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Edited by Annabel Brett and James Tully

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Part I

Introduction

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1 The context of *The Foundations*

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I

Quentin Skinner's early work was devoted as much to questions of method as to substantive historical exposition. Indeed, he became known to far wider audiences through his methodological essays than through those in his first field of research, the political thought of the English Revolution.¹ His most cited article, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', published in 1969, was strikingly polemical in the anathemas it pronounced upon the practices of his colleagues.² Accordingly, when *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* appeared in 1978, its reviewers were as much concerned to assess the book in relation to its author's methodological injunctions as to judge its contribution to its historical topic. *Foundations* was, among much else, a heroic hostage to fortune, and there was no little *Schadenfreude* among those reviewers who claimed it had failed its author's own tests.

In this essay I revisit some aspects of Skinner's approach to intellectual history, taking note of early reactions to *Foundations*. My aims are threefold. First, I explore some of the impediments, within the historical profession in the 1960s, which Skinner believed stood in the way of the study of intellectual history. Second, I consider a specific criticism of *Foundations*, that it was overly committed to a teleological account of the emergence of the modern theory of the sovereign state. Third, interwoven throughout, I stress the extent to which Skinner's work was indebted to the German social theorist Max Weber. In this discussion it should be kept in mind that a principal context for *Foundations* lay in the practice of history in Britain in the 1960s, for the book's origins lay in lectures which Skinner first delivered in Cambridge in 1965.

For their comments on an earlier draft of this essay I am indebted to Holly Hamilton-Bleakley, Clare Jackson, Jacqueline Rose and Sylvana Tomaselli.

Short reviews of *Foundations* are cited by author and journal title only.

¹ Many of Skinner's essays are now collected, in revised form, in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). His principal early essay on the seventeenth century was 'History and Ideology in the English Revolution', *Historical Journal* 8 (1965), pp. 151–78, repr. in Skinner, *Visions*, III.

² Quentin Skinner, *History and Theory* 8 (1969), pp. 3–53; repr. in Skinner, *Visions*, I.

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What has, quite properly, dominated discussion of Skinner's methodology is his indebtedness to the philosophy of language enunciated by R. G. Collingwood, J. L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein, and it is to this topic that Holly Hamilton-Bleakley's companion chapter in the present volume is devoted. Less readily noticed is the rather different source of inspiration in Max Weber, who casts long shadows over *Foundations*, and whose *Economy and Society* is the first work cited in it, just ahead of a compliment to Collingwood.³ The widespread revival of interest in Weber in the 1960s was instrumental in the effort to remove the barriers that stood in the way of the refurbishment of intellectual history. By the early 1970s Skinner was addressing closely theories of action and explanation as conceived within the Weberian tradition of theoretical sociology.⁴ This interest was enhanced when he became a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 1974, for in such social scientists as Clifford Geertz he encountered a tradition of hostility to positivism which could be traced to Weber's concept of *verstehen*, a concept which placed at the heart of the understanding of social action individual agents' own subjective meanings.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century a strong version of positivism was implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the work of a broad swathe of British historians, especially those who studied 'high' politics, and who indeed tended to regard 'high' politics as the essence of their discipline. Skinner's critique of his fellow practitioners within intellectual history is well known – 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' is chiefly addressed to them – but his indictment of the 'high' political historians, who deprecated intellectual history altogether, deserves notice. He devoted essays to dissecting the assumptions of two of the doyens of the British historical profession, Lewis Namier and Geoffrey Elton. His critique of Namier appeared in 1974 in a *Festschrift* for his Cambridge colleague J. H. Plumb.⁵ Plumb had, in *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675–1725* (1967), declared his own liberation from Namier's strictures, and thereby opened a route to reinstating the history of political thought in the era of the first English political parties.

³ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), I, p. x. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). The Weberian element in Skinner's work is well brought out in Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

⁴ Quentin Skinner, "'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action', in Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, 4th series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), repr. in Skinner, *Visions*, I; Quentin Skinner, 'Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action', *Political Theory* 2 (1974), pp. 277–303; repr. in Skinner, *Visions*, I.

⁵ Quentin Skinner, 'The Principles and Practices of Opposition: the Case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole', in Neil McKendrick (ed.), *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Political Thought and Society* (London: Europa, 1974), pp. 93–128, repr. in Skinner, *Visions*, III.

