Human cultures generate meanings, and the history of ideas, broadly conceived, is the study of these meanings. An adequate theory of culture must therefore rest on a suitable philosophical enquiry into the nature of the history of ideas. Mark Bevir’s book explores the forms of reasoning appropriate to the history of ideas, enhancing our understanding by grappling with central questions such as: what is a meaning? What constitutes objective knowledge of the past? What are beliefs and traditions? How can we explain why people held the beliefs they did? The book ranges widely over issues and theorists associated with post-analytic philosophy, postmodernism, hermeneutics, literary theory, political thought, and social theory.

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THE LOGIC OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

MARK BEVIR
TO LAURA
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Preface

Many of us find it hard to disentangle our interest in certain questions from our commitment to a particular approach. Certainly I do not know whether my decision to focus on the forms of justification and explanation appropriate to the history of ideas came before or after my decision to do so in a manner indebted to analytic philosophy. Perhaps the two cannot be separated. What I do know is that the work of Quentin Skinner, itself clearly influenced by analytic philosophy, first stirred my curiosity about issues germane to the logic of the history of ideas. My decision to draw on analytic philosophy to undertake a normative study of the forms of reasoning appropriate to the history of ideas has taken me away from the dominant concerns of the hermeneutic tradition, and, in particular, the ontological hermeneutics developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Whereas hermeneutic theorists typically concentrate on phenomenological and descriptive issues about the process of understanding, I have tried to provide a logical and normative analysis of the ways in which we should justify and explain the understandings we reach. Whereas they concentrate on the nature of understanding as an intellectual activity, I have grappled with the logical forms appropriate to arguments within the history of ideas. To have concerns other than those that dominate the hermeneutic tradition is not, however, to deny the validity of that tradition. Whatever quarrels I may have with the specific arguments of hermeneutic theorists, and those quarrels will become clear, I hope my logic of the history of ideas remains compatible with a hermeneutic study of the process of understanding. Surely analytic and other forms of philosophy need not always compete with one another?¹ Surely they can complement one another as different approaches suited to explorations of different issues?

¹ Elsewhere I have suggested that the post-modern rejection of given truths could inspire a type of phenomenology closely resembling the post-analytic philosophy I defend. See M. Bevir, ‘Meaning, truth and phenomenology’, Teorema 16 (1997), 61–76.
Although the debates surrounding the work of Skinner, and also J. G. A. Pocock, first stirred my curiosity about the logic of the history of ideas, I soon found myself leaving their ambit. Skinner and Pocock aim primarily to define a method for the history of ideas. They seek to describe the appropriate manner in which to recover the meaning of a text. It is their particular methods that then enable them to dismiss other ways of doing things, notably those which deny the autonomy of the history of ideas, focus on the coherence of texts, or consider the contemporary relevance of texts. In contrast, I decided that no method can constitute a form of justification. A method can perform a useful heuristic role, but it cannot give us a logical guarantee of the objectivity of an understanding of a work. Once again I do not want to deny the interest of the issues raised by Skinner and Pocock. However, because my concern is with the logic of the history of ideas, not its heuristics, I have come to rely at many points less on the secondary literature that surrounds their work than on analytic philosophers who have written on epistemology and the philosophy of mind, notably Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson.

So, my work has a strange relationship to much of the existing literature on the nature of the history of ideas. The existing literature, whether studying the process of human understanding or defending a particular method, focuses on ways in which we can come to grasp the meaning of a text. I engage with this literature when I consider the nature of the meanings we try to grasp, arguing that such meanings are equivalent to individual viewpoints understood as expressed beliefs. After this, however, I leave its concerns behind by arguing against the possibility of a logic of discovery. I suggest that no answer to the question of how we can grasp the meaning of a text can have a place in a logic of the history of ideas. My interest shifts, therefore, to the question of how we can explain the beliefs we postulate as the meanings of past works. Here I break with the established agenda in a way which gives my ensuing arguments at best a tangential relationship to the work of scholars such as Gadamer and Skinner. Thus, for instance, when I explore the nature of a tradition, I do so to give content to a concept of tradition that helps us to explain beliefs, not one that helps us to analyse the process of understanding, or one that specifies a pre-condition of all

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² I have considered many of these issues elsewhere. See M. Bevir, 'The errors of linguistic contextualism', *History and Theory* 31 (1992), 276–98; 'Are there perennial problems in political theory?', *Political Studies* 42 (1994), 662–75; and 'Mind and method in the history of ideas', *History and Theory* 36 (1997), 167–89.
historical knowledge. The tangential relationship of my work to the existing literature means that although I contrast my concepts as they address my concerns with those of other authors, I often do so without thereby denying the validity of their concepts as tools for addressing their rather different concerns. After all, to say that a particular concept of tradition does not help us to explain beliefs need not be to say that it tells us nothing about the process of human understanding or the pre-conditions of historical knowledge.
I am grateful to all those whose professional and emotional support made my work easier and more enjoyable than it otherwise would have been. Newcastle University awarded me a research fellowship during the tenure of which I wrote much of the manuscript. The editors of History and Theory, Journal of Political Ideologies, and Political Studies kindly allowed me to use material that first appeared therein. John Haslam helped to steer the manuscript through the editorial process.