



# Analytical Philosophy and the Philosophy of Intellectual History: A Critical Comparison and Interpretation\*

Admir Skodo

*University of California, Berkeley*

*askodo@berkeley.edu*

---

## Abstract

This article argues that the relationship between analytical philosophy and the philosophy of intellectual history is conceptually uneasy and even antagonistic once the general philosophical viewpoints, and some particular topics, of the two perspectives are drawn out and compared. The article critically compares the philosophies of Quentin Skinner and Mark Bevir with the philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson. Section I compares the way in which these two perspectives view the task of philosophy. Section II points to a critical difficulty in Bevir and Skinner's use of analytical philosophy in their discussions on objectivity. In section III, another such critical juncture is identified in the topic of explanation. Finally, section IV suggests an interpretation for the character of the comparison.

## Keywords

analytical philosophy, intellectual history, philosophy of history, objectivity, explanation, idealism, historicism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson, Quentin Skinner, Mark Bevir

## Introduction

It is commonplace in the literature on modern intellectual history to argue that analytical philosophy positively shaped the philosophy of intellectual

---

\*) I would like to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundations for financing the research of this article. I would also like to thank Martin Jay for offering valuable comments on a previous draft of this article.

history.<sup>1</sup> As true as that may be, this article argues that the relationship between analytical philosophy and the philosophy of intellectual history is conceptually uneasy and even antagonistic once the general philosophical viewpoints, and some particular topics, of the two perspectives are drawn out and compared. The problematic nature of this relationship is either overlooked or underestimated both in the literature and among those in intellectual history who use analytical philosophy.

This article critically compares the philosophies of Quentin Skinner and Mark Bevir with the philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson. The choice of comparison is justified by the fact that the former two make extensive use of the latter's philosophies. To be sure, differences between Bevir and Skinner exist, both in terms of the particular perspectives of analytical philosophy they draw on, and in terms of the content of their own philosophies. The reason for why they have been selected is because they are the only intellectual historians who have systematically engaged with analytical philosophy. And the reason for why they have been placed together is because they encounter similar problems due to that very engagement.

The fact that these reasons are at odds with Bevir and Skinner's self-presentations acts as a constraint on the structure of my argument. The arguments of this article do not take the form of a charitable interpretation resting on the historicist principle of sympathy. Consequently, Bevir and Skinner's (and most commentators') own statements on their work concerning the character of analytical philosophy, and the relation of

---

<sup>1</sup> See e.g., D. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); J.G.A. Pocock, "Foundations and Moments," *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, ed. A. Brett, J. Tully, and H. Hamilton-Bleakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 37–49; K. Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); B. Young, "Intellectual History in Britain," *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*, ed. R. Whatmore and B. Young (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2006), 25–45; I. Hampsher-Monk, "The History of Political Thought and the Political History of Thought," *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, ed. I. Hampsher-Monk and D. Castiglione (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 159–175; R.N. Soffer, *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America: From the Great War to Thatcher and Reagan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27; and D. Boucher, *Texts in Context: Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), 193–251.

their philosophies to analytical philosophy, are not only sidelined, but also contested.<sup>2</sup>

In order for this analytical move to carry philosophical force, the article attempts to answer the following questions: if Skinner and Bevir's theories are compared with those analytical philosophies that inform them, then what philosophical implications can be revealed from that comparison for Skinner and Bevir's theories?<sup>3</sup> Do the analytical-philosophical assumptions, principles, and attitudes only strengthen the philosophical viability of the philosophy of intellectual history? Or do they risk obviating the conceptual identity, autonomy, and legitimacy of intellectual history that arises from historical practice – perhaps even the philosophical desire or need for such an idea of intellectual history?

In more concrete terms, this article compares the ways in which the two perspectives conceptualize the task of philosophy and the presuppositions of science (whether human or natural). There are of course different perspectives within analytical philosophy, and so Wittgenstein and Austin will be placed in a perspective separate from the perspective including Davidson and Quine. Moreover, I will take into account the differences in perspective between Wittgenstein and Austin. Notwithstanding these qualifications, which will complicate the presentation of the arguments, I hold that the arguments of this article are sound.

The arguments of this article seek to arrive at the following positions: first, to show that analytical philosophy has an either indifferent or inimical relation to Bevir and Skinner's philosophies of intellectual history, why this is so, and what philosophical implications this relationship has for Bevir and Skinner's philosophical positions. Second, to suggest that historians would do right to be careful in committing themselves so strongly to analytical philosophy *of whatever perspective*.<sup>4</sup> And third, to re-open the discussion on the relationship between analytical philosophy and history.

---

<sup>2</sup>) In other words, this is neither a reception study, nor a historical account of the place of analytical philosophy in the history of historiography. This article does aspire to be faithful to the principle of factual and contextual accuracy when describing the positions of the subjects studied. But primarily it reveals certain philosophical implications and problems issuing from that interpretation.

<sup>3</sup>) I use "theory" and "philosophy" interchangeably when discussing Skinner and Bevir.

<sup>4</sup>) Different kinds of reasons for why scholars should be careful in using analytical philosophy can be found in B. Wilshire, *Fashionable Nihilism: A Critique of Analytic Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002); A. Preston, *Analytic Philosophy: The History*

The article is arranged as follows. Section I compares the way in which the two perspectives (including perspectives within analytical perspectives) view the task of philosophy. Section II pinpoints a critical difficulty in Bevir and Skinner's use of analytical philosophy in their discussions on objectivity. Section III identifies another critical difficulty in the topic of explanation. Finally, section IV suggests a philosophical-historical interpretation for the results of the comparison.

