Skinner, Wittgenstein and Historical Method

JONATHAN HAVERCROFT

Abstract: In a recent criticism of Quentin Skinner’s historical method Peter Steinberger has drawn upon linguistic analytic philosophy to argue that intellectual history should focus on the reconstruction of logical propositions rather than the contextualization of author’s statements. This essay will argue that Steinberger reproduces many of the same types of methodological problems that prompted Skinner’s initial critique of intellectual history in the 1960s. I will draw upon the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein to demonstrate that Steinberger’s conception of intellectual history as the reconstruction of the logical content of statements fundamentally misunderstands what political philosophy is—and by extension the methods of historical interpretation.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Quentin Skinner, historical method, interpretation, speech acts, context

In a noted recent article, Peter Steinberger has offered a very provocative critique of Quentin Skinner’s methodology: namely, that the very philosophy upon which Skinner grounds his historical interpretation of texts—the ‘philosophical pragmatics’ as Steinberger calls it—are ill suited to the interpretation of written texts. The defining feature of this approach, according to Steinberger, is that it is used primarily to interpret improvised conversation and that improvised conversation requires a particular set of rules and conventions in order for it to be intelligible, whereas written communication does not require such rules. He does concede to the Skinnerian response that ‘the author of a written text (…) is dependent upon and constrained by established discursive rules, just as much as the casual utterer’. But this response, in Steinberger’s mind,
Paragraph

is not sufficient because he believes ‘that the particular kinds of rules that govern ordinary, improvised conversational activity and that are necessary for such activity to occur successfully must be quite different from the rules that govern formal writing’ (*AHPT*, 139). Furthermore he insists that ‘the burden of proof is on Skinner to show why this is not so’ (*AHPT*, 139).

In this article I wish to take Steinberger up on his invitation, and in so doing I am prepared to accept that the burden of proof is upon me to demonstrate that the rules that govern ordinary improvised conversation are not significantly different from the rules that govern written communication. This question of the role that rules play in communication and the interpretation of communication is an important one, and in replying to Steinberger it is my hope to also point out that some fundamental issues are at stake in the practice of political philosophy. If I understand Steinberger correctly, in refuting the applicability of speech-act theory to textual interpretation he hopes to put the activity of political theory (or at least that branch of political theory interested in the interpretation of historical texts of political theory) on a more ‘analytical’ footing — whereby interpretation would aim ‘to reconstruct — patiently, systematically, and with close attention to the rules of rational inference — the argumentative structure of the text and its theoretical implications or entailments’ (*AHPT*, 145).

In defending Skinner’s method and the applicability of its philosophical underpinnings to political theory, I do not want to make all interpreters of historical texts Cambridge School theorists. Instead, I see Skinner as having been the first to introduce an approach to political philosophy that focused on action, use and meaning and that this approach has been far too neglected, and if I am correct then not only is Skinner’s method valid, but the philosophical underpinnings of his method provide a sounder basis for doing political theory in general than the analytic method to which Steinberger would have us return. And so my hope is that this essay will clarify how the philosophy of Austin and Wittgenstein informs Skinner’s approach to textual interpretation, and why the linguistic turn in philosophy matters for the historical study of political theory.

At the outset, it is worth noting that Steinberger does not attempt to refute any of the central claims of speech-act theory — that the meaning of an utterance is determined by its use in a particular context, that the successful performance of an utterance rests upon the satisfaction of a set of rules, and that failure to perform an utterance
according to these rules will lead to misunderstanding and/or failing to do what one set out to do in performing a particular speech-act. Steinberger's objection is that speech-act theory does not apply to the interpretation of written texts. The challenge here is not to defend the method or orientation in general, it is to defend the application of this method in cases to which Steinberger thinks the method was not intended to—or simply cannot—apply. In Steinberger's understanding the approach pioneered by speech act theorists was to apply to improvised conversation, not to written texts.

