

# CAN I SAY THAT MACHIAVELLI WAS WRONG?

ON TRUTH-VALUE JUDGMENTS IN  
PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY OF IDEAS

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**This winter, the University of Oslo's Philosophy-program and History of Ideas-program are being joined together. This provides a good opportunity to rethink what separates these two closely related academic fields.**

*By Ole Martin Moen*

If an historian of ideas is asked what separates history of ideas from philosophy, her first reply is likely to be that while history of ideas is an historical discipline, philosophy is not. Given elementary semantics, this should not surprise anyone. But what then, one might wonder, separates the history of ideas from the history of philosophy? This is a more interesting question, I think, and here one is likely to be met with two replies, drawing two interrelated distinctions between the fields: one related to content, the other related to method.

The *content*-related distinction will state that historians of ideas study a wider range of texts than philosophers do. While historians of philosophy usually restrict themselves to the study of texts explicitly grappling with philosophical questions, historians of ideas traditionally have a broader focus in their selections of texts and authors. This is the reason Homer, Luther, Darwin and Freud are central figures in the University of Oslo's history of ideas curriculum, though they are absent in philosophy.

The *method*-related distinction will state that while philosophers examine the validity of the ideas they work with, historians of ideas restrict themselves to interpreting and explaining these ideas. Truth-value judgments, in other words, are often deemed irrelevant in history of ideas. As Espen Schaanning, professor of History of Ideas at the University of Oslo, nicely put this point in a lecture I attended as an undergraduate, «We historians of ideas don't care who is right and who is wrong. Or, well, we do—but we don't say it while at work» (Schaanning, 11.01.2005).

Here, however, it is important to clarify a possible ambiguity. When it is claimed that historians of ideas are not concerned with truth-value judgments, this applies only to the ideas found in the texts they study, not to the interpretations of these texts. Even though an historian of ideas would hesitate to say that Machiavelli is wrong, she would not hesitate to say it's wrong to claim that Machiavelli was a Neo-Hegelian. Were the history of ideas *as such* and in all aspects void of truth-value judgments, it would hardly classify as an academic subject.

The content-related distinction, I think, is a clearly valid one, contributing to the legitimization and definition of the history of ideas as a separate academic field. In fact, I think that at our own institution—where the history department is primarily materialistically oriented while the philosophy department is primarily analytically

oriented—there is certainly room for a discipline which studies the broad development of human intellectual life, as the history of ideas does.

I think, however, that the method-related distinction is more problematic, and this distinction is the topic of this essay. My aim, still, is not to cover this problem as a whole. Rather, I will restrict myself to examining the argument against truth-value judgments put forth by Quentin Skinner, one of the most central contemporary historians of ideas holding this position.

In *Regarding Method*, the first volume of his influential three-volume *Visions of Politics*, Skinner explicitly and strongly upholds this position when he claims that it is «nothing less than fatal to good historical practice to introduce the question of truth into historical interpretation» (Skinner, 31). His view is that «our task as historians is to try to recover [a past thinker's] point of view» and that in order to discharge this task,

what historians «need to employ is solely the concept of rational acceptability and not that of truth.» (Skinner, 53) Since I'm an historian of ideas currently at refuge in a philosophy journal, however, my aim in this essay is not merely to interpret, explain and assess the «rational acceptability» of Skinner's view. Rather, my aim is to judge the truth-value of Skinner's claim. What I will argue, specifically, is that even though Skinner's view is based on true and valid observations about the nature of historical inquiries, his condemnation of truth-value judgments is far more rigid than his arguments allow for.