## I. The Task of Philosophy

Skinner and Bevir have themselves made it clear that even though they have been strongly influenced by other traditions of thought, such as British idealism, it is above all analytical philosophy that has provided them with the means to construct a philosophy of intellectual history. They make extensive and recurring use of the philosophies of leading analytical philosophers such as Austin, Quine, Wittgenstein and Davidson.<sup>5</sup> In an interview from 2002 Skinner relates that although R.G. Collingwood was of “most immediate and powerful” influence to “his thinking and practice,” “Mark Bevir is [...] right to insist that, at least in my own case, the impact of a certain strand in analytical philosophy was of even greater importance.”<sup>6</sup> Given these self-descriptions, and the ascriptions of commentators, I find it

---

*of an Illusion* (London: Continuum, 2007); T. Akehurst, *The Cultural Politics of Analytic Philosophy: Britishness and the Spectre of Europe* (London: Continuum, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> For Skinner, see “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3–53, for a discussion on Austin; “Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1970), 118–138, for a discussion on Austin; “On Performing and Explaining Linguistic Actions,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1971), 1–21, where Grice's analysis of intention is added to Skinner's theory; “A Reply to my Critics,” *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. J. Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 231–289, where Kuhn (250), Wittgenstein (260), Quine (251–252) and Davidson (252) come to the fore in Skinner's analysis; finally in *Visions of Politics: Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2 and 4, Skinner professes that he has always been following Austin, Grice, Strawson, Grice, Wittgenstein, Quine, and Davidson. For Bevir see *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): on 14–15 and 43–57 Wittgenstein is discussed; Davidson is discussed on 280–282 and 299–300; Quine on 36–37; and Kuhn and Lakatos on 227–234.

<sup>6</sup> P. Koikkalainen and S. Syrjämäki, “Quentin Skinner on Encountering the Past,” *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 6 (2002), 34–67.

pertinent to re-open the character of the relationship between analytical philosophy and intellectual history.

It is clear that for Skinner and Bevir the method, concepts, and arguments of analytical philosophy can be used to draw out and justify the fundamental presuppositions and therein-implied precepts of a proper intellectual history. According to Skinner, historians' attempts at such a task, as for instance adumbrated in G.R. Elton's *The Practice of History*, are too feeble, and so must be supplanted with philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Already in 1965 Skinner excoriated historians for their conceptual incompetence and deep-seated aversion to matters concerning the value of philosophy for their discipline. This is especially pernicious to history, as the historian's reason on its own, according to Skinner, is not well equipped to grapple with issues concerning historical understanding or explanation. As Skinner contends, "The historian's commonsense explanatory concepts seem too ambiguous, however formulated, to result in successful explanations."<sup>8</sup> This judgment was to be repeated, with more fervor, in 1975.<sup>9</sup> It is no mere auxiliary role that Skinner attributes to philosophical arguments (such as the German historicists gave to philology and source criticism) but one where they are capable of enunciating the "necessary and perhaps sufficient principles for understanding a text."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, and crucially, such "philosophical arguments" can "be couched in the form of precepts about method," and "these in turn serve to provide us with a helpful guide to practice."<sup>11</sup>

Bevir essentially shares this view with Skinner. For Bevir philosophy is a logical and normative mode of inquiry into an established body of concepts, a body such as intellectual history. Through philosophical analysis, the fundamental issues pertaining to the way a historian reasons about his or her object can be "made salient," according to Bevir. Obviously, then, philosophy can do something for history that it cannot do itself. More specifically, Bevir views the task of philosophy to entail "a means of unpacking

<sup>7</sup> G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). See Skinner's critique in "Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Cult of the Fact," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 7 (1997), 301–316.

<sup>8</sup> Q. Skinner, "The Limits of Historical Explanations," *Philosophy*, 41 (1966), 199–215, 212.

<sup>9</sup> Q. Skinner, "Hermeneutics and the Role of History," *New Literary Studies*, 7 (1975), 209–232.

<sup>10</sup> Q. Skinner, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action," *Political Theory*, 2 (1974), 277–303, 279.

<sup>11</sup> Skinner, "A Reply to my Critics," 233.

categories or theories and intuitions or facts that are embedded in our concepts.”<sup>12</sup> And what philosophy reveals through its analysis of the way historians reason about data is an identification of where they do “not reason in the appropriate manner.” This identification justifies a normative dimension to philosophy, and so philosophy diagnoses and fleshes out inappropriate instances of reasoning, followed by a prescription of correct ones. What Bevir ultimately wants to establish with his philosophical analysis is an “ideal type of reasoning” for intellectual history that carries normative weight.<sup>13</sup>

It is true that when Bevir and Skinner draw on their favorite philosophers they do not simply mimic them or apply their general propositions onto new domains of objects. Both Skinner and Bevir reject certain aspects of analytical philosophy. But still, as much as they may reject, or as far as they are ready to go in changing analytical philosophies, they nevertheless do not give the impression of harboring any fundamental distrust toward them. They do not give this impression, for they never question the very *idea* of analytical philosophy, that is, analytical-philosophical method and analytical philosophers’ view of the task of philosophy.

Quite a few astute commentators have picked up on this and suggested that Skinner and Bevir’s indebtedness to analytical philosophy might be an ominous sign to intellectual history. John G. Gunnell argues that in combating the logical positivists Skinner has accepted one of their key aims: to arrive at a methodology of history with the tools of philosophy. Gunnell worries that this might hide the inheritance of the fatal flaws of the positivist outlook, such as its inapplicability to historical science.<sup>14</sup> David Boucher argues that through Skinner’s influence, analytical philosophy has managed to subject history to its own premises, and so “history, as an intellectual mode of enquiry, is made to rest upon the foundations of the philosophies of language of Wittgenstein and Austin.”<sup>15</sup> This kind of

---

<sup>12</sup> Bevir, *The Logic*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Bevir, *The Logic*, 8–9.

<sup>14</sup> J.G. Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Winthrop, 1979), 103, 121–122.

<sup>15</sup> Boucher, *Texts in Context*, 18.

judgment reaches a rhetorical culmination in Kenneth Minnogue's verdict that Skinner is a "philosophical imperialist in historical disguise."<sup>16</sup>

Bevir too has endured attacks for his use of analytical philosophy. Brian Young, not unlike Minnogue in his phrasing, has criticized Bevir for being intellectually tyrannical in using a definite article for his logic. Young traces the origins of this tyranny to the analytical philosophers Robert Nozick and John Rawls, who attempted to impose on the essentially concrete nature of politics an essential abstract form of analysis. Young wishes to rid intellectual history of such a tyranny.<sup>17</sup> And as Minnogue's phrase constitutes a climax in the verdicts on Skinner, so we can jump to Allan Megill's comment on Bevir's use of analytical philosophy as an exercise guided by "naïve theoreticism," and let it act as the verbal apogee of the scornful remarks on Bevir.<sup>18</sup> Megill's final verdict is that in using analytical philosophy Bevir has done little more than construct an abstract though imaginative theory that is, *eo ipso*, unable to provide the guidelines for historical understanding, for to try to fit the past's essential concreteness, heterogeneity, alterity and fluidity into such a theory is to strip it of everything that determines it.

