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Bevir, Mark

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THE ROLE OF CONTEXTS IN UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLANATION

By Mark Bevir

I. CONTACT INFORMATION

Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1950

Email: mbevir@socrates.berkeley.edu

II. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mark Bevir is a member of the Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of <u>The Logic of the History of Ideas</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and, with R.A.W. Rhodes, <u>Interpreting British Governance</u> (London: Routledge, 2003); and he is editor, with Frank Trentmann, of <u>Critiques of Capital in Modern Britain and America</u> (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), and <u>Markets in Historical Contexts</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

ABSTRACT

In considering the Cambridge School of intellectual history, we should distinguish Skinner's conventionalism from Pocock's contextualism whilst recognising that both of them argue that the study of a text's linguistic context is at least necessary and perhaps sufficient to ensure understanding. This paper suggests that although "study the linguistic context of an utterance" is a valuable heuristic maxim, it is not a pre-requisite of understanding that one does so. Hence, we might shift our attention from the role of linguistic contexts in understanding a text, to the role of ideational contexts in our explanations of meanings or beliefs. The explanatory role of contexts can be unpacked in terms of traditions and dilemmas. Here the paper also considers how this approach differs from that of the Cambridge School.

THE ROLE OF CONTEXTS IN UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLANATION[1]

Quentin Skinner, Regis Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, helps to run a series of scholarly monographs published by Cambridge University Press under the general heading "Ideas in Context". Ideas in Context - this is the crux of the approach advocated by the Cambridge School of intellectual history inspired by J.G.A. Pocock and Skinner. In order to understand an utterance, they argue, we must locate it in the appropriate linguistic context. This might seem an obvious principle, but it has revolutionised Anglophone intellectual history. It also might seem a straightforward principle but it can be filled-out in various ways.

I sympathise with much of the revolution wrought by the Cambridge School. They have inspired a concern with the historicity of texts against overly analytical and abstract approaches to the history of political thought (Skinner 1988a). Nonetheless, I hope to rework contextualism so as to enable us to understand why the Cambridge School has produced valuable work whilst being less dogmatic about how we should acquire knowledge of the past. "Study the linguistic context of an utterance" is a useful heuristic maxim, but doing so is not necessary or sufficient for understanding. Contextualism should be reworked as a doctrine about appropriate forms of explanation, not requirements of understanding.

Contextualism and Conventionalism

Before considering the merits of the Cambridge School, we need to be clear what Pocock and Skinner argue. The contextualists inspired by Pocock argue that the meaning of a text derives from a paradigm or langue to which it belongs. In contrast, the conventionalists inspired by Skinner claim that to understand a text we must

situate it within contemporaneous conventions or debates. While contextualists deny that authorial intentions matter on the grounds that paradigms determine meanings, conventionalists believe that meanings embody authorial intentions albeit that authors must express their intentions conventionally. While contextualists want to situate texts in paradigms centered on shared doctrines or assumptions, conventionalists focus on debates composed of speech-acts concerning similar questions.

Although commentators often ignore the distinction between contextualists and conventionalists, the theorists involved are well aware of their differences. So, Pocock (1985 pp. 4-5) criticises conventionalists for stressing authorial intentions rather than discourse:

> The objection [to authorial intentions] with which we are dealing . . . asks . . . whether intentions . . . can be said to exist apart from the language in which the text is to be constructed. The author inhabits a historically given world that is apprehensible only in the ways rendered available by a number of historically given languages; the modes of speech available to him give him the intentions he can have, by giving him the means he can have of performing them.

Likewise, Skinner (1988c p. 106) attacks contextualists for highlighting discourses rather than authorial intentions:

> If Greenleaf's stress on traditions or Pocock's on languages are treated as methodologies in themselves, they are prone to generate at least two difficulties. There is an obvious danger that if we merely focus on the relations between the vocabulary used by a given writer and the traditions to which he may appear connected by his use of this vocabulary, we may become insensitive to instances of irony, obliquity, and other cases in which the writer

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

danger, however, is that if we merely concentrate on the language of a given

writer, we may run the risk of assimilating him to a completely alien

intellectual tradition, and thus of misunderstanding the whole aim of his

political works.