Steinberger's assertion that ordinary language philosophy does not apply to written communication results from three errors in his reading of the connection between speech-act theory and Skinner's method. First, he has overemphasized the influence of Grice and Searle on Skinner's method and ignored entirely the influence of the later Wittgenstein.² This is significant because there are crucial differences between what Grice and Searle feel speech-act theory should do and what Austin and Wittgenstein themselves did. In overemphasizing the former and underemphasizing the later Steinberger has built up a straw man. Second, Steinberger insists that these philosophies of ‘pragmatics of communication’ are designed precisely to explain how the making and receiving of utterances functions successfully as an unrehearsed, improvised endeavour governed by communicative rules (AHPT, 138). I will turn to the writings of J. L. Austin to show that his philosophy of language was not only (or even primarily) concerned with explicating improvised communication. As such, Skinner's appropriation of Austin shows us the value of treating texts as a performance rather than simply as a set of formal arguments. Third, I will argue that Steinberger draws a distinction between literal meaning and intended meaning that cannot be sustained. In conclusion, drawing upon remark §81 from Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, I will argue that underlying Steinberger's understanding of how texts should be interpreted is a concept of an ideal language that Wittgenstein critiques. The reason Skinner's appropriation of philosophical pragmatics is useful is because he shows us how, given the insights of the linguistic turn, we can interpret historical texts.

The influence of philosophical pragmatics on Quentin Skinner's methodology

Steinberger's central critique of Skinner is that Skinner does not properly follow the implications of the theorists that he cites as the
influence for his method (AHPT, 135). Steinberger has misread the role that these thinkers have played in Skinner's thought. Steinberger cites Austin, Searle and Grice as the chief influences upon Skinner's method, but in precisely the inverse proportion of their influence upon Skinner. Steinberger cites Grice seventeen times, whereas in Regarding Method—Skinner's collection of his methodological essays—he cites Grice four times. Steinberger cites Austin sixteen times, whereas Skinner cites him twenty-four times. And Steinberger cites Searle sixteen times whereas Skinner cites him three times. Most strikingly, Steinberger cites Wittgenstein only once, and this reference is to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, whereas Skinner cites the later Wittgenstein fifteen times and has said in a recent interview that: 'Insofar as I was able to understand the [Philosophical Investigations] at all, I took it to be about the theory of meaning, and I carried away from it a basic thought about “meaning” that subsequently animated all the essays I later published on that theme'. As he makes clear in this interview, the philosophy of language of the later Wittgenstein is the primary philosophical inspiration for his methodology and his incorporation of Austin and Grice into his work are simply as 'annexes' to the ideas of Wittgenstein (EP, 48).

While counting the number of references in two different texts does not prove anything by itself, it is significant because Steinberger has drawn heavily upon Grice and Searle to reconstruct a model of 'philosophical pragmatics' that he then uses to accuse Skinner of failing to understand, suggesting that Skinner has failed to live up to a model of language that Skinner himself does not accept. The straw-man argument arises when Steinberger elides Austin with Searle and Grice, while remaining silent on the influence of the later Wittgenstein. Searle developed Austin's theory of performative utterances by exploring the constitutive rules for the successful performance of an illocutionary act, and Grice developed a theory of conversational implicature that explains the unstated, but implied meaning of a speech-act. In the cases of Searle and Austin, their primary interest is in human conversation, and their focus is on the rules that govern the improvisational structure of conversation. However, the work of Wittgenstein and Austin—unlike the work of Searle and Grice—is concerned with the performative nature of language in general regardless of whether it is written or spoken. As such, drawing upon Wittgenstein and Austin to analyse texts is completely consistent with their philosophy. Contra Steinberger, philosophical pragmatics was intended to analyse more than just improvised conversation. But in
arguing that it can only analyse speech-acts Steinberger introduces a second confusion: that of eliding improvisation with performativity as the object of analysis of philosophical pragmatics.

**Improvisation vs performance and the role of rules**

Another confusion that Steinberger exhibits concerning the nature of ordinary language philosophy is about what it is attempting to capture. Steinberger claims 'the speech-act theory of Austin and Searle and the implicative theory of Grice are designed to explain how the making and receiving of utterances functions successfully as an unrehearsed endeavour governed by competitive rules' (AHPT, 138). This is a point that he raises at several junctures to argue that the chief difference between the speech-acts that Austin, Searle and Grice analyse and the texts that Skinner examines is that speech-acts are improvised and texts are carefully written.

This claim is faulty for two reasons. First, Steinberger has confused performance with improvisation, as we have already noted. Second, the statement cuts against his claim that a recovering of intended meaning is not an important part of textual exegesis. In this case, Steinberger has misread the intention of Austin and Wittgenstein, who both argue that the meaning of an utterance is determined by how a statement is used in a particular context. Both Austin and Wittgenstein refute the notion that the meanings of words can be determined by knowing what material objects those words refer to — what philosophers of language call a referential theory of meaning. For both Austin and Wittgenstein the meaning of words is determined by their use in a particular context, regardless of whether or not a statement is rehearsed or improvised, spoken or written.