What all these critics have in common are the rebukes they issue for theorists of intellectual history who use analytical philosophy. But intellectual rebukes look with a gaze that is guided by instinctive and territorial disagreement, and are often not based on actual substantiations.<sup>19</sup> Thus, to the point the critics may be in some respect, but what is really needed is an analysis of the way analytical philosophers themselves view the task of philosophy as compared to how intellectual historians view it. By now we know how Bevir and Skinner view it, and so it is time to address the analytical philosophers' views of philosophy and examine how they fit with Bevir and Skinner's vision of philosophy.

<sup>16</sup> K. Minnogue, "Method in Intellectual History: Quentin Skinner's *Foundations*," *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. J. Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 176–194, 180.

<sup>17</sup> B. Young, "The Tyranny of the Definite Article: Some Thoughts on the Art of Intellectual History," *History of European Ideas*, 28 (2002), 101–117.

<sup>18</sup> A. Megill, "Imagining the History of Ideas," *Rethinking History*, 4 (2000), 333–340, 338.

<sup>19</sup> Gunnell, Minnogue, Young, and Boucher draw on traditions of thought or thinkers that do not fit well with the traditions that Skinner and Bevir draw on. And when they do draw on the same tradition, they do so through very different interpretations or modifications of that tradition. For instance, where Skinner and Bevir draw on idealism to defend intentionalism, Boucher draws on the same tradition to defend anti-intentionalist constructivism.

As is well known, Austin and Wittgenstein both belong to an Oxbridge philosophical movement that shifted the task of philosophy from being an analysis of a purportedly foundational logical structure of reality, language, or thought (which they attributed to idealists and logical positivists for instance) to being a non-foundational analysis of language in everyday or specific use.<sup>20</sup> These “ordinary language philosophers” refused to reduce language to logical foundations or completely detach it from its use in everyday life, and so vindicated the supremacy of ordinary language in philosophical study. Austin and Wittgenstein could thus agree on what the object of philosophy should be, but from there on, their philosophical-personal temperaments made them approach that object differently.

Bevir and Skinner too start out from concepts used in everyday life, e.g. “intention,” “belief,” and “context,” and they do so partly through the philosophies of Austin (Skinner) and Wittgenstein (Skinner and Bevir). But upon closer examination, their philosophical vision turns out to be quite different from what Austin and Wittgenstein envision as the task of philosophy, and these differences carry certain implications that I will spell out.

Wittgenstein’s general philosophical attitude is directed toward logic and especially language; it can perhaps be summarized in an aphoristic fashion: for Wittgenstein logic is not *above* or *below* the use of language, but always *in* the use of language. The object of philosophy is not the foundational structure of thought buried under the surface of its site in ordinary language. It is on the contrary “something in plain view, for this is what we don’t seem to understand.”<sup>21</sup> This is *all there is* to the philosophical object, and this marks the path of philosophy as an activity. Anytime a philosopher becomes “bewitched” by language into thinking there is something beyond its use, then there, *and only there*, does philosophy have a role to play: by clearing such mistakes away. Wittgenstein rejects the belief that the logic of language must be fixed, static and abstract, and owns up the fact that it is a non-reducible and non-fixed “form of life,” but one that is useful and that works in human culture. Wittgenstein thus argues: “I use the name ‘N’ without a *fixed* meaning. (But that detracts us little from its usefulness).”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> D. Pears, “Wittgenstein and Austin,” *British Analytical Philosophy*, ed. B. Williams and A. Montefiore (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 17–41.

<sup>21</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), §89.

<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §79.



And he reasons in the same manner regarding the concept of “rule,” arguing that even though rules are non-foundational for social relations, inexact (in logical and propositional terms), change, and sometimes change as we go along in a rule-regulated practice, they are still useful.<sup>23</sup>

Skinner and Bevir’s theories do draw upon and are indeed consistent with some of Wittgenstein’s *arguments* about the inextricable bond between language and culture, and his fervent belief in the inherently contingent and malleable nature of our concepts.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, in constructing philosophies so as to give the human sciences their dignity in relation to the natural sciences, Skinner and Bevir are utterly un-Wittgensteinian, as Wittgenstein was vehemently opposed to that conception of philosophy. We can, for means of illustration of this difference, paraphrase Wittgenstein’s aphorism, “*You cannot gain a fundamental understanding of mathematics by waiting for a theory,*”<sup>25</sup> as “*You cannot gain a fundamental understanding of intellectual history by waiting for a theory.*” He famously wrote, again about the task of philosophy: “Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.”<sup>26</sup> And, again about philosophy (which he called “grammar” at times): “Grammar [...] only describes and in no way explains the use of signs.”<sup>27</sup>

For Wittgenstein, there is no founding, justifying, or prescribing involved in *philosophical* research (or in theories). For Bevir and Skinner, in contrast, philosophy can and indeed should found, justify, and prescribe for the form of life we call historical research and thought.<sup>28</sup>

What is the philosophical implication of this difference for Bevir and Skinner? It is that critical aspects of their philosophies (foundation, justification, prescription) lack grounding in Wittgenstein. These aspects require a wholly different task of philosophy than that presented by Wittgenstein

<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §83.

<sup>24</sup> As they make evident repeatedly. See e.g. Bevir, *The Logic*; and Skinner, “A Reply to my Critics.”

<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein quoted in R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 307. See also Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §109; and R. Monk, “Biography and Theory Reconsidered: Second Thoughts,” *New Formations*, 68 (2009), 134–143.

<sup>26</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §124.

<sup>27</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §496.

<sup>28</sup> This reading is developed in the following two sections.

(or any of the other philosophers that will be discussed shortly), but Skinner or Bevir never spell out such a task. It is assumed to naturally flow from analytical philosophy. Indeed one of Skinner and Bevir's crucial points in drawing on analytical philosophy is to accomplish this task, and so they leave us with the question how analytical philosophy of whatever cast provides the tools for doing so.<sup>29</sup>

Austin shares with Wittgenstein the philosophical object of study (ordinary language), and his reasons for this choice are similar as well. Austin had at one point become disenchanted, like Wittgenstein, with the belief that “the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state’ some fact, which it must do either truly or falsely.”<sup>30</sup> For Austin, again as for Wittgenstein, a sentence is always “used in *making a statement*,” and the *meaning* of the sentence cannot therefore be said to reside in the statement, or in its logical template, or in the order of things in the world outside the statement and the statement's maker.<sup>31</sup> It was ordinary language that was to be studied by the philosopher, and this choice of study had profound effects on Austin. As John Searle relates, Austin argues that all distinctions essential to man are laid down in ordinary language, and so we can learn a great deal by disentangling them the actual use of language.<sup>32</sup> People *do* things with words and that is Austin's cue to his philosophical investigations. Austin argues that there is a complex class of sentences which do not take the form of the statement, are neither true nor false, yet naturally occur in and are vital to language. As is well known, he calls this type of sentence the “performative” or the “speech act.”