Pocock (1962; 1972; 1985) denounces intentionalist accounts of historical

meaning on the grounds that the meanings of utterances derive from paradigms or

langues. The meanings available to authors depend on the ways of thinking, writing,

or speaking that exist in their communities. Authors can not break out of socially-

given structures, so what they can say hinges on the structures to which their

communities give them access. Pocock insists that even if authors remain the actors

of history, the units of history must be theoretical and linguistic structures since these

fix what authors may say. Languages function "paradigmatically to prescribe what he

[the author] might say and how he might say it" (Pocock 1972, p. 25): they "give him

the intentions he can have, by giving him the means he can have of performing them"

(Pocock 1985, p. 5). Languages appear here to decide content as well as form: they

fix the ideas or meanings we express as well as the words we use to do so. It is true

that Pocock sometimes allows that texts have multiple meanings, but he then ascribes

the open nature of the meaning of a text not to the ability of authors to use language

creatively to convey their particular ideas but to the fact that any linguistic context

typically includes several languages each of which gives the text a different meaning.

As he explains, "the more complex, even the more contradictory, the language context

in which he [the author] is situated, the richer and more ambivalent become the

speech acts he is capable of performing" (Pocock 1985, p. 5).

Skinner argues that the meanings of utterances come from authors expressing their intentions in accord with the conventions that govern the treatment of the questions they address. To understand an utterance we have to grasp both its meaning and its illocutionary force, where its meaning comes from the sense and reference of its words, and its illocutionary force comes from the conventions that determine what the author was doing in making it. Skinner here equates intended illocutionary force with actual illocutionary force: he identifies what an author intended in making an utterance with what he did do in making it by virtue of the ruling set of conventions. Sometimes he does not seem to have any reason for doing this. In the best known statement of his position, he just says: because "the essential aim . . . must be to recover this complex intention on the part of the author" therefore "the appropriate methodology . . . must be concerned, first of all, to delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance, and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider linguistic context as a means of decoding the actual intentions of the given writer" (Skinner 1988a, pp. 63-4). At other times Skinner equates intended illocutionary force with actual illocutionary force on the grounds that authors follow the ruling conventions in order to be understood. He says, because "any writer must standardly be engaged in an intended act of communication," therefore "whatever intentions a given writer may have, they must be conventional intentions in the strong sense that they must be recognizable as intentions to uphold some particular position in argument, to contribute in a particular way to the treatment of some particular theme, and so on" (Skinner 1988b, p. 77).

Despite their differences Pocock and Skinner share a certain orientation. Both of them regard the study of the linguistic context of an utterance as necessary for

understanding to occur. The study of linguistic contexts is allegedly a prerequisite of adequate intellectual history. They argue that meanings depend on linguistic contexts, so historians who neglect such contexts neglect the very meanings with which they are concerned. Skinner writes, "to understand what any given writer may have been doing in using some particular concept or argument, we need first of all to grasp the nature and range of things that could recognizably have been done by using that particular concept, in the treatment of that particular theme, at that particular time" (Skinner 1988b, p. 77). Similarly, Pocock writes, "it seems a prior necessity [of historical understanding] to establish the language or languages in which some passage of political discourse was being conducted" (Pocock 1985, p. 7). Sometimes they even suggest that their preferred methods might be sufficient to ensure historical understanding, as when Skinner writes, "if we succeed in identifying this [linguistic] context with sufficient accuracy, we can eventually hope to read off what the speaker or writer in whom we are interested was doing in saying what he or she said" (Skinner 1988d, p. 275).

Despite Pocock and Skinner's numerous statements to the effect that they provide us with a method that we must adopt if we are to understand an utterance, some commentators maintain that their work deals with epistemological, not methodological, issues (Gunnell 1979, pp. 98-103; 1982).[2] These commentators fail to allow, however, that when Pocock and Skinner define their methods as pre-requisites of understanding, they thereby fuse epistemology with methodology so that their methods come to constitute forms of epistemic justification. Here "study linguistic the linguist context" becomes a logic of discovery: that is, a necessary pre-requisite of understanding, or, more generally, a method we must follow if we are to acquire justified knowledge of an object. According to Skinner, for example, to

understand an utterance, we must grasp the meaning of its words and also its intended illocutionary force. The words in Defoe's tract on "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters" are clear: they mean we should regard religious dissent as a capital offence. Yet to understand the tract, we have to grasp not only the meaning of the words but also its intended illocutionary force. "The Shortest Way With the Dissenters" has the force of a parody. Defoe was being ironic: he was ridiculing contemporary arguments against religious toleration, not recommending the hanging of dissenters. Crucially Skinner then argues that the expression and reception of intended illocutionary force requires a background of shared conventions. To understand an utterance, historians must have knowledge of the prevailing conventions that governed discussion of the questions it addresses. Hence, the recovery of the intended illocutionary force of an utterance requires "a separate form of study, which it will in fact be essential to undertake if the critic's aim is to understand 'the meaning' of the writer's corresponding works" (Skinner 1988b, p. 75).