Yet speech-act theory was not intended only to recover the rules of improvised conversation. As Austin notes at the beginning of *How to Do Things with Words*, the purpose of his work was to look at statements that did not fit into the traditional categories of statements that analytic philosophers studied. Austin then proceeds to provide four such examples of statements: saying ‘I do’ at a wedding, naming a ship ‘Queen Elizabeth’ while smashing a bottle against its bow, saying ‘I give and bequeath my watch to my brother,’ and saying ‘I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow’. Now, Austin’s point is that analytical philosophy has primarily focused upon what he calls ‘constative’ statements — that is statements that are true or false assertions of fact.
Conversely, Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* is developing a procedure for analysing performative statements— that is statements through which one performs an action.

Steinberger insists that the crucial feature of philosophical pragmatics is that it recovers rules that help make improvised speech possible (*AHPT*, 139). And as his evidence, he claims that most of the examples used by Austin, Grice and Searle are improvised speech acts (*AHPT*, 138). But in the case of the examples that Austin provides, most are rehearsed, not improvised. Weddings have rehearsals for a good reason: to make sure all the people in the party know when to say their lines. The ‘I do’ of a wedding is not off the cuff; the partners in the wedding are following a script. Similarly, an event like a christening of a ship is planned in advance, and all the people participating in the ceremony know their lines before the event. And a will, is ‘a carefully planned, painstakingly executed, utterly non-improvised activity of asserting the actual or possible fact of a proposed content’ to quote Steinberger’s description of what a text is and a speech-act is not (*AHPT*, 141). Only the final case of a person making a bet could be considered an example of a spontaneous activity. Yet, even in the case of betting, one often (though not always) carefully analyses the situation and the likely outcome before calling one’s bookie.

The crucial point here is that Steinberger insists that the philosophical pragmatics of Austin, Grice and Searle are not a good fit for interpreting texts in the history of political thought because their approach helps analyse improvised conversation. Yet this is not what Austin (who, of this trio, has the most influence on Skinner) is doing. Instead he focused on the performative dimension of language, be it written or spoken. Skinner adopted Austin’s focus on the performative dimension of language for his methodology because he was concerned that the dominant approach to the history of political philosophy in the 1960s focused too much on looking in texts for perennial ideas. Instead, Skinner drew upon Austin and Wittgenstein because he felt that their approach to understanding the meaning of a statement by understanding the context in which that statement was used could help the intellectual historian ‘consider what earlier philosophers may have been doing in writing as they wrote’ (*RM*, 3). The point of Skinner’s method is to understand how historic texts of political philosophy were written as interventions in particular political struggles.

At the root of Steinberger’s confusion is the role that rules play in language. Steinberger argues, ‘that the particular kinds of rules
that govern ordinary, improvised conversational activity and that are necessary for such activity to occur successfully must be quite different from the rules that govern formal writing (AHPT, 139). In making this claim, Steinberger seems to ignore the large number of ways in which even written communication is not improvised but nevertheless follows many of the same rules as spoken conversation. While written communication is revised and thought through in a way that a spontaneous conversation with a neighbour is not, as long as the communication is in the same language it draws upon the same set of rules as spoken communication. Many of these rules lie in the background, and are very difficult to explicate. If we had to be aware of all the rules of grammar and spelling and think through every possible way a word could be used or misinterpreted and think consciously about the muscle movement required to type or write even a single word we would go nowhere. We become conscious of the rules that govern our language when we slip up, when a sentence does not sound right. Writing follows these rules in the same way that improvised conversation does. Without these rules sitting in the background I would be unable to act, but if all the rules according to which I act were made explicit I would also be unable to act—paralyzed by my over analysis of how I should act.