For Austin, the criteria and presuppositions of a performative are *already* laid down in ordinary language, and so can be grasped by a philosopher with an intuitive grasp of performatives (this resembles Wittgenstein's view that philosophy targets the fact of failing to understand what we are accustomed to by cultural habit, and so take for granted until we ask philosophical

---

<sup>29)</sup> To counter a possible objection: in the last section, I will show that Skinner and Bevir do *not* fall back on another philosophical tradition to supply them with the appropriate view of the task of philosophy.

<sup>30)</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisà (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1.

<sup>31)</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things*, 1.

<sup>32)</sup> J. Searle, “J.L. Austin (1911–1960),” *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, ed. A.P. Martinich and D. Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 218–230, 222.

questions). Therefore, philosophy for Austin seems to mean non-foundational, non-justifying, and non-prescriptive *description* of the already existing necessary and sufficient conditions of speech acts. All the philosopher has to do is to render explicit the *synchronic* logical elements and relations that obtain in linguistic acts. So *established* and *fixed* are these elements and constitutive rules of performatives that Austin believes that one can construct a taxonomic system out of them.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, “philosophical taxonomy” might approximate fairly well to the character of Austin’s view of philosophy. G.J. Warnock’s anecdote about Austin is most illuminating in this respect. Austin, he writes, “was willing to talk about one small point for a whole morning” or “for a whole term or a year,” and when he was told that “at this rate [...] it would take twenty or thirty years before we can come out with an answer to our large problem. To this Austin would have said: why not?”<sup>34</sup> It needs no further laboring to show that such a view of philosophy, within which the theory of performatives is embedded, is at odds with a discipline such as history, which prides itself on its focus on the *diachronic* and *changing* forms of human life.

Skinner has made extensive use of Austin’s philosophy, as is well known. However, Skinner’s conception of philosophy is not compatible with Austin’s, because for Austin, philosophy cannot be turned into a procedure for identifying and explaining the *historicity* of performatives. But this is precisely what Skinner wants the theory of speech acts to do. We can infer the counterfactual that if Skinner had consistently followed Austin’s vision of philosophy, he would have become a “taxonomist of the history of political thought.” He would have tried to categorize all the various uses of concepts like “the State,” “liberty,” “obligation,” “*virtù*,” “rhetoric,” “consent,” “*ius gentium*,” and “*lex naturalis*,”<sup>35</sup> into systems defined by the logical presuppositions that make them possible, and the logical conditions that enable them to fulfill whatever illocution they were intended to realize. He would not have cared for particular uses of such concepts, by particular persons, in particular contexts, constantly being used in a variety of compatible and

---

<sup>33</sup> Searle, “J.L. Austin.”

<sup>34</sup> Warnock quoted in E. Gellner, “The Crisis in the Humanities and the Mainstream of Philosophy,” *Crisis in the Humanities*, ed. J.H. Plumb (London: Pelican Books, 1966), 45–82, 59.

<sup>35</sup> These concepts recur in Skinner’s empirical studies. See e.g. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: 2 Vols.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

incompatible ways, and changing in response to changes in context and the personality of their users. In short, he would have been an unhistorical historian.<sup>36</sup> Skinner is certainly finely tuned to the diachronic and shifting nature of political languages, as he has shown in his empirical works, which have undeniably contributed to complicating and deepening our understanding of early modern political thought.<sup>37</sup> But if this is so, then we must conclude that Skinner's *philosophical* use of Austin in his *historical* studies is based on a serious misreading or selective reading of Austin's philosophy (not that this is a problem, quite the contrary).

Now I turn to the philosophies of Quine and Davidson. These two American philosophers were trained at Harvard, a fact that goes some way in explaining their strong interest in natural science, as opposed to Oxford philosophers, who traditionally are oriented toward culture and everyday language. Quine's most important influences came from the logical positivists. Upon the completion of his Ph.D. he decided to take a trip to Europe to meet some of them. His meeting with Rudolf Carnap, a champion of the idea that natural scientific presuppositions ultimately underlie *all* sciences,<sup>38</sup> would amount to an influence so strong that Quine was to give him the epithet his greatest teacher.<sup>39</sup>

Quine believes that the foundation, justification, and conceptual character of any particular science must lie within the framework of the logic of natural science: any science must be based on objectively measurable and quantifiable facts, be amenable to causal explanations, and be conducive to predictions. Philosophy is to further this conception of natural science in all special sciences.

Quine's famous rejection of the atomistic view of knowledge that drew a sharp distinction between analytic and synthetic statements in favor of a "holistic" view that saw justification and explanation as matters not reducible to synthetic or analytic statements is only taken so far.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Quine goes even farther than the "underlaborer" conception of philosophy. This

---

<sup>36</sup> Which I do not think he is, at least not in his historical writings.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. *Reason and Rhetoric*. The same can be said of Bevir. See M. Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> R. Carnap, *The Unity of Science* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 193.

<sup>40</sup> W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *The Philosophical Review*, 60 (1951), 20–43.

conception was first articulated at the height of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For instance, in Locke's view, the value and utility of philosophy lies in "removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge," a way paved by the likes of Boyle and Newton.<sup>41</sup> For Quine, philosophy is one of the "master-builders" of knowledge, and so philosophy is to be "naturalized."<sup>42</sup> In his own words: "Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology, and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz. a physical human subject."<sup>43</sup>

As Carnap was Quine's revered teacher, so was Quine Davidson's. It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that the ideal philosophical vision for Davidson is one that treats "wants and thoughts as theoretical constructs," through which it "assigns numbers to measure degrees of belief and desire," so as to be able to predict behavior. With this procedure, it is hoped that philosophy can attain "scientific respectability."<sup>44</sup>

Since for Skinner and Bevir the human sciences are autonomous and legitimate *on their own terms*, Quine and Davidson's conception of philosophy stands in an inimical relation to their theories. It is true, though, that neither Skinner nor Bevir accept Davidson and Quine's positivist vision of the task of philosophy. Yet, as we will see in the next two sections, especially Bevir, but also Skinner, has failed to appreciate the scientific under and overtones in Davidson and Quine regarding particular issues in the philosophy of science, resulting in some serious problems for Bevir and Skinner's analyses of objectivity and explanation. Indeed, I will try to show that Skinner and Bevir both seem to commit themselves to positivist foundationalism in issues regarding objectivity and explanation.