### What Skinner claims

If an historian of ideas' job is to explain a past intellectual's «point of view», as Skinner claims, the question arises whether or not the «truth-value» of this «point of view» is in any way relevant for the kind of explanation she ought to provide. If the «truth-value» is relevant for determining the explanation she ought to provide, it follows that «truth-value» is something about which an historian of ideas needs to be concerned in order to figure out how to approach her material. This, moreover, is a position held by Keith Graham, Steven Lukes, Graham Macdonald and Phillip Pettit who claim (here in Macdonald and Pettit's words) that «the kind of explanation one gives of alien belief» indeed is dependent upon «the truth and falsity of this belief» (Skinner, 31). Their argument in support of this conclusion is that while false beliefs need an explana-

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tion, true beliefs are largely self-explanatory. Accordingly, an historian of ideas must judge truth-value in order to decide whether or not a given idea in fact needs to be explained.

This might intuitively seem like a plausible position. To construct a supporting example, we could imagine that historians suddenly found one of Machiavelli's lost writings, and that in this piece of writing, they discovered that Machiavelli at one point refers to «man's two legs». Since human beings obviously have two legs, this would not be much to ponder over, and we would not feel any need to explain why Machiavelli thinks that man has two legs. Probably, the claim would hardly be noticed. What would the reaction be, however, if Machiavelli out of thin air had referred to «man's three legs»? Probably a widespread lift of eyebrows and an equally widespread sense of an urgent need to explain how Machiavelli could have come to claim that man has three legs. While truths, in other words, are not in need of explanation, falsehoods are, and accordingly, historians of ideas cannot escape judging the truth-value of the material they study.

Skinner, as we should expect, is opposed to such an argument, and he is opposed to it for epistemological reasons. The problem with the argument, according to Skinner, is that it rests upon the premise that what is true obviously and automatically writes itself on the mind of an historical agent – and that what is false must have occurred by some «lapse of rationality» or a psychological factor that somehow prevented the obvious from being grasped. Skinner claims this premise does not hold, since the fact is that we ourselves play a very active (indeed leading) role in the shaping of our identification of the world: we volitionally categorize, contrast, generalize, draw conclusions etc., and because of the fallibility of this process, we can at the same time be rational and mistaken (Skinner, 33). Accordingly, both true and false claims may stem from rational deliberations. As such they equally require an explanation, and as further follows, the truth-value of a judgment is not relevant for what kind of explanation we ought to provide.

Though I find this argument sound, I assume that Skinner would agree that simple perceptual knowledge can in fact be said to write itself upon the mind of the observer, and accordingly, I will further assume that he would

agree that the imaginary example of Machiavelli claiming that man has three legs would indeed require more of an explanation than an unnoticeable two legs-claim. The reason would be that the number of legs of a man is perceptually self-evident, and if Machiavelli had seriously claimed that man has three legs, this would seriously alter our judgments of Machiavelli. Since this example concerns only perceptual knowledge, however, its proper treatment cannot be used as an analogy for how historians of ideas ought to interpret their material. Historians of ideas face and seek to interpret wide abstractions such as religions, ideologies and philosophies, and the fact that a crude mistake involving perception would call for a psychological evaluation, does not warrant that an intellectual mistake calls for the same.

To illustrate the fatality of relying on such a (false) epistemological premise in studying abstract thought, Skinner points to the French historian Emmanuel Ladorie's explanation of the Post-Reformation witch-trials (Skinner, 35-36, 41). Since Ladorie

shares Macdonald and Pettit's premise, Ladorie assumes—in seeking to find the cause of the witch-trials—that what we must be looking for is a breakdown of normal reasoning, a situation in which «the peasant consciousness suddenly broke loose from its moorings» (Ladorie, 60). What Ladorie forgets in claiming this, however, Skinner maintains, is that even though it today probably would take a «lapse of rationality» to believe in witches, this need not be the case in a radically different context. The claim that there are witches is no doubt false, but whether or not a specific item of knowledge seems reasonable to a spectator depends upon the surrounding items of knowledge the spectator holds. Rather than to seek psychological reasons why the peasants of Languedoc came to believe in witches, Skinner suggests we simply explain this by turning to Deuteronomy, Galatians and Exodus, i.e. the Old Testament. In a context taking for granted that the Old Testament «constitutes the directly inspired word of God», he maintains, «it would have been the height of irrationality for them to have *disbelieved* in the existence of witches. For the Bible not only affirms that witches exist, but adds that witchcraft is an abomination and that witches must not be suffered to live» (Skinner, 36). This, Skinner claims, is a much more likely and much more seriously engaging explanation than a psychological breakdown. Of course,