All of this is to show that when we act in any way we are following rules. Skinner’s claim that to understand the meaning of an author’s statement one must first explicate the linguistic conventions of the milieu in which the author wrote draws heavily on Wittgenstein’s discussion of following rules in the Philosophical Investigations. The reason that Skinner draws upon Wittgenstein and Austin is because their philosophy of language points to a fundamental problem of textual interpretation: ‘The problem of interpretation arises in part because we do not generally trouble, even in everyday cases, to make explicit exactly what we see ourselves as doing’ (RM, 107). In reconstructing the discursive context in which a historical figure in political philosophy was writing Skinner is attempting to recover the rules that the figure was following. And in recovering the rules the figure was following, Skinner is attempting to understand what it is that figure was doing. Without an understanding of the background rules according to which authors were writing, their actions would be as unintelligible as trying to watch a sporting competition without understanding the rules of that game.
It seems that Steinberger’s confusion about how rules and conventions operate in language stems from his reliance on an analogy with jazz. To be fair, Steinberger’s analogy is an illuminating one. Jazz, like language, is generally an improvised activity, and in order for a jazz piece to be successful—in the sense of pleasurable to listen to rather than random sound—the musicians must follow certain rules. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein introduces the concept of language games to describe ‘language and the actions into which it is woven’ (*PI*, §7). This concept is meant to illustrate that the meaning of a language is embedded in its use, and it is only through understanding how a word is used in a specific context that one can understand its meaning. Throughout the first eighty remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein proceeds to use the analogy between language and games to illustrate how we use language according to definite rules, and how an understanding of these rules is necessary in order to understand the meaning of words and concepts. Yet after developing this analogy Wittgenstein cautions against misunderstanding following a rule as ‘operating a calculus according to definite rules’ (*PI*, §81). This danger arises because games and calculi have ‘fixed rules’ (*PI*, §81). In drawing an analogy between the fixed rules of games and the rules that guide the uses of terms in a language the danger is to assume that these two types of rules operate in the same way. One can write out explicit rules about natural phenomena and rules of games, but to do this in a language would be to construct an ideal language. Yet such an ideal language would be a construction that would miss much of the nuance of everyday language. And Wittgenstein believes that to take the ideal language as somehow superior to our everyday language is what leads to confusions over the meanings of words and concepts. Steinberger seems to think that there are particular sets of rules that govern improvisation, and that philosophical pragmatics is concerned only with recovering those rules. Yet, the point of Wittgenstein’s analysis of rules in language, and the reason that Skinner draws upon this aspect of Wittgenstein, is that discursive rules are not fixed. Some rules apply to both spoken and written conversation, other rules do not. And the nature of rules is challenged and modified over time. As such, the background rules according to which both speakers and writers make statements are constantly changing. And in order to understand the meanings of statements we must recover the rules according to which the statements were made.
One of Steinberger’s reasons for arguing that the philosophy of pragmatics is not applicable to the interpretation of texts of political philosophy is that there is a difference between the literal meaning and the intended meaning of a text. In order to illustrate this, Steinberger argues that we assert facts in order to refute scepticism about us engaging in a particular activity. Steinberger writes:

Thus, if I want simply to assert the fact of me calling your mother, and if I anticipate any scepticism, I may well be inclined to provide detailed evidence (e.g. a demonstration that I know how to reach your mother, proof that I have called your mother in similar circumstances), but, more important, I will often attempt to present my claim and my evidence in language — involving say, the use of force indicating devices — that minimizes or eliminates the difference between the literal meaning of my words and their intended meaning. (AHPT, 140)

Steinberger’s point is that when political philosophers make propositional claims they will attempt to minimize the gap between the literal meaning of words and their intended meaning. So, one of the core points of Steinberger’s critique of Skinner is that an attention to the illocutionary force of utterances focuses too much on the intended meaning of words as opposed to their literal meaning. Behind this critique is the assumption that there is some kind of gap between intended and literal meaning.

Steinberger thinks that understanding who and what an author was arguing against is irrelevant to understanding the propositional content of a political philosophy. This explains why he introduces a gap between assertions of fact and the intended meaning of a text. In doing this, Steinberger makes it sound as if political philosophy is a ‘calculus operating according to definite rules’ (to paraphrase Wittgenstein, PI, § 81). In order for this to be the case, all political philosophers would have to operate according to these definite rules in the construction of their arguments. Furthermore, this assumes that all political philosophers were attempting to make the arguments of their texts a series of transparent moves that abide by the rules of a single game that we would all recognize as political philosophy.