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Skinner's withering criticism of Elton, the senior professor in his own university, did not appear until much later, in 1997. He pointed to Elton's 'cult of the fact', his narrow veneration of political history, his insistence that intellectual history was 'removed from real life' and the striking lopsidedness of his views about what kinds of history were 'hard' and 'real'.⁶

Namier and Elton were historians of whom it might almost be said that their guiding principle was the rejection of historical agents' own accounts of what they were doing. Namier regarded ideology, the exposition of normative ideas about social and political life, as pathological, a systematic distortion of how things really were. For him, the historian was an unmasker of ideology, who lays bare the material foundations of political action. The fault of intellectual historians was that they were naive enough to take seriously the utterances of historical agents. The arguments which princes, courtiers, statesmen and intellectuals put forth were so much sophisticated self-justification, incidental to the dynamics of power and to the 'real' motives and interests of the actors. Ideologies were, in Namier's memorable term, mere 'flapdoodle'.⁷ They were, to use more technical jargon, 'epiphenomenal'. The latter term was familiarly used by Marxists, and this points to the paradox that conservative practitioners of 'high' politics shared a fundamental assumption with Marxists, that what was argued and published by people in the past was not the vital material of history. Historians of ideas accordingly belonged, in Elton's words, in the 'scullery' of the historical profession and not in the 'drawing room'.⁸

Namierite and Eltonian canons of historical rectitude had two consequences for ordinary practice in historical research and writing. By their lights, manuscript archives were privileged above printed sources. Typically, the correspondence of politicians should assume precedence over the treatises, tracts and sermons of their times. A properly professional historian went to the Public Record Office and the county record office and not to the rare books library. While it was impossible to evade the obvious thought that nearly all historical work depended on studying the utterances of past agents, it was held that utterances in private correspondence were less compromised than those in public speech. Public speech was characteristically described as 'propaganda', and hence judged to be inherently distorted. Any historian who inhabited only the milieu of rhetorical affect and public persuasion was fundamentally debilitated. It was an argument which entailed a view about the authenticity of private utterance, as if private speech were exempt from 'ideology'.

⁶ Quentin Skinner, 'The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact', *Visions*, I, pp. 8–26, originally published in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997), pp. 301–16.

⁷ L. B. Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1930), p. 95. For his general reflections on method see *Personalities and Power* (London: Macmillan, 1955).

⁸ G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 12; quoted in Skinner, 'The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact', p. 14.

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A second consequence for practice is found in the prose of much historical writing at mid-century. Historians provided analyses of events and motives, of causes and consequences, but tended to think it irrelevant or distracting to allow us to listen to the voices of the actors. They did not often quote the words of the people about whom they wrote. Virtually every development since the 1960s, whether it be the invitation to ‘empathy’ or the close relationship now existing between history and literature, has taught us to be better attuned to the languages of the past. While Namier and Elton worried about the corrupting effects of the betrothal of history to the social sciences, they scarcely imagined that their approach to history would turn out to be far more seriously challenged by the betrothal of history to literature. It is neither sociology, nor even hermeneutic philosophy, that has had greatest impact on how historians write, but rather literature. Historians of all kinds now think far more carefully about voice, genre, rhetoric and metaphor. They take it to be important to heed the self-descriptions of historical agents, and in turn to understand the public languages within which self-descriptions were embedded. While Skinner has warned against the more flaccid aspects of ‘empathy’, and has insisted that historians can have explanatory ambitions beyond redescription of how the world looked to past agents, none the less a fundamental ambition of *Foundations* was to be perspectival, to allow the reader a sense of how past actors understood and articulated their actions and intentions and, more particularly, how they justified themselves rhetorically in speaking to their contemporaries. ‘Seeing things their way’ is the simple injunction in the title of Skinner’s recent introduction to his collected methodological essays.⁹

Skinner’s 1974 essay against Namier focused on the era of Sir Robert Walpole, the third and fourth decades of the eighteenth century. He used his examination of Viscount Bolingbroke’s celebrated political and literary assault on the Whig prime minister as a case study of his theorem that understanding ideology is a necessary part of explaining historical action. He conceded, with the Namierites, that it was not necessary to take the sincerity and putative elevated motives of the Bolingbrokeans at face value. Skinner is suspicious of historians’ resort to categories of ‘sincerity’ and ‘insincerity’. Sincerity is not something which can be established. We understand actors from the outside, by discerning what they publicly perform. Yet, on the other hand, against the Namierites, he denied that it was feasible to dismiss Bolingbroke’s ideas as *ex post facto* rationalisations disguising material motives. Rather, Bolingbroke’s appeal to traditional Whig ideals served to legitimate an otherwise seditious

⁹ Skinner, *Visions*, I, ch. 1. On the uses and limits of ‘interpretative charity’ see *ibid.*, I, ch. 3; and Quentin Skinner, ‘The Rise of, Challenge to, and Prospects for a Collingwoodian Approach to the History of Political Thought’, in Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk (eds.), *The History of Political Thought in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 175–88, at pp. 185–6.