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one may well claim that the entire context of the Post-Reformation area constituted a «breakdown of reasoning» or a «mass delirium», but from the eyes of an historian of ideas, this is not relevant. What is relevant, claims Skinner, is that if we seek to understand alien beliefs, we should be exceptionally careful if searching for psychological problems that «prevented» people from seeing the truth; rather, we should seek to understand why a belief could in fact seem reasonable given the context in which it was held.

Accordingly, we may now grasp why Skinner claims that it is «fatal to good historical practice to introduce the question of truth into historical interpretation». It is fatal because using truth-value as a guide to interpretation makes us write «Ladurie history», i.e. a pseudo-history that does not demand of historians any proper form of contextualization.

As we have now laid out Skinner's argument that we should not as historians judge «truth», we are halfway through the descriptive part of this essay. As we have seen, Skinner doesn't merely claim negatively that we should not judge truth-value; he also claims positively that we should judge what he calls «rational acceptability». Understanding this, moreover, is crucial to grasping the full motivation behind Skinner's view on truth-value judgments. Before I criticize Skinner's point of view, therefore, I will now seek to explain his concept of «rational acceptability» and his reasons for claiming that even though truth-value judgments are not relevant for an historian of ideas, judgments of rational acceptability are.

For an action or conviction to be «rationally acceptable», Skinner defines, it must be «[reasonable] to hold true in the context [in which the historical agents] find themselves, [according to] some accredited form of reasoning» (Skinner, 31, 40). In order to grasp why Skinner thinks such a judgment is useful for an historian, we need a somewhat broader understanding (at least in outline) of what Skinner really means by «context» in relation to rational acceptability. In order to grasp Skinner's conception of a «context», moreover we need to understand the framework within which his conception of «context» arises; the framework of (1) his theory of meaning, (2) his theory of speech-acts and (3) his general historicist conception of history.

(1) Skinner's theory of meaning is a Wittgenstein-inspired conviction that words gain their meaning through their relationship to other words. Applied to the study of the history of ideas, this implies that the meaning behind

Machiavelli's works is graspable only when the work is seen as part of the debate situation (or, if one wills: the «language game») in which Machiavelli wrote (Skinner, 65). If we seek to understand Machiavelli, therefore, it will be just as fruitless to read a work of his in isolation (no matter how many times we read it), as it would be fruitless to stare at a word in isolation from other words in seeking to understand the word's meaning.

(2) Skinner's theory of speech-acts is a largely Austinian conviction that a speech/an utterance fundamentally is and must be understood as a kind of action. A speech, in other words, like any human activity, is something someone does in some context in order to attain something. Applied to the study of the history of ideas, this means that in seeking to understand the intention behind a text (and thus, to understand what the author really meant), we need not only integrate the text into its linguistic frame, but also seek to grasp what the author had reason to expect to attain from claiming what he claimed. I think this principle is eloquently formulated by James Tully in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, where Tully summarizes Skinner's point of view under the heading «The pen is a mighty sword» (Tully, 7). Rather than claiming, as does the old saying, that the word is mightier than the sword, Skinner treats words as swords: as forceful weapons in a battle. Charles Taylor also captures this well when he summarizes this principle of Skinner's as an instruction for the student of the history of political ideas: «Try to see what the author was trying to accomplish in his political context. Read the text as an action in context» (Taylor in Tully, 219).

(3) By Skinner's general historicist attitude, I refer to the large extent to which Skinner claims that one historical context (both linguistically, confer (1) and more physically, confer (2)) can be fundamentally different from another; i.e. his view of history as discontinuing and contingent. (This conviction runs through Skinner's works, and he claims to maintain it for what he simply calls «empirical grounds» (Skinner, 88)).