But consider for a second how different the type of enterprise that Plato engaged in is from Machiavelli’s activities. Plato wrote dialogues, whereas Machiavelli wrote interpretations of historical figures in order
to advise contemporary politicians. These differences in the genres shape the content of their arguments. In the case of Plato, while many assume that Socrates is often presenting Plato’s perspective, a major area of debate within Plato scholarship is which characters in a dialogue (if any) speak for Plato. In the case of Machiavelli, his genre and style of writing have led to numerous questions about whether or not his suggestions were sincere. So, at the very least the intended meaning of a text shapes our ability as readers to access the literal meaning of the text. And I would argue in the more ‘literary’ works—that is those works that deploy literary techniques such as metaphor, allegory, poetry, or narrative fiction in order to advance a normative argument about politics—in the political theory canon—such as the works of Plato, Machiavelli, Rousseau and Nietzsche—those authors chose to write in the style that they did because they did not feel that their message could be conveyed through ‘literal’ meanings.

While in many instances it may be difficult to separate the intended meaning from the literal meaning, Steinberger could reply that in successful works of political philosophy the author—intending to write a work that will stand the test of time—attempts to write a work that has as much literal content—assertions of fact and deductive arguments—and as little intended meaning—rhetorical content and literary style—as possible. And in many ways Hobbes’s *Leviathan* is the best example of what Steinberger thinks political philosophy is. Recall that in *Leviathan*, Hobbes sets himself the task of discovering a new science of politics that is free from the erroneous assumptions of humanist political philosophy—a genre of political philosophy that placed a great deal of emphasis on the rhetorical skills of the authors. Instead, Hobbes wants to create a political philosophy that is simply a set of logical deductions from a set of empirical observations. In other words, Hobbes intended *Leviathan* to be a model of an approach to political philosophy that operates according to a set of rational rules that all can follow and reconstruct in their own mind. Yet, *Leviathan* is also marked by a scepticism that all will be able to understand the principles or that they will be willing to abide by them. So part of *Leviathan*s argument is that the sovereign must force its subjects to follow these principles and definitions. Hobbes goes to great lengths to define his terms precisely because he operates on the nominalist belief that words are mere signs that we affix to objects.

As Skinner demonstrates in *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, while Hobbes was concerned about the destructive effect rhetoric could have in politics and the art of classical rhetoric was a
target during the middle stage of Hobbes's career, by the time Hobbes writes *Leviathan* he has determined that rhetorical techniques are necessary to persuade an audience. This is actually quite significant in the context of Steinberger's critique of Skinner, as Skinner's point in this book is that even that figure in the history of political philosophy most committed to developing a purely rational science of politics eventually had to conclude that rhetorical techniques are necessary to political argumentation. As such, Hobbes abandons the view of political philosophy as a context free civil science that operates according to literal meaning (in Steinberger's terms) in favour of one that acknowledges the role of rhetoric, and is sensitive to its audience and is involved in an act of persuasion rather than something akin to a scientific proof. In order for Steinberger's claim that interpreting texts in political philosophy is simply a matter of reconstructing the literal meaning of the arguments of the text to hold, he would have to demonstrate that the rhetorical form of the argument had no impact on the content of the argument. Yet, even someone as committed to a rational view of political argumentation as Hobbes, ultimately abandons this viewpoint. Furthermore, one of Skinner's points in recovering the classic art of political rhetoric in *Reason and Rhetoric* is to remind his readers that classic rhetorical techniques such as *paradigastole* are based on the principle that how a fact is described determines how others assess that fact in moral and political terms (*RR*, 91–5). In other words, classical rhetoricians realized that in the area of moral and political argumentation there was no such thing as a brute fact, all facts were interpreted through a moral outlook.

"Standing on the very brink of misunderstanding": the danger of presupposing an ideal language in political philosophy

Steinberger suggests as an alternative to contextual interpretation an analytic approach to philosophy. He argues that the purpose of an analytic approach to political philosophy is 'rationally reconstructing—perspicuously restating—what has been said in a way that reveals its underlying logic' (*AHPT*, 142). His view of textual analysis is to recast a philosopher in a better form. In critiquing Skinner he draws a distinction between a lexicographical analysis of a text—which involves reconstructing the grammatical rules of a particular discursive community—and a philosophical analysis that 'analyse[s] a particular set of propositions with a view towards
discovering and explicating their underlying argumentative structure’ \( (AHPT, 143) \). In making this distinction, Steinberger is arguing that Skinner is not involved in political philosophy, but that those who reconstruct the underlying logic or structure are. Furthermore, Steinberger proceeds to quote from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: ‘Language disguises the thought, and indeed in such a way that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the clothed thought’\(^\text{13}\) and then asserts that ‘this claim is every bit as relevant to his later work as it is to the *Tractatus* in which it appears’ \( (AHPT, 143, \text{n.13}) \). This is a problematic claim, and from my perspective it is absolutely fatal to his argument against Skinner. Recall that the crux of Steinberger’s critique is that the philosophical resources upon which Skinner draws ‘actually point to a decidedly non-Skinnerian approach that focuses not primarily on discovering or reconstructing historical circumstances, but on uncovering and explicating structures of argumentation’ \( (AHPT, 135) \). This is because the passage from the early Wittgenstein that Steinberger cites is precisely the claim that the later Wittgenstein rejects. And the reason for this rejection is that the later Wittgenstein comes to believe that the notion that there is an underlying logic behind all language and that the task of the philosopher is to recover this logic by clarifying language is wrong.