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programme of political opposition by aligning it with conventionally acceptable canons of patriotic rectitude. Bolingbroke's political programme was only possible in so far as it was rendered justifiable in the court of public discourse. Political action is predicated upon public legitimation.

Skinner's essay had a Weberian cast. While Weber did not flinch from the thought that relationships between human beings are relations of power, and that power is ultimately grounded in coercion, none the less power is rarely naked. In most societies, people are persuaded that the demands placed upon them are legitimate. This throws the weight of social explanation away from the exercise of force to the production of legitimacy. Weber provided an antidote to the Marxist tendency – and to all parallel tendencies on the political right – to dismiss the sphere of ideology as epiphenomenal to the material motors of history. Weber argued that ideologies function as enablers. Political agents are enabled to proceed if, and only if, they are successful at publicly construing their ambitions in terms which their audiences recognise as legitimate by the standards of their normative beliefs about what is honourable, virtuous, godly or patriotic. This shifts attention from specifying the interests which agents have to specifying the values which communities hold and the ways in which those values are transmuted by the discursively proficient. Political revolutions depend on conceptual revolutions. They involve a kind of legerdemain, in which the political innovator achieves a transformation while trailing the colours of conventional beliefs. Normative languages are the force-field within which ideologists function, and those languages may be deeply constraining of what is practically possible, or liberating for those skilled in reshaping the conventions.

Foundations was grounded in this set of assumptions. In the preface, for example, speaking of the humanist norm of 'honour', Skinner wrote:

Anyone who is anxious to have his behaviour recognised as that of a man of honour will find himself restricted to the performance of only a certain range of actions. Thus the problem facing an agent who wishes to legitimate what he is doing at the same time as gaining what he wants cannot simply be the instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects. It must in part be the problem of tailoring his projects in order to fit the available normative language.¹⁰

Throughout *Foundations*, the verb 'legitimate' and its cognates were pervasive. The twelfth century, Skinner remarked, saw 'the formation of an ideology designed to legitimate the most aggressive of the Papacy's claims to rule'. The Huguenots set out to 'legitimate the first full-scale revolution within a modern European state'. Pierre du Moulin helped to 'legitimate the rule of absolute monarchy in France'.¹¹ Theorists were seen to be doing ideological work on behalf of some specified cause. They were said to meet 'pressing ideological

¹⁰ Skinner, *Foundations*, I, pp. 12–13. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 14; II, pp. 241, 264.

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needs', to perform 'ideological services' or to provide 'an armoury of ideological weapons'.¹² Ideas enabled action, but action was constrained by what could successfully be achieved in the work of legitimation. Not least of the consequences of this approach was that the world of ideas, construed as the production of legitimacy, was no longer disjoined from the history of 'actions' and 'interests'. Deeds are predicated upon the possibilities and constraints which words offer.

Max Weber exemplified his concept of legitimation in his classic study of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904). Here he countered the Marxist analysis which traced the genealogy of capitalism in the economic dynamics of the decline of feudalism. He suggested that capitalism owed its triumph to the ability of its early proponents to legitimate it in relation to prevailing religious values. On this argument, the Protestant ethic, with its godly injunctions to industriousness, its puritanical distaste for luxurious display and its preference for indefinitely deferred gratification, proved peculiarly suitable for sustaining commercial enterprise. To understand the emergence of capitalism it was necessary therefore to understand not only economics but also theology. In the early 1970s Skinner intended to write a major reevaluation of the Weber thesis through an investigation of the transmutations of early-modern godly vocabulary as it came to be applied to the values of commercial society. How was it, for example, that commendations entailed in the notion of living in accordance with God's 'providence' came to be applied to 'provident' forms of conduct in the worldly lives of industrious and parsimonious capitalists? The project was abandoned, but elements of it surface in his writings.¹³ It was a project which brought together Weber's concept of legitimation and the lexical preoccupations of linguistic philosophy, a fusion which has lain at the heart of Skinner's procedure.¹⁴

The emphasis on the history of ideologies in *Foundations* had a consequence for the way in which 'classic' authors and texts were treated. From the outset Skinner had been sceptical of the canonising of the classics. His 1969 essay, 'Meaning and Understanding', was originally entitled 'The Unimportance of the Great Texts in the History of Political Thought'.¹⁵ The demotion of the classic texts was in part an entailment of the concept of legitimation. Theorists cannot be understood 'on their own terms', as engaging in unmediated intellectual activity, but in terms of the way they operate within prevailing conventions. Even at its most innovatory, political theory is necessarily conventional. Skinner's account of Thomas More, to take one instance, was woven into a collective account of Erasmus, Starkey, Elyot and Budé, for it was necessary to

¹² Skinner, *Foundations*, I, pp. 6, 11; II, p. 310. ¹³ See the items cited in n. 4 above.