With these three characteristics of contexts – context as linguistic, context as physical and context as largely contingent – we can gain a fuller understanding of what Skinner means when claiming that judgments of «rational acceptability» within context is relevant for an historian of ideas. Judging «rational acceptability», Skinner thinks, is relevant because it is our sole means to grasp the habitual way in which an historical agent maneuvers in his terrain. A good parallel, I think, could be our general judgment

of our friends' characters. Just as a grasp of our friends' characters helps us understand the claims, evaluations, intentions and actions of our friends, a judgment of the contextual «rational acceptability» of Machiavelli helps us gain access to Machiavelli's habitual mode of functioning in his linguistic and physical context. As a concretization of this principle, Skinner provides the example of how Machiavelli, in seeking to establish his claim that his contemporaries lack virtù, reports much fewer casualties in local wars than what he must have known to be true. To take note of this trait of Machiavelli, Skinner maintains, is urgently important because it raises questions about...

...Machiavelli's beliefs [that we earlier] had no occasion to ask or even notice. Why is he so excessively insistent on the military incompetence of his fellow countrymen? Is he nursing some private grievance? Or is he merely nostalgic for the bygone days of citizen militias? Or is he unduly influenced by the classical assumption that such forces are alone capable of displaying courage? This question in turn suggests to the historian some wider ones. Should we be looking for a strongly emotional component in others of Machiavelli's political belief? Should we think of him as habitually credulous in his response to the political writings of ancient Rome? Only by enquiring into the rationality of his beliefs can we hope to recognize the range of explanatory puzzles they actually pose. (Skinner, 40)

Skinner, therefore, does not argue that an historian of ideas should be disinterested in dealing with his material, even though his rejection of truth-value judgments could appear to imply so when taken out of context. An historian needs to be actively judging, as that is a means to gain access to what we ultimately seek to grasp: the intention behind the agents' actions. When we judge, however, we must remember that our judgment should not be a judgment from our own contemporary context, but from the context in which the historical agent himself acted. Grasping this, we grasp what Skinner means when he claims that «what we need to employ [as historians of ideas] is solely the concept of rational acceptability and not that of truth» (Skinner, 53).

### **Why Skinner is wrong**

Having descriptively surveyed Skinner's position and his reasons for maintaining it, we shall now discuss whether or not his position is true.

As already indicated, I think many of Skinner's insights are both true and valuable. Particularly valuable, I think, is his observation that if we seek to grasp the meaning of a work, we need to grasp it from the debate-situation in which the work was created and in the linguistic framework available to its author. I also think Skinner's general stressing of context is valuable, and that this—as his fellow Cambridge historian John Dunn points out—brings into prominence and sheds new light on works outside the standard Western intellectual canon, since these works now make up a debate-situation considered necessary for historians of ideas to study (Dunn, 21). These observations, moreover, I think are important contributions to the definition and legitimization of history of ideas as an academic discipline. In a wide sense, I am therefore in full agreement with Skinner's positive instruction: that active judgment of «rational acceptability» within context is mandatory in studying intellectual material of the past. My disagreement with Skinner, accordingly concerns only his negative instruction: that it is straightforwardly «fatal» for an historian of ideas to judge the truth-value of the material he encounters. Since my aim in this essay is to criticize Skinner, therefore, I will here leave the discussion of «rational acceptability» and give exclusive focus to his negative statement regarding truth.

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My initial comment on Skinner's negative statement was that he is «more rigid than his evidence allows for». Since my criticism accordingly amounts to the rigidity involved, I also here agree with his general principle. My agreement specifically concerns the claim that judgment of truth-value is not a necessary part of interpretation and that the truth-value of the statements we seek to interpret is irrelevant

(as far as the statements are abstract in character) to what sort of explanation we ought to provide. With regard to this point, I actually think one could even see it as a logical necessity that a judgment of a statement's truth-value is not a necessary step towards understanding the statement. The reason is simply that before you can judge the truth-value of a statement, you need to understand it, and if it were so that you needed to know whether or not the statement is true before you could understand it, both its meaning and its truth-value would be trapped in a logical circle where A presupposes B and B presupposes A.