Wittgenstein explicitly rejects his earlier view of language in remark 81 when he writes:

\[\text{In philosophy we often compare the use of words with games and calculi which have fixed rules, but cannot say that someone who is using language must be playing such a game. — But if you say that our languages only approximate to such calculi you are standing on the very brink of misunderstanding. For then it may look as if what we were talking about were an ideal language. As if our logic were, so to speak, a logic for a vacuum. — Whereas logic does not treat of language — or of thought — in the sense in which a natural science treats of a natural phenomenon, and the most that can be said is that we construct ideal languages. But here the word ‘ideal’ is liable to mislead, for it sounds as if these languages were better, more perfect, than our everyday language; and as if it took the logician to show what a proper sentence looked like. (PI, § 81)}\]

Wittgenstein adds that in his earlier work he made the mistake of thinking ‘that if anyone utters a sentence and means or understands it he is operating a calculus according to definite rules’ \( (PI, § 81) \). This error comes from the tendency to believe that there are a set of rules of logic that lie behind language, and that the task of the philosopher is to discover these rules. This drives philosophers to
seek an abstract and universal mode of expression that is free from imprecision. But, as the later Wittgenstein argued, the rules of our language are embedded in our linguistic practices, and because our language is dynamic and changing, the meaning and use of words and the rules that govern how we use those rules change with our language. And this is precisely the reason that Skinner carefully reconstructs the discourses in which an author wrote: because their political language was different from ours. We will not understand their utterances without understanding the grammar of their political discourse. Conversely, Steinberger presupposes that there is a language beyond our everyday language that is universal in its structure regardless of which natural language an idea is expressed in and that this ideal language is unchanging across time and space. And because of this, the purpose of the analytic interpreter is to recast texts in this language.

There are three reasons why this claim is problematic. First, from the internal perspective of Steinberger’s own argument—that is, that the philosophers of language that Skinner draws upon do not support Skinner’s method—Steinberger has developed an argument that undercuts his own position. The type of analytic reconstruction of the logical arguments of a text that Steinberger holds up as the model of historical interpretation rests on precisely the view of language that Wittgenstein and Austin were rejecting. The later Wittgenstein’s primary object of critique in the *Philosophical Investigations* was theories of ideal language. In its place, Wittgenstein argued that the meanings of words were determined by how words were used in specific contexts—that is language games—and that as such there was not one ideal meaning for a given word. Skinner draws upon this to argue that the meanings of words and utterances vary depending upon what historic and linguistic context a statement is used in. As such attempts to determine the transhistorical meaning of a text will fail because there is no ideal language or fixed meaning for words that the interpreter of a text can refer to in interpreting. Similarly, the element of J. L. Austin that Skinner draws upon is his argument that when one focuses on constative utterances (true/false statements), philosophers ignore a whole other class of statements, performative utterances (statements in which a person does something by uttering a series of words). Skinner takes from this the insight that works in political philosophy are not simply works of political philosophy, but that they are in fact primarily works of political philosophy. In other words, we will not understand a text if we simply focus on the truth content of that text’s arguments, we must also understand what political acts the
author was attempting to perform in writing that text. This type of understanding is only possible through an exploration of the author’s political and historical context. As such, Skinner’s method does follow from the philosophical resources that he draws upon. As discussed above, Wittgenstein and Austin are not simply developing a linguistic philosophy to deal with improvised conversation, their work was primarily interested in re-thinking what language is. In both cases they placed an emphasis on language as a practice or an activity — regardless of whether it was spoken or written — and they critiqued the idea that it was possible to construct an ideal language that could represent an objective world. The alternative model of textual interpretation the Steinberger suggests in his critique of Skinner rests on precisely such a picture theory of language. Yet Steinberger does not explain how he proposes to get around the critiques of this approach to language that Wittgenstein, Austin and other post-positivist analytic philosophers raised in the 1950s and 1960s. His approach is indeed very old-fashioned.