The idea that the study of linguistic contexts constitutes a logic of discovery - a pre-requisite of understanding or knowledge - underlies many of the other positions associated with the Cambridge School. Pocock and Skinner insist on the autonomy of intellectual history because any attempt to reduce a text to its economic, political, or biographical contexts implicitly denies the need to study its linguistic context. They deny that there are perennial problems in intellectual history because such problems appear to be trans-historical and so independent of particular linguistic contexts. They reject "the myth of coherence" because they believe we understand a text not by attributing unexpressed beliefs to its author but by identifying its linguistic context. And they oppose a history of concepts on the grounds that concepts can not retain their identity across contexts.

<u>Contexts and Understanding</u>

The Cambridge School insist on the necessity of the study of linguistic contexts for understanding to occur. Pocock and Skinner are, I believe, mistaken in thus presenting their methods as logics of discovery. No method can be a prerequisite of good history whether it be contextualism, conventionalism, or something else. Any putative logic of discovery must rest, explicitly or implicitly, on the assumption that to understand an utterance we need to hold a correct prior theory. Theorists can insist on a specific method only if they assume that historians are unable to reconstruct meanings without suitable knowledge or preparation. Depending on their predilections, they might insist on historians having prior knowledge of linguistic contexts or conventions, the psychological makeup of the speaker, or the relevant socio-economic background.

We need to distinguish here between the prior theories with which people approach utterances and the passing theories by which they understand them. In <u>The Rivals</u> by Richard Sheridan, Captain Absolute reads out a letter complaining of Mrs Malaprop's dull chat full or words she does not understand. Mrs Malaprop responds by proclaiming her pride in her ability to present "a nice derangement of epitaphs". Sheridan clearly intended the audience to laugh at this additional example of her tripping over her tongue. Although they probably have a prior theory that "a nice derangement of epitaphs" means "a nice derangement of epitaphs', hopefully they develop a passing theory that she means "a nice arrangement of epithets.

The distinction between prior and passing theories of itself shows that correct prior knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding. A correct prior theory is not necessary for understanding because we always might set out with a

faulty prior theory and yet arrive at an adequate passing theory. A correct prior theory is not sufficient for understanding because we always might set out with an adequate prior theory and yet arrive at a faulty passing theory. Because a correct passing theory is neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure understanding, no method can be a guarantee or a prerequisite of understanding. No method can guarantee understanding because someone who sets out with a correct prior theory might reach a faulty passing theory. And no method can be a prerequisite of understanding because someone who sets out with an erroneous prior theory might reach an adequate passing theory.

Because there is no mechanical procedure appropriate to the retrieval of past meanings, historians can not justify their theories by reference to the method they use. Hence, Pocock and Skinner are mistaken in arguing that their respective methods are logics of discovery. The particular process by which historians reach an understanding of an utterance has no epistemological significance. They can try to systematise past experience in methodological hints or they can try something new; they can rely on instinct or they can wait for inspiration. What matters is the result of their endeavours. Just as we judge mathematical proofs and scientific theories without asking how their exponents arrived at them, so we should evaluate interpretations of utterances without considering the methods used by historians.

However, to reject the possibility of any method being a pre-requisite of understanding need not be to deny any role to the study of linguistic contexts. Pocock and Skinner have acted like a breath of fresh air, particularly in the history of political thought, where there methods have inspired numerous works, including their own, full of valuable historical insights. They have done so, however, not because they are right about contextualism being a logic of discovery, but rather because

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contextualism, first, provides a useful heuristic maxim, and, second, overlaps

somewhat with important facts about the nature of explanation in intellectual history.

Contexts and Explanation

With respect to understanding, the study of linguistic contexts constitutes only

a heuristic, not, as Pocock and Skinner argue, a logic of discovery. Among the furore

over the Cambridge School, however, little attention has been given to the explanatory

role played by linguistic, or better ideational, contexts in intellectual history. This role

becomes particularly extensive if we accept semantic holism. Semantic holists

believe that the truth-value of any proposition depends upon other propositions we

hold true. Although this is not the place to defend holism at length, we might observe

that it informs several of the most important developments in modern philosophy,

including the rejection of pure observation by philosophers of science such as Thomas

Kuhn (1970), the analyses of meaning and interpretation by philosophers such as

Donald Davidson (1984) and W.V.O. Quine (1961), and the restatement of the

contintental hermeneutic tradition by Hubert Dreyfus (1980).