Thus I agree with Skinner's criticism of Ladurie. What I think is crucial, however, is that our problem with

Ladurie is not that he judges truth-value *as such*; the problem, rather, is that he lets his truth-value judgments be normative for the explanations he provides. Accordingly, I think it is proper to raise the following critical question: If Ladurie had judged the truth-value of the material he studied (let's say he dismissed the entire post-Reformation era as fundamentally misguided), yet still in his historical explanation of the belief in witches did not tend towards psychologizing, would his judgment of truth-value then still be fatal?

My answer to this question is no, and so for the mere reason that to claim X is something distinguishable from claiming that X is relevant for Y. Accordingly, I think it is a valid objection to Skinner's position to claim that truth-value judgments are not harmful as long as they are considered irrelevant in the process of interpretation. As far as I know Skinner's literature, he does not address this objection.

One possible reply, however—given Skinner's own arguments—could be that for an historian of ideas to judge the truth-value of the claims he encounters would be a meaningless effort and a waste of time (and thus in one sense «fatal»). Given a radical historicist point of view – a point of view in which there is an extreme shift in context from one era to another – this could be a plausible reply, and Skinner also hints in this direction in chapter 3 of *Visions of Politics* where he writes that nothing hinders one in asking whether an utterance from the renaissance (particularly, Machiavelli's claim that mercenary armies always jeopardize the liberty of the city state) is really true or false, but that asking such a question is anachronistic: it is analogous to asking whether or not the French king is bald: today, «the question doesn't arise» (Skinner, 53).

If we are to assess this example as an argument against the possible value of intercontextual truth-value judgments, however we should ask whether Skinner here has given a sufficiently broad and strong example to support his case. While it does seem fairly safe to assume that the question of the impact of mercenary armies on city-states is no longer much of a pressing issue, couldn't one easily give other examples where such an assumption would not be as safe? We could consider, for example, Aristotle's thoughts about happiness and human flourishing in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and ask whether it is in any way clear that Aristotle's observations belong solely within the context of the Greek city-state and are not applicable beyond

it. Whether our answer to such a question is yes or no depends, as indicated, upon the radicalism of one's historicist outlook. If one claims that there is a complete change of context from one era to another, one could claim that Aristotle's observations bear no consequences for people living in the 21st century. Do we, however, find arguments supporting such an extreme historicism in Skinner's own writings?

I think not. One interesting thing one should notice while reading *Visions of Politics*, is that Skinner in his judgment of what characterizes a rational agent provides context-independent criteria for rationality. He claims that a rational agent (no matter where or when) seeks to support his point of view, is willing to reason, seeks to resolve inconsistencies, and even holds ideas in harmony with what is needed for survival. Skinner also explicitly rejects Richard Rorty's criticism of such a view (Skinner, 31-32). Accordingly, and as I interpret

him, Skinner takes for granted that there is at least some contextual continuity between different epochs. As a consequence it follows that a statement made in one context can be directly relevant in another. From this it further follows that Skinner is not justified in claiming the necessity of excluding truth-value judgments from historical study on the grounds that they are all meaningless statements comparable to statements about the French king's baldness.

Since I reject his arguments, I do not, in other words, agree with Skinner's conviction that truth-value judgments are bound to be fatal for historians of ideas. And furthermore: by not fiercely excluding truth-value judgments, I even think Skinner could have avoided some of his most hard-hitting critics, for example John Keane's claim that Skinner's theory of history leads to «dusty antiquarianism» and Joseph Femia's claim it «takes all value out of history» (Keane and Femia in Tully, 212-213, 162). I *do* think Skinner does an impressive job defending the history of ideas in arguing that even though the subject does not give us eternal insights into eternal questions, it does give us insights into what other worldviews and lives are possible and into how we have gotten to take for granted the ideas we take for granted today. It is not so however that some virtues associated with an academic discipline must exclude others, and a supreme virtue of the history of ideas could well be that it gives insights that can be used, not merely as historical material, but as ideas for oneself to

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ponder over. This, however, would be a matter of judging the truth-value of the claims one studies.