¹⁴ See Palonen, *Skinner*, p. 53.

¹⁵ P. Koikkalainen and S. Syrjämäki, 'On Encountering the Past: an Interview with Quentin Skinner', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6 (2002), pp. 34–63, at p. 35.

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investigate a wide body of texts in order to establish the moral norms embedded in the ordinary language of debate. The study of ideologies required the investigation of genres, schools, traditions and shared beliefs rather than singular texts. The range of hitherto hidden authors recovered in *Foundations* was remarkable, from Azo to Zasius and Accolti to Zabarella. It was a striking feature of the book that no chapter heading contained a person's name. Rather, chapters had such titles as 'The Florentine Renaissance' or 'The Duty to Resist'. This elementary fact about the book's plan liberated it from the litany of pedestalled classics that structured most textbooks: Machiavelli, More, Bodin, Hobbes, Locke. *Foundations* was, as one reviewer remarked, 'collectivist' history of political thought.¹⁶ For those reviewers who were attached to a more heroic conception of political philosophy, Skinner's book was demeaning to philosophy. It flattened the distinction between, in Michael Oakeshott's words, genuine 'philosophical reflection' and the 'forensic' jousting of pamphleteers engaged in 'mere justification'. Judith Shklar likewise wished Skinner had distinguished more strongly the 'continuously interesting political theorists from those who only concern us as part of the general scenery'.¹⁷

Foundations implicitly posed large questions about canonicity and about the genres that should fall within the purview of the 'history of political thought'. *Foundations* based itself primarily, and more or less traditionally, on treatises and tracts which addressed politics as a distinctive field of human activity and moral difficulty. At the same time, it drew attention to less familiar sources. It encompassed works by theologians, diplomats, lawyers and educationists, together with advice books, panegyrics, city chronicles, annotations in the Geneva Bible and plays by Shakespeare and John Bale.¹⁸ As Shklar remarked, once the canon is broadened there is unavoidable slippage towards highly unstable territory as regards genre.¹⁹ In the decades since *Foundations* was published, generic expansiveness has become much more comprehensive. Skinner's intimations, for example, of the importance of the history of curricula are carried forward more fully, not least in his own study of the context of Hobbes's civil science.²⁰ He also argued, in an essay of 1987, for a major enlargement of genre in his account of the political theory of the frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico

¹⁶ C. Trinkaus, *American Historical Review* 85 (1980), p. 79n.

¹⁷ Michael Oakeshott, *Historical Journal* 23 (1980), pp. 450–1; Judith Shklar, *Political Theory* 7 (1979), p. 551n. I have dwelt thus far on positivist deprecations of intellectual history: some critics, however, within intellectual history, have found Skinner's own position to be prejudicial to the proper autonomy of the history of thought.

¹⁸ For the two last see Skinner, *Foundations*, II, pp. 99, 222.

¹⁹ She wrote that, for Skinner, the political theorist is 'seen as the necessary partner of the historians, jurists, theologians, and poets of his age. For reasons not altogether clear, scientists, metaphysicians, deviant and mystically inclined religious seers, and dabblers in magic are not included': *Political Theory* 7 (1979), p. 551.

²⁰ Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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in Siena.²¹ Generic expansiveness is, *inter alia*, the product of the impact of literary ‘new historicism’, which has brought to the attention of historians of political thought the poetry and drama of the past. By the 1990s some of the humanist and republican themes essayed in *Foundations* were being explored in work on, for instance, Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* and the poetry of the English Civil War.²² A signal instance of this advent is the study of the Bolingbrokean assault on Walpole. The three decades since Skinner’s essay of 1974 on this topic saw a remarkably fertile range of research, much of it by literary scholars. The topic now involves consideration of the novels of Jonathan Swift, the poetry of Alexander Pope and James Thomson, the plays of John Gay and Henry Brooke, the cartoons of Hogarth and the oratorios of Handel.²³ Generic expansiveness has eroded the orthodox boundaries of ‘the history of political thought’, and, a quarter-century after *Foundations*, it is less clear whether the subject survives other than as subsumed into intellectual history more generally, and in turn into cultural history.

