols, order or consciousness, the moral and spiritual situation and

¹⁷ Voegelin *Order and History* Vol. II p. 68

¹⁸ Michael Federici. *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (ISI Books, 2002) p. 89.

¹⁹ Michael Federici. *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (ISI Books, 2002) p. 136.

questions of existence remain items of primary concern. The focus on the soul and on existence is also a turn toward the person. This, of course, did not necessarily resolve the struggle Voegelin was engaged in. There was always a tension between subjectivity and trying to go beyond it. Yet, in coming up short, Voegelin (perhaps inadvertently) that being a person is the only way to know what a person is. Consciousness is the way in which we grasp consciousness. Persons are both within and beyond the existence they participate in.

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By turning toward humans' experience and symbolization of the order of existence, Voegelin moved much closer than Skinner to historical truth and meaning. While Skinner's approach helps expand the context of a given text and elevates the critical role of intentions, he can ultimately provide little more than an account of what was said and what linguistic and ideological influences shaped the chosen words. While his work does resist the temptation toward anachronism, there is a sense in which the speaker is lost in the speaking. The historical author or agent, in Skinner's account, is not unconcerned with questions of truth and existence, but their answers do not transcend their particular historical moment and circumstances.

Skinner's hostility to claims of universal truths or perennial problems undercuts his ability to say how the historian can make sense of historical texts or why the task is even worthwhile. Furthermore, his claim that "we must do our own thinking for ourselves" conflicts with his own project. Differences aside, it would be difficult to see how Skinner could provide the details of his method without drawing on the work of R.G. Collingwood and J.L. Austin, just to name two. While it may be unhistorical to impose contemporary problems on past thinkers, those same individuals and texts have handed down the very questions, concepts and examples from which modern historians must draw to understand the past, the present and themselves. We

cannot, as it were, do our own thinking for ourselves because the content of those thoughts is the byproduct of history whether we are aware of it or not. As David Walsh observes:

History is not a spectacle indifferently unfolded before a subject who may impose his or her preferences upon it. It is rather a realm in which truth is constantly at stake as an existential imperative, for both the actor and the observer. Even when separated by the distance of time and space, they are bound together by an inexorability not so easily ignored. The truth of existence as it emerges in history is as valid for the inheritors as for the initiators, and the lines of responsibility flow in both directions. What is received by one human being is of relevance to all others who, in turn, have an obligation to preserve and pass it along to their successors.²⁰

The very possibility of studying history is contingent upon the past's relationship to the present. Skinner, despite his best efforts cannot escape this reality. Indeed, when subjected to his own method and historical context, he does not seem to achieve the objectivity he strives for.²¹ Voegelin is profoundly aware of the impact which the historicity of his own thought has on him, and by emphasizing the symbol of *anamnesis*, as a remembrance and recollection of formative experiences in one's past, he takes greater responsibility for his position as the historian *within* history.

While a "Voegelinian" perspective exposes a number of problems inherent in Skinner's method, to simply abandon his work is unnecessary. Throughout his prolific career, Skinner has unearthed countless texts and figures that have long been neglected and has provided considerable assistance in the Western world's quest for greater historical self-understanding. His work is inevitably incomplete, however. Skinner does not account for questions of transcendence, order, and consciousness. In doing so, he risks subordinating the speaker to the speech-act and the author to the text. "It is because we are persons that we have history," David Walsh reminds us, "that is, an openness to one another that is prior to our chronological

²⁰ Walsh. *Politics of the Person*. p. 187.

²¹ See Emile Perreau-Saussine. "Quentin Skinner in Context." *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007), 106–122.

intersection within time.”²² Eric Voegelin did much to recover this openness in the history of political thought and political theorists would do well to follow him.

²² Walsh. *Politics of the Person*. p. 189.