As this has been a long section, a brief formal summary is in order. With Austin and Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, intellectual history as a discipline, seen as a form of life or body of thought, can in principle be considered an epistemically legitimate and autonomous discipline, but

---

<sup>41</sup> P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1990), 4.

<sup>42</sup> W.V.O. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," *Epistemology: An Anthology*, ed. E. Sosa, et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 528–538.

<sup>43</sup> Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," 533.

<sup>44</sup> D. Davidson, "Psychology as Philosophy," *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, ed. M. Martin and L.C. MacIntyre (Cambridge, Massachusetts: the MIT Press, 1994), 79–81, 83.

*philosophy* has no place in telling it what to do, how to do it, or why to do it. Compared to Bevir and Skinner's theories, Austin and Wittgenstein's philosophies are partially compatible with theirs: certain concepts and arguments in Austin and Wittgenstein are in line with Skinner and Bevir's theories of intellectual history, but the general philosophy is not. The far greater danger comes from Quine and Davidson, for they would in the end see the legitimacy and autonomy of philosophy, and indeed any human science be reduced to a foundation and justification that is laid down in natural science – or rather a particular conception of natural science.

## II. Objectivity

One concrete topic where this danger emerges is when Bevir and Skinner invoke the philosophies of Davidson and Quine to address the nature of objectivity. To begin with Bevir, it is not little he owes to Davidson: his definition of the object of intellectual history, “beliefs,” is based on Davidson's definition of belief.<sup>45</sup> For Bevir a “belief is a psychological state in which one holds a proposition true.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Bevir takes from Davidson the idea of “radical interpretation” of others, resting on the “the principle of charity (explored in more detail in section III).” What is of most importance for this discussion is Bevir's acceptance of Davidson's claim that in interpreting an other person that is *prima facie* alien in his or her beliefs and behavior, we need to assume that we share with him or her a number of *true* beliefs, that is, beliefs that correspond to a world that is independent from both the interpreter and the interpretee. Thus Bevir: “A belief is a psychological state we attribute to someone in an attempt to explain and predict behaviour (in the following section I will discuss in more detail Bevir's analysis of explanation).”<sup>47</sup>

But on the question what to make of this definition of “belief” in discussing objectivity Bevir finds himself adopting a positivist perspective. When Bevir lays down his epistemic criteria of objectivity, he contends that an

---

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). For a good introduction to this difficult writer and thinker see S. Eynine, *Donald Davidson* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> Bevir, *The Logic*, 129.

<sup>47</sup> Bevir, *The Logic*, 129.

objective historical narrative must arise from “agreed facts” which the scholarly community agrees to be true. But this “anthropological” definition of objectivity, where truth is attained and maintained only in a given dialogical and inquiring community is, crucially, qualified by Bevir’s provision that facts entail observations, and since latter stick to the world, to an “independent reality” (from the mind), so too must the former. And Bevir defines this relation between observation and fact in terms of *correspondence* between fact and world, a relation captured by the notion of *true belief*.<sup>48</sup>

However, Bevir argues that by having accepted Quine (and Kuhn’s) arguments against the positivist distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, and affirmed a view of knowledge as a holistic entity, he has managed to steer clear of reducing objectivity to either analytic or synthetic statements. For this reason, he lays down bold speculation and open theories as sound epistemic criteria for admissible historical enquiry.

Yet, it is not at all clear that Bevir has managed to shake off the yoke of the analytic/synthetic divide, because he argues that under no circumstances can the criteria of “accuracy” (i.e. correspondence) and “comprehensiveness” (i.e. the more facts the more objective the narrative) of facts be derailed, for *that* would make the narrative unobjective, and so unhistorical. What this argument implies is that observationally true or synthetic statements are absolutes in historical objectivity.<sup>49</sup> So far from breaking down the analytic/synthetic barrier, Bevir seems to uphold it by giving primacy to the synthetic statement as the warrant of an objective historical account. Bevir’s position is highly problematic, since, pushed to its logical conclusion, it upholds an entire view of human science that is by and large positivist. Although Bevir has denied that he is committed to the strong positivist empiricism of Davidson’s program, one understands Frank Ankersmit’s zeal in trying to push Bevir to acknowledge such a commitment.<sup>50</sup>

How do bold speculation and open theories fit into Bevir’s account of objectivity? Speculation can be taken to mean non-empirically corroborated theorizing about a certain empirical domain.<sup>51</sup> Theoretical openness

<sup>48</sup>) Bevir, *The Logic*, 99.

<sup>49</sup>) Bevir, *The Logic*, 99, 102–103.

<sup>50</sup>) M. Bevir and F. Ankersmit, “Exchanging Ideas,” *Rethinking History*, 4 (2000), 351–372.

<sup>51</sup>) Many great works of history are as much speculative as they are empirically sound. David Cannadine has pointed out that British post-Second World War historians, such as

can be taken to mean not deciding whether facts are necessarily and sufficiently explainable only by certain kinds of conditions, structures, or events. It is clear that Bevir welcomes such histories (and rightly so). But they cannot possibly fulfill his criterion of objectivity, and this problem issues from Bevir's commitment to Quine and Davidson. Bevir's epistemic criteria are inconsistent and that can only mean that logically divergent histories are admissible in his theory. The problem with this position is that it is precisely what Bevir does *not* want to maintain. His task is to show that *all* historical enquiry falls under the same logical jurisdiction. His logic is intended to be *complete*.