Explanation in intellectual history surely begins with an attempt to explicate a

particular idea or belief in terms of people's reasons for holding it. To say this is only,

first, to deny the current relevance of a physicalism that would explain beliefs in terms

of physiological states, and, second, to insist instead that such explanation depends on

the elucidation of reasons. We explain beliefs, and also actions, by showing how they

were reasonable given their relationship to other relevant beliefs and actions. There

are numerous debates here about what constitutes reasonable, and what other beliefs

and actions are relevant, as well as the ontological and metaphysical status of beliefs

and ideas. Yet while I will touch on some of these debates in what follows, for now

we can put them to one side. We need to emphasise only that we can begin to explain beliefs and ideas by showing how they fit with others in an individual's worldveiw or a group's episteme.

So, historians who want to explain a belief need to reconstruct the relevant context of beliefs as a fairly consistent web. Let us consider two extreme views of what such a reconstruction might entail. On the one hand, logical empiricists generally argue that we have pure observations capable of giving us factual beliefs, where our theoretical beliefs are attempts to find significant patterns among such facts (Ayer 1936). They might suggest, therefore, that historians can reveal the internal logic of a web of beliefs by relating its first-order beliefs to specific experiences, and by portraying its second-order beliefs as attempts to account for patterns among its first-order beliefs. On the other hand, irrationalists and idealists sometimes argue that basic categories construct the nature and content of the experiences out of which our beliefs arise (Foucault, 1970). They might suggest, therefore, that historians can reveal the internal logic of a web of beliefs by relating its constituent beliefs to fundamental categories, which are in some sense given to us as a priori truths.

Semantic holism ascribes a task to the historian of ideas different from both of these extremes. It implies that the reasonableness of a belief depends on its relationship to other beliefs. Although some beliefs refer to reality, they are never pure but rather always embody theoretical assumptions. Thus, the logical empiricists must be wrong: historians can not reveal the inner consistency of a web of beliefs by portraying it as a pyramid based on pure observations. Similarly, although our theoretical assumptions inform our understanding of our experience, they are never given to us a priori but rather always derive from earlier interactions with the world. Thus, the irrationalists and idealists must be wrong: historians can not reveal the inner

consistency of a web of beliefs by portraying it as an inverted pyramid resting on <u>a priori</u> truths. More generally, the hierarchical metaphor of a pyramid of beliefs is inappropriate. Beliefs form webs that map onto reality at various points, where these points are defined by the ways in which the relevant beliefs relate to one another. Webs of belief are networks of interconnected units, with both the units and the connections between them being defined in part by beliefs about external reality. Sometimes historians will want to elucidate a belief that is a long way from points in the web that map onto external reality in terms of beliefs that are close to such points. At other times they will want to elucidate beliefs that are close to points that map onto external reality in terms of beliefs that are far from such points. In neither case, however, does the fact that a historian chooses to start from a particular point imply that it constitutes an epistemic foundation for the relevant web of beliefs.

A historian of ideas can explain why people held particular beliefs by locating them in the context of their webs of belief. Imagine that a historian thus explains that people held belief A because they believed X, Y, and Z. Next the historian probably will want to know why they believed the particular web of beliefs they did. We again can identify two extreme views of this task. On the one hand, logical empiricists generally argue that people arrive at webs of belief as a result of pure experiences. They might suggest, therefore, that the historian can explain why people held the webs of belief they did by reference to their experiences alone: the historian needs to consider only the circumstances people find themselves in, not the ways in which they construct or interpret their circumstances through inherited traditions. On the other hand, irrationalists and idealists often argue that people arrive at webs of belief as a result of inheriting a way of making sense of the world. They might suggest, therefore, that the historian can explain why people held the webs of belief they did

solely by reference to the traditions that informed, or even constructed, their perceptions: the historian needs to consider only the general concepts people inherit, not the ways in which they respond to their circumstances.

Semantic holism shows both of these extreme views to be mistaken. Consider first the atomistic individualism associated with logical empiricism. No doubt people come to believe things only in the context of their life-histories. What interests us however is why a particular web of beliefs becomes part of a particular life-history. Because we can not have pure experiences, we necessarily construe our personal experiences in terms of a prior bundle of theories. We can not arrive at beliefs through experiences unless we already have a prior web of beliefs. Thus, the logical empiricists are wrong: we can not explain webs of belief by reference to the pure experiences of the relevant individuals. Our experiences can lead us to beliefs only because we already have access to webs of belief in the form of the traditions of our community.