The emphasis in *Foundations* on ideologies rather than ‘classic’ authors has latterly carried with it further hazards in the practice of the discipline. As the ‘linguistic turn’ across the whole of the humanities made its impact, and as Marxism retreated, the term ‘ideology’, which was conspicuous by its presence in *Foundations*, gave way to the ubiquity of the preferred terms ‘language’ and, above all, ‘discourse’. Postmodern doubt about authorial agency, and emphasis upon the reception of texts, has had the effect of rendering the world of ideas less the production of authors than the common, unowned, vernacular of their time. Ambient ‘discourses’ are apt to replace individual authors and texts. Ironically, the result can be a variety of intellectual history which is rather like the old history of ideas which Skinner had set out to castigate, in which Platonic ideas float free of authors and historical contingencies. Biancamaria Fontana has recently complained, apropos a collection of essays on early-modern republicanism, of

surreal battlefields, where languages and vocabularies, jargons and paradigms joust strenuously against each other, like the empty armours of non-existent knights in Italo Calvino’s *Our Ancestors*. The result is little different from the struggle of opposing ‘isms’ in the old (pre-Cambridge-method) textbooks of the history of political thought.²⁴

²¹ Quentin Skinner, ‘Ambrogio Lorenzetti: the Artist as Political Philosopher’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 72 (1987), pp. 1–56; repr. in Skinner, *Visions*, II.

²² Blair Worden, *The Sound of Virtue: Philip Sidney’s Arcadia and Elizabethan Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1996); David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²³ For a survey see Mark Goldie, ‘The English System of Liberty’, in Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 70–4.

²⁴ Biancamaria Fontana, ‘In the Gardens of the Republic’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 July 2003, reviewing Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: a Shared European Heritage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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This tendency is further enhanced by the methodological injunction, which John Pocock was especially keen to insist upon, that political languages are not to be confused with political doctrines, still less with particular programmes or policies.²⁵ The effect can be to speak of this or that ‘discourse’ as a web of words not of any agent’s making. The result can be slack practice in which the historian is exonerated from the spadework of excavating exact circumstance and the context of authorial engagement. Ideas are not, as the late Richard Ashcraft remarked in praise of the method of *Foundations*, ‘a cloud bank moving through the stratosphere’.²⁶

II

A central purpose of *Foundations* was to elucidate the emergence of the modern concept of the state. Skinner defined the state in explicitly Weberian terms as ‘the sole source of law and legitimate force within its own territory’.²⁷ Within the body of the book his definitions tended more toward the juridical, for he accented the emergence of the idea of legal sovereignty, and turned to the glossators of Roman law to find its earliest expressions, notably in Bartolus of Saxoferrato.²⁸ In this respect the book constructed an arch from Bartolus to Bodin, from the fourteenth-century jurist who responded to the overweening claims of the emperor to the sixteenth-century jurist who reshaped the idea of sovereignty in the circumstances of the French Wars of Religion. The framing of the *Foundations* as a search for origins prompted the most persistent complaint by reviewers, that it tended towards the teleological. John Salmon remarked on the ‘tension between two of the professed aims of the book, between the exemplification of a newly prescribed historicist method in the history of ideas and the somewhat Whiggish intent to illuminate the process by which the modern concept of the state came to be formed’.²⁹ Oakeshott, engaging in a piece of *tu quoque*, asked,

is it not ‘unhistorical’, anachronistic, to think of [the concept of the state] as a construction erected on ‘foundations’ laid by Marsiglio, Bartolus, Machiavelli, Beza, etc.? These writers were not laying foundations; they were casuistical moralists and lawyers fumbling for circumstantial arguments to support their clients.³⁰

Similar criticism has resurfaced more recently. James Alexander has suggested that while John Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment* (1975) might be called

²⁵ J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

²⁶ Richard Ashcraft, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981), p. 390.

²⁷ Skinner, *Foundations*, I, p. x; cf. II, pp. 351–3.

²⁸ Skinner, *Foundations*, I, pp. 9–10, and *passim*.

²⁹ John Salmon, *History of European Ideas* 4 (1983), p. 331. Cf. D. Boucher, *Political Theory* 8 (1980), pp. 406–8; W. J. Bouwsma, *Catholic Historical Review* 67 (1981), pp. 84–5; K. R. Massingham, *Politics* 16 (1981), pp. 124–9.

³⁰ Michael Oakeshott, *Historical Journal* 23 (1980), p. 452.