Judging anything as true or false, however, is not something drastic, crude and condemning; rather, it is merely the integration of an item of knowledge into not only others' contexts, but also into one's own perception of the world. To perform such integrations, I think, is a sign of enthusiasm and genuine concern for ideas, i.e. for the subject matter historians of ideas study. Enthusiasm and genuine concern, moreover, I regard as anything but academically fatal.

It might very well be that Skinner prefers literature in the history of ideas that never includes the author's truth-

value judgments. In many cases, in fact, I would even side with him. Given Skinner's arguments, however such a preference cannot be a universal instruction for the writing of history of ideas. As long as truth-value judgments are not considered interpretationally relevant, whether or not they should be included in an historical inquiry is solely a matter of taste. With this falls the claim that a fundamental and constitutive difference between philosophy and history of ideas can be how they deal with the phenomenon of truth: As far as Skinner has proved the point, I can say that Machiavelli was wrong and still write full-blooded history of ideas.

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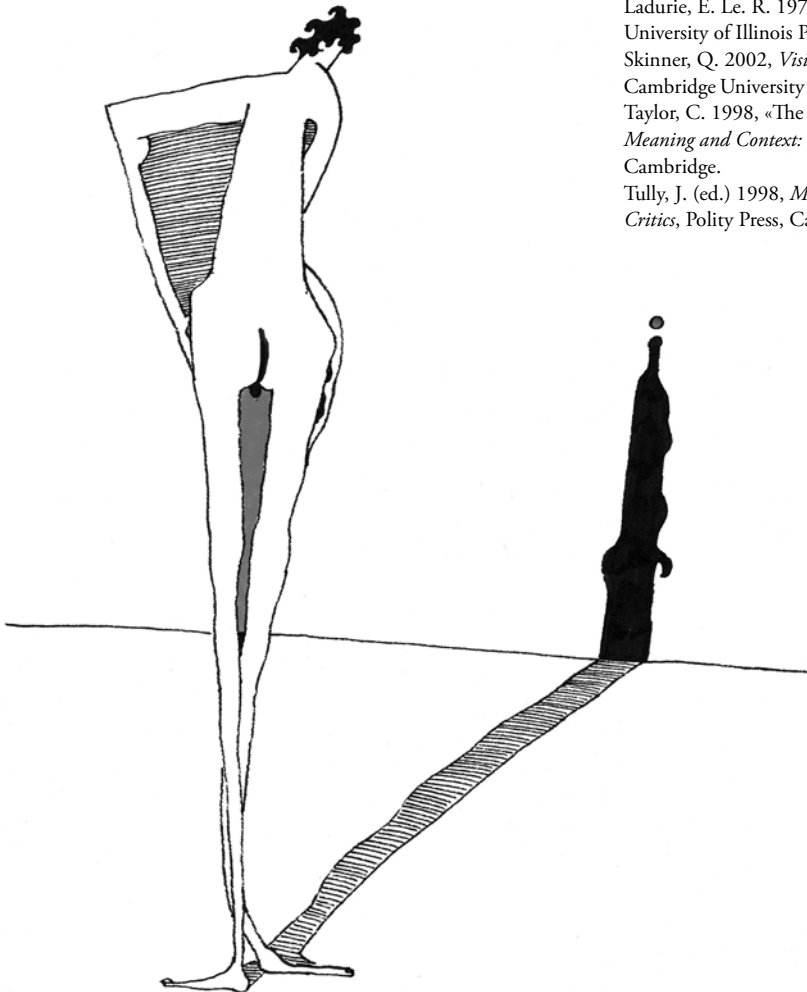


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