Critics might object to this stress on inherited traditions on the grounds that there must have been a moment of origin. However both "an individual who holds beliefs" and "an inherited tradition" are vague terms in a way that undermines the need for a moment of origin lying behind explanations of webs of belief. The holding of beliefs does not become a reality at any definite point on a spectrum of cases running from, say, purposive behaviour without language, through the use of single words, and the use of whole sentences tied to particular nouns, to elementary forms of abstract theorising. Inherited traditions do not become a reality at any definite point on a spectrum of cases running from, say, birds who migrate along established routes, through chimpanzees who co-operate strategically to capture monkeys, and a family of hunter-gathers who follow the rains, to a tribe that plants its crops at a particular

time of year. Crucially, because both "an individual who holds beliefs" and "an inherited tradition" are vague predicates, we can not talk of a moment of origin when either people came to hold beliefs or inherited traditions came into being.

Consider now the strong structuralism associated with idealism and irrationalism. No doubt people adopt their beliefs against a background tradition that already exists as a common heritage. What interests us though is how the beliefs of particular individuals relate to the tradition they inherit. Traditions can not be self-sufficient because they are based on the beliefs of individuals who therefore must be able to adopt beliefs that extend or modify the traditions. Thus, the idealists and irrationalists are wrong: we can not explain webs of belief as the products of self-sufficient traditions. Traditions arise, develop, and wither only because individuals come to hold the beliefs they do for reasons of their own.

Critics might object to our denying the self-sufficiency of traditions after we already have accepted that individuals always arrive at their webs of belief against the background of inherited traditions. But that individuals start out from an inherited tradition does not imply that they can not go on to modify it. Indeed, traditions change over time, and we can not explain these changes unless we accept that individuals are agents capable of altering the traditions they inherit. Perhaps, however, critics will argue that traditions themselves determine which choices are, and are not, available to individuals therein. Michel Foucault (1970) allows for competing outlooks in his epistemes in a way which suggests he gives to epistemes just this role of a limiting framework. Nobody can thus argue that traditions impose limits on agents, however, unless in principle we could recognise such a limit if it existed, and we could not recognise such a limit even in principle unless we could have criteria by which to distinguish a necessary limit imposed on agency by a

tradition from a conditional limit agents could go beyond although they happen not yet to have done so. Imagine, then, that we could identify the limits a tradition imposed on the choices of its adherents. Because these limits would be imposed by the tradition itself, they could not be natural limits transcending all traditions. Moreover, because we could identify the limits, we could describe them to the people who adhered to the relevant tradition, so assuming they could understand us, they too could come to recognise them. Finally, because they too could come to recognise the limits, and because these limits could not be natural, therefore they could transcend them, so really the limits could not be such at all. A historian can explain why people held the beliefs they did only by reference to the ways in which they reasoned against the background of inherited traditions.

We can explain why people held a belief by placing it in the context of their webs of belief. In addition, we can begin to explain why they held these webs of belief by placing them in the context of the traditions from which they set out. Critics might object that this form of explanation comes perilously close to Pocock's method. Yet our proposed use of webs of belief and traditions differs significantly from his use of paradigms and languages. Whereas he argues that a paradigm or a <u>langue</u> enables historians to understand the meaning of utterances, we have argued that webs of belief and traditions enable them to begin to explain beliefs. Moreover, because we have argued that webs of belief and traditions enter into explanations rather than fixing meanings, we can accept that historians might grasp the meaning of an utterance even if they do not study the appropriate web of beliefs or tradition.

Critics might object next that the distinction between understanding and explanation does not amount to much. They might argue that people necessarily express their beliefs using language, so if paradigms or webs of belief explain

individual beliefs, these paradigms also must explain the meaning of utterances in which case we surely can say that knowledge of the relevant paradigms enriches our appreciation of particular utterances. This argument contains a valid point: because beliefs exist as interconnected webs, to locate a belief in its web is to fill out its content and thus to aid our understanding of it. Nonetheless, when critics equate our concept of a web of beliefs with Pocock's paradigms and languages, they ignore the reasoning behind our distinction between understanding and explanation. Whereas our form of explanation relates a belief to the web of beliefs of the individual believer, the contextualists relate an utterance to a social structure. This is why Pocock's overlapping paradigms tend to crush out personal identity. When he tells the history of his putative languages, he tends to introduce some utterances by an individual in the story of one language, and other utterances by the same individual in the story of another language, but at no point does he feel a proper need to bring these different utterances together to show how the individual held a coherent web of beliefs. In contrast, we have argued that the initial context of interest to historians is the web of beliefs of the individual they are studying.