Skinner too exhibits an ambivalent attitude toward Davidson's tenets of philosophical anthropology when discussing objectivity. On the one hand, he holds that "I cannot see that this view of radical interpretation possesses the relevance for historians that some of Davidson's more enthusiastic followers have [...] supposed."<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, Skinner wishes to uphold a distinction between concept and fact, for the reason that once that distinction is made, it is possible for a historian to say that two people from two different cultures can be said to be "experiencing and talking about the same thing," thereby avoiding relativist judgments, and ensuring objective knowledge of the past.<sup>53</sup> So even though concepts determine facts, and here Skinner refers to Quine's holism for support,<sup>54</sup> he writes, "I do not mean to deny the existence of a mind-independent world that furnishes us with observational evidence as the basis of our empirical beliefs."<sup>55</sup>

Skinner too, in other words, upholds the analytic/synthetic divide. Interestingly, as Ankersmit has pressed Bevir to accept his strong commitments to a correspondence theory of truth, so has Boucher in a strikingly similar vein pressed Skinner to do the same.<sup>56</sup>

---

E.P. Thompson, Lawrence Stone, and J.H. Plumb, propelled historical research into news domains of research not despite, but because of, the fertile errors of their narratives. See D. Cannadine, "British History: Past, Present – and Future," *Past and Present*, 1 (1987), 169–191.

<sup>52</sup> Skinner, "A Reply to my Critics," 238.

<sup>53</sup> Skinner, "A Reply to my Critics," 250.

<sup>54</sup> Skinner, "A Reply to my Critics," 332.

<sup>55</sup> Skinner, "A Reply to my Critics," 250.

<sup>56</sup> Boucher, *Texts in Context*, 214.



### III. Explanation

Explanation is another topic where Davidson and Quine's philosophies pose problems for Bevir and Skinner. It is clear that for Bevir and Skinner, the form of explanation in history is different in kind from natural scientific explanation. Natural science (viewed philosophically) is fundamentally governed by presupposing physical and inanimate entities and relations, such as earthquakes, molecules, neurons, neural networks, mechanisms, and causes. The latter two are employed to explain and even predict observed or registered instances of the former four. The outcome is an explanatory scheme where the objects to be explained turn out to be fully determined by causal laws or mechanisms, and so are amenable to prediction. In contrast, history (viewed philosophically) obeys a rational form of explanation, where the *explanandum* are entities like arguments, actions, norms, values, institutions, and the *explanans* is arrived at through concepts like reason, convention, tradition, intention, dilemma, and purpose. The outcome is an explanatory scheme where the object to be explained is non-reducible to external and internal structural forces, and so non-predictable.

Bevir and Skinner understand "rationality" in terms of some measure of true beliefs, and in terms of minimal logical consistency between an individual's beliefs.<sup>57</sup> A rational form of explanation is characterized by the assumption that only tradition- and situation-bound adult, free, self-conscious, and rational human individuals can effect change in human history. To explain historical changes, one must therefore unearth the socially indexical rational thoughts held in the first-person mode that brought them about.

Skinner's reflections on explanation are rather equivocal, and this has to do with his changes of mind, where the new views have turned out to muddle rather than clarify, or improve, the old.<sup>58</sup> In 1966, Skinner believed that the "primary aim" of the intellectual historian "should not be to explain, but only in the fullest detail to describe."<sup>59</sup> By 1971 he had changed his mind, now arguing that the illocutionary redescription of an episode – i.e., a redescription of a linguistic action that identifies the point it is trying to make in a wider convention of arguments – is "also a mode of explanation of the

---

<sup>57</sup> This is essentially a Davidsonian definition of "rationality."

<sup>58</sup> The following owes much to Boucher's *Texts in Context*.

<sup>59</sup> Skinner, "The Limits of Historical Explanations," 212.

given episode.” So in 1971 Skinner makes description equivalent to explanation in order to save his formulation from 1966. He writes, moreover, “that although such explanations function by citing reasons, these cannot in this case be construed as causes of which the corresponding actions are effects.”<sup>60</sup> In 1974 Skinner avowed that a shift had occurred in his thought on explanation, and now he performs an analysis of action that involves intentions and conventions, and is strictly “non-causal.”<sup>61</sup> He then contends that “to exhibit a social action as rational is to explain it.”<sup>62</sup> By 1988 this has become a “golden rule” of explanation, that is, to treat the agent’s beliefs as rational given their conventions of rationality is to have a means of explaining them.<sup>63</sup> However, such a “sympathetic” form of rational explanation, informed by Collingwood, was in place already in 1969, and was reiterated in 2002.<sup>64</sup> What remains fairly constant in Skinner’s many shifts on this issue is thus a firm belief in a sympathetic rational explanation as the appropriate one for intellectual history.

Bevir, like Skinner, is firmly committed to a sympathetic form of rational explanation. However, he has not changed his mind on this issue and has presented a deft analysis. The problem of how to arrive at the appropriate mode of explanation for intellectual history is, for Bevir, how to account for *change* in belief. The need to explain change arises when one observes a shift in belief in a person. For instance, if someone is a Marxist and holds Marxist beliefs, but then over a period of time decides to become a liberal, then what needs to be explained is why the person rejected his Marxist beliefs and adopted the liberal ones. To do so Bevir postulates the concept of “dilemma.” Almost exclusively it is philosophers of natural science that Bevir makes recourse to here, the most noteworthy of which are Kuhn (“anomaly”), Lakatos (“problem”), and Popper (“puzzle”).<sup>65</sup> A “dilemma” Bevir defines as a new belief that a person holds true, thus incorporating it into his existing web of beliefs, but as such it comes to stand in opposition

---

<sup>60</sup> Skinner, “On Performing,” 13; Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 137.

<sup>61</sup> Skinner, “Some Problems,” 285.

<sup>62</sup> Skinner, “Some Problems,” 295.

<sup>63</sup> Skinner, “A Reply to my Critics,” 247.

<sup>64</sup> Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” and Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 7, 28.

<sup>65</sup> See *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science: London 1965: Volume 4*, ed. I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

to his/her other beliefs, and so the person must exercise his/her reason to resolve the dilemma. In order to explain such changes in persons we must “treat their utterances charitably.”<sup>66</sup> What this means is that we must seek to show how given the historical person’s best beliefs we can infer an internal consistency to their web of beliefs.

Bevir owes much to Davidson in having worked out this principle of charity. Bevir does not adopt the Davidson’s principle wholesale, and rejects one of its main ingredients: that we should assume that others hold a sufficient amount of the same true beliefs as we do. But we now have to remember that his critics have taken Bevir’s rejection with a pinch of salt, and that Bevir has been reluctant to resolve his equivocations concerning the role of true beliefs regarding objectivity. A similar problem arises in his discussion on explanation.