Second, there is a fundamental problem with presupposing that there is an ideal language that texts of political philosophy conceal. Why would political philosophers write in a language other than the one that Steinberger presupposes it is the task of the interpreter of historical texts to reconstruct those arguments in? While some political philosophers may have attempted to conceal their true intent\textsuperscript{14} and others may simply be bad writers, if there were an ideal language in which to present arguments of political philosophy — say in symbolic logic — why wouldn’t political philosophers have written their work in this manner in the first place? Steinberger seems to assume that political philosophy is like maths, and that political philosophers saw themselves (or at least they should see themselves) as constructing proofs that all readers would accept as true. Certainly there have been some political philosophers who have attempted to engage in such an activity. In some moments in \textit{The Republic} Plato explores this possibility and Spinoza wrote his \textit{Ethics} according to the geometric method. But if one surveys the canon of political philosophy, there have been as many different styles of writing political philosophy as there have been major political philosophers. This would suggest that Steinberger misunderstands what political philosophy is. It is not like maths, because arguments in political philosophy cannot be demonstrated in the way that a mathematical proof can be. Instead, arguments in political philosophy are attempts to persuade others. Persuasion presupposes that there are not self-evident truths as in
mathematics, but that it is always possible to argue on either side of a given case, and that the rhetorical form of an argument shapes its content.

But even if we were to grant Steinberger that it was possible to re-construct arguments of texts in an ideal language, and that such a language would accurately reflect the argumentative content and intent of the writers of classic works of political philosophy, this raises another problem. Steinberger's description of what textual interpretation should be does not reflect how contemporary political theorists interpret texts in practice. Those who engage in the history of political thought have debates about the meaning and intention of works of political philosophy. Was Machiavelli a 'teacher of evil', a defender of republican virtues, or an ironist trying to trap Lorenzo de Medici? Was Hobbes a proto-rational choice theorist, or was he using humanist rhetoric in order to critique humanist political values? While Steinberger might dismiss such questions as merely 'lexographical', determining what an author's intentions are is essential to understanding the content of that author's argument (AHPT, 143). And while Steinberger assumes that most authors of political philosophy write works that are 'carefully written, rigorously argued, and painstakingly constructed assertions of proposed content' he does concede much scholarship in political theory provides evidence that authors write ironically, attempt to hide their message, and that sometimes their primary intent was to engage in a particularly provincial debate in their context. What he does not provide is a means to resolve these textual ambiguities. When two interpreters of Hobbes disagree over the meaning of Hobbes's text, what criteria should we use to adjudicate the dispute? The point of interpretive methods such as Skinner's is to provide us with such criteria. Yet the only method Steinberger provides us with is 'a systematic effort to focus closely on what is said, to piece together the structure of argumentation and to relate assertions of content with ever more accuracy and clarity' (AHPT, 143). While every good interpretation of a text should do this, what Steinberger does not explain is how one is supposed to do this in those instances where the structure of argumentation is ambiguous or the meaning of what is said is unclear. Finally, one might ask Steinberger what the point of the historical interpretation of political philosophy would be if it simply involved reconstructing the arguments of authors in a clear and logical form. If there is a clear and logical way in which to reproduce Hobbes's argument about the social contract, then once one scholar has written and published
that reconstruction, why would we need any other works on Hobbes's social contract? In dismissing Skinner's method, Steinberger does not provide us with any guidance as to what would be a more appropriate means to interpret and analyse historical texts.

NOTES

1 Peter J. Steinberger, 'Analysis and History of Political Thought', *American Political Science Review* 103:1 (2009), 135–46 (139), henceforward AHPT.


4 Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki, 'Encountering the Past: An Interview with Quentin Skinner', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6 (2002), 32–63 (47), henceforward EP.

5 The other major thinker of the twentieth century to do this is Stanley Cavell, who draws on Wittgenstein and Austin to analyse written and spoken language in as diverse a set of areas as film, theatre, contemporary music, epistemology and ethics. For example, see his diverse set of essays in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, second edition 2002).


10 For example see Mary Dietz, 'Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and The Politics of Deception', *American Political Science Review* 80:3 (September
Dietz argues that Machiavelli is intentionally giving Lorenzo de Medici bad advice in order to return Florence to a republic.