Critics might object, finally, that if we explain beliefs by reference to webs of belief, and webs of belief by reference to traditions, then the relevant contexts for beliefs ultimately must be traditions understood as social paradigms. Yet this objection ignores the limits that our defence of human agency led us to place on the explanatory role of traditions. We found that traditions influence people's beliefs without being constitutive of them. Thus, traditions can provide no more than a starting point for an explanation of a web of beliefs, and certainly not a full explanation of the beliefs an individual holds at a given moment. Because people develop their beliefs against the background of an inherited tradition, we can begin to

give an account of their intellectual development by describing the relevant tradition. But because people go on to adjust their beliefs, we must continue our account of their development by discussing why they adjusted their beliefs as they did.

How can a historian explain why people develop and revise traditions in the particular ways they do? Consider once again, two extreme views of what this task might entail. On the one hand, logical empiricists might argue that people test their theoretical beliefs against pure observations, modifying any beliefs that are in conflict with these observations. They might conclude that historians can explain a change of belief by showing how certain observations falsified the old beliefs whilst providing support for the new ones (Popper 1972). On the other hand, idealists might argue that people try to make their beliefs comprehensive and logically consistent, modifying beliefs in conflict with one another. They might conclude that historians can explain a change of belief by showing how the old web of beliefs contained two contradictory propositions which the new web deals with in an appropriate way (Hegel 1956). Irrationalists, of course, typically deny changes of belief are ever reasonable: they argue that rationality is relative to a paradigm, or web of beliefs, so no change of paradigm properly can be explained as reasonable (Foucault 1970).[3]

Semantic holism suggests the form of explanation appropriate to changes of belief differs from those prescribed by logical empiricists and idealists. Because there are neither pure observations nor self-supporting beliefs, no single observation or belief provides a sufficient explanation of any change. Rather, webs of belief are networks of interconnected concepts mapping onto reality at various points, so we can explain changes only by exploring the multiple ways in which a new understanding interacts with an old web of beliefs. Sometimes they will have to show how a new experience promoted a new view of old theories. At other times they will have to

show how a new theory promoted a new interpretation of old experiences. Webs of belief develop in a fluctuating process with all sorts of beliefs pushing and pulling one another in all sorts of ways. Semantic holism suggests, therefore, that people modify their beliefs in response to dilemmas although there is never any one required modification. A dilemma should be understood here as any new understanding - whether based on an interpreted experience or reflections upon existing beliefs - that stands apart from one's existing beliefs and so forces a reconsideration of them.[4]

The way people respond to any given dilemma reflects both the character of the dilemma and the content of their existing webs of belief. Consider the influence of the character of a dilemma on the changes people make in response to it. When confronted with a new understanding, people must reject it or modify their beliefs to accommodate it. If they reject it, their beliefs will remain unchanged. If they modify their beliefs to accommodate it, they must do so in a way that makes room for it, so the modifications must reflect its character. To face a dilemma is to ask oneself what an authoritative understanding says about how the world is, and, of course, to ask oneself a question is always to adopt a perspective from which to look for an answer. Every dilemma thus points us to ways in which we might resolve it. Among Victorian Christians who were troubled by a conflict between faith and the theory of evolution, for example, several responded by modifying their faith in a way that reflected the character of the dilemma they faced. They argued that God was immanent in the evolutionary process; he worked through natural processes in the world, rather than intervening miraculously from beyond. They reconciled the theory of evolution with a belief in God by presenting the evolutionary process as itself a manifestation of God's activity.

Consider now the influence of people's existing webs of belief on the nature of the changes they make in response to a dilemma. If people are to accommodate a new understanding, they must hook it on to aspects of their existing beliefs. The content of their existing beliefs, moreover, will make certain hooks available to them. To find a home for a new belief among their old ones, they must make intelligible connections between it and them, where the connections they can make will depend on the nature of their old beliefs. People can integrate a new belief into their existing ones only by relating themes in it to themes already present in them. Thus, their existing web of beliefs provides a litany to which they offer a series of responses as they come to terms with the dilemma. For example, the pantheistic beliefs associated with the romantics provided some Victorians with a hook on which to hang a theory of evolution. They moved from a pantheistic faith in nature as a mode of God's being by way of the theory of evolution to an immanentist faith according to which God worked his will through natural processes in the world. They reconciled the theory of evolution with faith in God by hooking the former on to pantheistic themes in their existing beliefs.