This problem suggests that both Bevir and Skinner have failed to resolve the post-positivist dilemma of philosophically accounting for objectivity and explanation without recourse to true beliefs. It is certainly the case that in their empirical studies both Bevir and Skinner allow for, logically speaking, *both* non-true beliefs *and* inconsistent webs of beliefs as objects of intellectual history (such as a belief in *Geist*, *volonté générale*, God, witches, natural law theory, universal brotherhood, patriarchalism, and Christian socialism).

Their *concept* of rational explanation, however, does not entail these kinds of beliefs and relations between beliefs. In other words, there is no *philosophy* accounting for why and how these kinds of thought are *explainable*. By committing themselves to Davidson and Quine, Skinner and Bevir might have mistaken a sheep for a wolf in sheep’s clothes. I will now try to substantiate this last statement by presenting Quine and Davidson’s views of scientific explanation.

The only leeway (if this can be called leeway) Quine and Davidson give to the human sciences is a strictly behaviorist “input-output” explanatory scheme of human action, a scheme that they believe can be formalized in logical notation. Quine and Davidson’s ruminations of “desire,” “belief,” “intention,” “action,” and the like are, as P.M.S. Hacker has argued, ultimately *subsumed* under a thoroughly naturalist form of explanation.<sup>67</sup> In Davidson’s words: “What is needed in the case of action, if we are to predict

---

<sup>66</sup> Bevir, *The Logic*, 65.

<sup>67</sup> Hacker, *Wittgenstein’s Place*.

on the basis of desires and beliefs, is a quantitative calculus that brings all relevant beliefs and desires into the picture. There is no hope of refining the simple pattern of explanation on the basis of reasons into such a calculus.”<sup>68</sup>

Elsewhere Davidson has dared to predict the future of the sciences dealing with thought and action. Explicitly pitting an anti-naturalist approach, heralded by Collingwood, against a naturalist one, exemplified with behaviorism and decision theory, he predicts that the latter have a brighter future in sight. And in this future the explanation of action, already now adumbrated by “serious behaviorists,” will show that we can probably “do away with mention of such publicly unobservable states as beliefs, intentions, and desires.”<sup>69</sup> And decision theory will become a “theory of measurement,” which will perhaps not attempt a reduction of mental states to physical states, but it will “show how a well-understood pattern can lead from simple to sophisticated distinctions,” and this makes it “particularly appropriate to the study of action.”<sup>70</sup> As we have seen, neither Bevir nor Skinner seems to perceive the threats these strong naturalist aspects in Quine and Davidson pose for the philosophy of intellectual history.

Indeed Bevir even takes Davidson’s philosophy to be compatible with a rational, non-predictive, and non-deterministic one. He writes that Davidson’s “anomalous monism” – which states that as ontological entities mental events are identical whether in natural or human science, but as epistemological entities they are logically incompatible – shows “how a rejection of determinism (including probabilistic determinism) in the human sciences might be compatible with a pretty thorough-going materialism.”<sup>71</sup> The last two sections have tried to show that this compatibility is far from being evident when Bevir tries to found human scientific objectivity and explanation on Davidson’s philosophy.

---

<sup>68</sup> Davidson, “Psychology as Philosophy,” 81.

<sup>69</sup> D. Davidson, “Aristotle’s Action,” *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 277–295, 285.

<sup>70</sup> Davidson, “Aristotle’s Action”, 292.

<sup>71</sup> M. Bevir and A. Kedar, “Concept Formation in Political Science: An Anti-naturalist Critique of Qualitative Methodology,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 6 (2008), 502–518, 515, n 36.

#### IV. Post-Second World War Analytical Philosophy and Idealism in Britain

The comparison conducted above begs some form of interpretation. It arises from the following chain of reasoning: if the one strand of analytical philosophy has proven to be, at best, indifferent toward telling historians what, how, and why to do historical research (Austin, Wittgenstein), and if the other has proven to pose a naturalist threat to intellectual history (Quine, Davidson), then philosophical indifference and naturalism create two major philosophical lacunae, and we would expect of anyone who wishes to construct an anti-naturalist theory of intellectual history which is philosophically justified to fill them (Bevir and Skinner's desire is to do just that).

This line of reasoning suggests that Bevir and Skinner's theories embody some other tradition or traditions that furnishes them with a philosophy that is explicitly oriented toward historical thought and research and is anti-naturalist. One such tradition, perhaps the most important one, is to be found in later British idealism (and historicism), especially in its Collingwoodian vein. The co-existence and use of the two traditions in Bevir and Skinner's works account for the character of the relationship between intellectual history and analytical philosophy. The remainder of this article is devoted to adumbrating this interpretation.

A story that can shed light on Bevir and Skinner's uneasy and at crucial junctures antithetical relationship with analytical philosophy might go something like this. Bevir and Skinner seek to construct theories that involve a strong commitment to the autonomy of history in relation to natural science, and to articulate the presuppositions of historical enquiry.<sup>72</sup> Collingwood, in a distinctly new idealist vein, expressed the crucial underpinning of such a philosophy already in 1928 in a letter to his good friend and influence Benedetto Croce: "I have learnt from you to regard philosophy as primarily the methodology of history [...]."<sup>73</sup> And indeed, Bevir and Skinner often refer to the importance of Collingwood. Studying alien beliefs *qua* contextualized, rational, and intentional activity from a sympathetic

<sup>72</sup> Such a set of beliefs can be found in R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History: Revised Edition*, ed. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>73</sup> Collingwood to Croce, 5 January 1928, "Lettere di Robin George Collingwood a Benedetto Croce (1912–1939)," *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, 45 (1991), 545–563, 555.

perspective, seeing intellectual history as the queen of the human sciences, a systematic inquiry distinct from natural science – these are some of the Collingwoodian principles they find of critical value for a proper theory of history.<sup>74</sup>

But both Skinner and Bevir were trained in an intellectual culture wherein Collingwood has been taken to argue that philosophy attempts to find a spiritual unity amid all the world's, if not the universe's, oppositions, differences, conflicts, contradictions, and divergences. And that historical understanding essentially arises from “re-enactment,” a knowledge procedure through which the historian breaks down the barriers of sense and culture, separating our present from past human life, through an exercise of his transcendental imagination, resulting in a re-experience of the past mind in all its immediacy and subjective completeness.<sup>75</sup> As Bernard Williams writes, for this reason most “did not take him [Collingwood] seriously,” for “the re-enactment thesis provided a convenient and seemingly rather dotty version of the kind of thing that a sensible empiricist-style of history would want to avoid.”<sup>76</sup>