After people find hooks in their existing webs of belief on which to hang the understanding constitutive of a dilemma, they have to go on to modify several more of their existing beliefs. To see why this is so, we need to remember that semantic holism implies that our beliefs map onto reality only as coherent webs. Thus, a change in any one belief requires compensating and corresponding changes to be made to related beliefs. A new understanding affects a web of beliefs somewhat as a stone does a pool of water into which it falls. A dramatic disturbance occurs at the place where the stone enters the water, and from there ripples spread out, gradually fading away as one recedes from the centre of the disturbance. As people alter one

belief, so they almost necessarily have to modify the beliefs connected with it, and then the beliefs connected with these others and so on. Once again the additional changes people thus make to their existing beliefs will reflect both the character of the dilemma and the content of the beliefs themselves. As people modify more and more beliefs, so they strengthen the hooks that pull the new understanding into their web of beliefs. They adjust more and more of their beliefs the better to accommodate the new arrival. Each adjustment they make relates the new understanding to additional beliefs in ways that are mediated by the previous adjustments. Each adjustment they make enriches the themes that bring the new understanding into a coherent relationship with their existing beliefs.

People change their beliefs by hooking a new understanding onto themes already present therein. We can not specify this process in any greater detail precisely because it is a creative one associated with the capacity for agency. People's old webs of belief provide them with resources with which they can accommodate a new belief, and a new belief provides them with hints as to how they might locate it in their old web of beliefs, but these resources and hints do not determine, nor even place identifiable limits on, the new webs of belief at which they finally arrive.

Historians can explain why people changed their beliefs in the ways they did by presenting the new webs of belief as responses to dilemmas that confronted the old ones. Critics might object that this diachronic form of explanation closely resembles a logic of discovery. They might suggest that if historians can explain a new web of beliefs by portraying it as a response to a dilemma faced by the old one, they can recover the new beliefs by studying the dilemma, or at least they can not recover the new beliefs without studying it. Crucially, however, whereas the Cambridge School demand an unswerving adherence to a method, our diachronic form of explanation

does not do so. Our arguments allow historians to reach an explanation however like provided only that they express it in a particular form.

Critics might object that the distinction between a pre-requisite of understanding and a form of explanation lacks the content it would need to prevent our approach collapsing into a logic of discovery. They might argue that although our insistence on a particular form of explanation does not imply that a given method is necessary to produce good history, it does imply that a given method is sufficient to produce good history. After all, they might say, if the impact of dilemmas on webs of belief explains changes of belief, historians can be certain of recovering a change of belief if they recover the old web of beliefs and the dilemma. We can respond to this objection in general terms as well as with special reference to intellectual history. In general terms, forms of explanation set up empty schemas whereas logics of discovery purport to tell people how to set about filling in these schemas on any given occasion. Thus, because an explanatory schema need not tell people how to fill it in on particular occasions, a form of explanation need not entail a logic of discovery. A form of explanation appropriate to the natural sciences, for example, might include, as a bare minimum, the idea of an initial state of affairs causing a later one to come into being in such and such a way. But this schema does not provide scientists with a logic of discovery. It does not tell them how to set about filling it in on any given occasion. It does not do so because the nature of the link between two states of affairs, and so how one causes the other, is itself a vital part of what scientists try to discover. Once scientists know how a causal connection relates two states of affairs, they can use knowledge of one term and of the relevant causal connection to discover the other term. But when scientists thus tell people a later state of affairs will follow from an

initial state of affairs because of such and such a causal relationship, they are announcing the results of an investigation, not undertaking one.

In the case of the history of ideas, the relevant explanatory schema is as follows: an old web of beliefs changes into a new web of beliefs because of a dilemma. Critics might point out that in the history of ideas a concept of rationality establishes the link between the two terms of this explanatory schema. They might argue that because historians do not need to discover the nature of this link, our explanatory schema entails a logic of discovery. They might say that if historians know the nature of the initial state of affairs, then because they know the nature of the link between the two terms, they must be able to discover the later state of affairs. However, we can not thus derive a logic of discovery from our explanatory schema. The critics must accept the link between the two states of affairs is a rational one or else their argument fails because the nature of the link is no longer fixed. But if the link between the two states of affairs is a rational one, not a causal one, then historians can not possibly deduce the later from the earlier. Indeed, because the link between two states of affairs is a rational one, historians can reconstruct the movement from the one to the later only with the benefit of hindsight. Nobody could have predicted the movement no matter what prior knowledge they had. Historians can not deduce one state of beliefs from another, and this means that they can not be certain of discovering a new web of beliefs from prior knowledge of the relevant old web of beliefs and the dilemma it confronted.