This reading of Collingwood's philosophy and theory of re-enactment has a specific history and we have a lot to learn from the reception of Collingwood's philosophy after the Second World War, when idealism finally lost its function as a dominant philosophical movement at British philosophy departments, a function taken over by analytical philosophy (which had defined itself in the early twentieth century in direct opposition to idealism). Though Collingwood's philosophy of history was “saved” for post-war intellectual society, by philosophers such as Patrick Gardiner, W.H. Dray, and W.H. Walsh, the “saviors” indicted the intellectual family to which Collingwood belonged. They defended and developed some of his

---

<sup>74</sup> Q. Skinner, “The Rise of, Challenge to and Prospects for a Collingwoodian Approach to the History of Political Thought,” *The History of Political Thought in National Contexts*, ed. I. Hampsher-Monk and D. Castiglione (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 175–189; M. Bevir, “Universality and Particularity in the Philosophy of E.B. Bax and R.G. Collingwood,” *History of the Human Sciences*, 12 (1999), 55–69.

<sup>75</sup> An interpretation that is in large parts inaccurate, as has been shown by an impressive amount of Collingwood studies. See e.g. G. D'Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); and S. Helgeby, *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R.G. Collingwood* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004).

<sup>76</sup> B. Williams, *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. M. Burnyeat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 346–347.

concepts and principles while castigating the idealist family for corrupting Collingwood's *general* philosophical outlook for logically leading Collingwood to the slopes of metaphysical-Christian absolutism, irrationalism, relativism, and intuitionist mysticism.<sup>77</sup>

Collingwood's continued repute hinged on the success of post-war philosophers of history to on the one hand refute his idealism and historicism and, on the other, to give new meanings to those elements of his philosophy still deemed valuable, by interpreting them through those methods and attitudes deemed legitimate by analytical philosophers.<sup>78</sup>

This state of affairs went practically unchallenged until the 1980s (when Collingwood studies more sensitive and open to the historical Collingwood began appearing on academic book shelves) and constrained those theorists of history and intellectual historians who had been educated in the heyday of analytical philosophy (such as Bevir and Skinner). To take an example, William Dray's defense, in the 1950s, of a Collingwoodian rational form of explanation presented itself as meaningful on account of meeting the challenge posed by the positivist covering-law model on the latter's own terms. Dray thereby circumscribed what is to count as a rational form of explanation in a manner that could resonate among analytical philosophers of science of the positivist bent.<sup>79</sup>

In the case of Dray, the outcome may have been philosophically felicitous. Even though he re-fashioned Collingwood in a thoroughly analytical idiom, Dray held on to the dividing line between the philosophy of history and the philosophy of natural science, giving his theory a fair degree of internal consistency. Still, much like Skinner and Bevir, he too faces a problem when it comes to his very idea of philosophy (the nature of its method, its ideals, and its positive role in the domains of life it studies), for though he claimed to have described the logic of (above all professional) historical

---

<sup>77</sup> P. Gardiner, "Introduction," *The Philosophy of History*, ed. P. Gardiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1–17. This was a reading shared by another type of philosophy that rose to prominence after the Second World War in the United States, brought to life by German émigré philosophers such as Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt. See e.g. L. Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 5 (1952), 559–586.

<sup>78</sup> For an account of some of the ways in which Collingwood's philosophy of history survived among analytical philosophers of history, see A. Skodo, *Idealist-Historicist Moments: Varieties of Agency in Modern British Historical Thought before, during and after the Second World War* (unpublished PhD thesis, European University Institute, 2011), 205–214.

<sup>79</sup> W.H. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1957).

understanding, one can not only contest this claim on an empirical basis (as historians of historiography will attest to), but also on a philosophical basis: Dray can be critiqued for being fundamentally incapable of answering the question what role his theory can play in the practice and methodology of history. And this, as Collingwood argued presciently in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, is symptomatic of analytical philosophy as a whole, a shortcoming that can be attributed to its curious resolve in refusing to posit a philosophical method.<sup>80</sup>

It is of crucial significance for the purposes of this interpretation to observe that both Skinner and Bevir represent Collingwood in very much the same language we find from the 1950s and onward. On the one hand, there is the dismissal of Collingwood's absolutism, irrationalism, intuitionism, and mysticism. On the other hand, there is the attempt to make Collingwood's philosophy of history credible in an analytical style of reasoning.<sup>81</sup> This complex intellectual inheritance – interwoven with even more complex political, social, and cultural reasons for why the character of analytical philosophy, idealism, and the relation between analytical philosophy and idealism looks as it does after the Second World War – provides us with a contextual means to interpret the character of the comparison above.

Essentially, the interpretation emphasizes the astonishing *cultural* influence of analytical philosophy even in intellectual sub-cultures where its main characteristics either serve no purpose or are detrimental to its professed principles. What is most remarkable about this is the strong presence of positivist philosophy of science in the thought of two leading theorists of history who make it one of their chief goals to vehemently contest the purported value of positivism for the human sciences.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method: Revised Edition*, ed. and intro. J. Connelly and G. D'Oro (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). See also *The Analytic Turn: Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology*, ed. M. Beaney (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>81</sup> See above all Bevir, "Universality;" Skinner, "The Rise."

<sup>82</sup> Arthur Danto's insistence on the philosophical, if not cultural or institutional or generational, credence of positivism even after its supposed death finds here an unexpected corroboration. See A. Danto, "The Decline and Fall of the Analytical Philosophy of History," *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. F. Ankersmit and H. Kellner (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 70–89.



A series of questions that need further examination arise from this skeletal interpretation: is the philosophy of intellectual history in the Skinnerian and Bevirian mode (or modes sufficiently similar in certain aspects to identify the same complex of problems) trapped in conflicting, even opposing, philosophical visions, conceptual choices, and intellectual values? Does intellectual history need or even want analytical philosophy? In a more pessimist and speculative pitch one may ask: instead of unearthing the agony involved in *choosing* between competing philosophies, does not the comparison above, and the general interpretation of the curious blend of idealism, historicism, and analytical philosophy, attest to the intellectually schizophrenic structure of commitments involved when trying to philosophically analyze a form of life? These questions reveal a scholarly need: to re-open and re-appraise the role of analytical philosophy in history – indeed, in all human sciences.