Explanatory schemas give rise to logics of discovery only when both of two conditions are met. First, scholars have prior knowledge of the mechanism by which an earlier state of affairs brings a later one into being. Second, the nature of this mechanism is such that scholars can predict a later state of affairs provided they have

knowledge of the earlier state of affairs. The first condition might be met in intellectual history but the second is not. Historians can presume the link between two states of belief is a rational one but the nature of such a link precludes their predicting later webs of belief from their knowledge of earlier ones. So, because our explanatory schema does not allow for prediction, it does not lead to a logic of discovery.

Conclusion

The Cambridge School has had a dramatic influence on intellectual history. Much of this influence, I believe, has been beneficial. Nonetheless, both its theory and its practice remain problematic. My aim has been to reconsider the theory so as to render it less problematic and perhaps significantly to alter its trajectory. Despite often unrecognised differences, Pocock and Skinner alike present the study of linguistic contexts as necessary, perhaps even sufficient, to ensure a proper understanding of an utterance. In contrast, I have argued that there are no necessary pre-requisites for understanding an utterance, so we should accept their advice only as a heuristic maxim. The real importance of contexts, however, arises in relation to explanation, not understanding. We can explain the beliefs that are expressed in a text by locating them in the context of the wider web of beliefs of the person concerned, and we can explain this wider web of beliefs by locating it in the context of the relevant tradition and dilemmas.

Although my main concern has been thus to reconsider the theory of the Cambridge School, I have hinted at some of the ways in which this reconsideration might influence its practice. For a start, I have diluted the thesis of the autonomy of intellectual history. Because other contexts apart from the linguistic one might

provide valuable insights, we can imagine valuable heuristic maxims telling us to look

to them. In particular, dilemmas often arise from experiences, where reality, as we

conceive it, provides a useful guide to the nature of these experiences even though

they will have been constructed from within a particular web of beliefs. The reality of

inflation, for example, surely provides a useful context for explaining at least one of

the dilemmas that has inspired recent developments within the social democratic

tradition. In addition, to accept that linguistic contexts, although worthy of study, do

not fix the meaning of an utterance is to open up the possibility of our translating the

arguments of one utterance into the terms of another debate, context, or level of

abstraction, and thereby even to talk of perennial problems (Bevir 1994). As readers,

we can devise concepts that are sufficiently broad to cover utterances made in two or

more different contexts. Although the process of abstraction often will entail the loss

of some of the particularity of the meanings of the relevant utterances, this need not

mean that we miss-understand them. Moreover, we might have good reason to adopt,

at least in some cases, a heuristic maxim of the form "try to make authors appear

reasonable"; a maxim that would require us to concern ourselves with the coherence

of texts (Bevir 1997). Indeed, given that we explain beliefs by locating them in webs

of belief within which they appear reasonable, it is difficult to see how we can avoid

all concern with coherence. If we have good reason to assume someone wished to

present a consistent position, and if we also assume they had the intellectual capacity

to do so, we might even expend considerable effort looking for links between the

beliefs they clearly express. In these ways at least, my reconsideration of the

Cambridge School might help to break down some of the barriers that often isolate its

exponents from other intellectual historians.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper appeared in <u>Human Studies</u>.

[2] Skinner, reacting critically to Gunnell's characterisation of his work, reaffirmed yet again that he offers us his method as a logic of discovery. "I have sought to argue that, if our aim is to acquire this kind of understanding [of the historical meaning of a text], we have no option but to adopt an historical and intertextual approach" (Skinner 1988d, p. 232).

[3] Any belief in paradigms or absolute presuppositions surely pushes one towards an irrationalist relativism akin to that of Foucault (eg. Kuhn 1970; Collingwood, 1940. Toulmin (1972) discusses the problem mainly in relation to Collingwood.

[4] Dilemmas differ from Kuhn's (1970) anomalies mainly in that they need not be factual beliefs that inspire dramatic changes of belief. They differ from Popper's (1972) problems primarily in that they are wholly subjective or inter-subjective without any existence in a mind-independent world-three.