Meaning without Theory

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Abstract

There is a core conflict between conventional ideas about “meaning” and the phenomenon of meaning and meaning change in history. Conventional accounts are either atemporal or appeal to something fixed that bestows meaning, such as a rule or a convention. This produces familiar problems over change. Notions of rule and convention are metaphors for something tacit. They are unhelpful in accounting for change: there are no rule-givers or convenings in history. Meanings are in flux, and are part of a web of belief and practical activity that is in constant change. We can perhaps salvage some point to appeals to fixed frameworks if we treat them as “as if” constructions designed as crutches to enable us to improve on literal readings of the texts by making more sense of the inferential connections and practical significance of their content at the time.

The language that is customarily used to refer to meaning is atemporal, and determinedly so. The conventional accounts of meaning developed in response to Kripke’s account of the problem of following a rule. As Paul Boghossian puts it, “the idea of meaning something by a word is an idea with an infinitary character . . . there are literally no end of truths about how I ought to apply the term . . . if I am to use it in accord with its meaning.” And this is not an artefact of Kripke’s example, which is from arithmetic– “it holds for any concept.”


meanings, because they are finite— or as we might put it, dispositions are part of history, limited to the mental life of actual historical persons, while meanings are eternal or outside of time.

Quentin Skinner relied on a similar philosophical background when he appealed to the notion that in interpreting a given author one could rely on “conventions” that could be revealed by studying normal or less prominent texts of the same period. The interpreter could assume that these conventions were known to the author of the text that was originally in question, and that the author relied on these same conventions to give meaning to the text, even if the point of the text was to subvert the conventions. But convention is a notion bound to something historical— to the people who observe the conventions. Nevertheless, they too are fixed, and in this sense located someplace out of the flux of actual historical persons and their acts. Skinner provides something in the way of explanation when he notes that “various different concepts which have gone with various different societies.” There is thus some connection between concepts and “societies,” but “gone with” implies that they are separable things.

The neo-Kantian historicists, similarly, regarded historical epochs as differing in the mental structures that informed their tastes, beliefs, and the meanings that they ascribed to the world of events, facts, and artifacts. This idea soon hardened into a historiographic dogma, well expressed by Carl Becker, in his study of the Enlightenment, where he called this the climate of opinion:

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Whether arguments command assent or not depends less upon the logic that conveys them than upon the climate of opinion in which they are sustained. What renders Dante’s argument or St. Thomas’ definition meaningless to us is not bad logic or want of intelligence, but the medieval climate of opinion—those instinctively held preconceptions in the broad sense, that Weltanschauung or world pattern—which imposed upon Dante and St. Thomas a peculiar use of the intelligence and a special type of logic. To understand why we cannot easily follow Dante or St. Thomas it is necessary to understand (as well as may be) the nature of this climate of opinion.⁵

The climates of opinion of the past no longer “impose” themselves on anyone, but they are in some sense accessible to us as objects, fixed objects which on the one hand explain the thinking of the past and on the other enable us to interpret it.

The problem of the static character of these objects, including not only meaning-bestowing objects as world-views, but also the words on which meaning is bestowed, runs very deep, with various surface manifestations. These manifestations appear most familiarly in the historiography of science. In the 1960s Paul Feyerabend made the then revolutionary claim, against the idea that more advanced theories explained less advanced theories by derivation, that at least some large class of theories were not about the same thing as the theories that preceded

them, because the meanings of the terms had changed in the course of the advance. In the hands of Thomas Kuhn, this thesis became the positive theory that the meanings of scientific terms were given by paradigms, which were themselves, among other things, structures of assumptions shared by a given scientific community.

These were accounts of difference. But there was an underlying conflict between the fixed character of meaning-bestowing facts, the conventions, rules, and frameworks, and the facts of change that they were supposed to help account for. Kuhn could not conceive of these meaning-bestowing assumptions as changing in a normal way, in the way that ordinary explicit beliefs changed in the face of new evidence or new considerations. Because they were at a tacit level, and were constitutive of the meaning of the new evidence and the new considerations, they were necessarily immune to revision by new evidence or considerations, and consequently could only change holistically, by revolutions that installed new constitutive meaning-bestowing assumptions.

Meanings and Frameworks: the Temporal and the Atemporal Meet

Rules, conventions, frameworks, world-views and the like explain meanings, and also give us access to meanings. The means of understanding and explaining are fixed. But the “meanings” that they explain are themselves things that change. This produces two problems: one having to

do with explanation, and explanatory regresses, and the other having to do with access. The problem of access takes two forms: where do we get access to the meanings of texts or actions in history and how do we get access to the rules, conventions, assumptions, and so forth governing the meanings? The relation between these two problems of access is muddled, and so is the relation between these problems and the problem of explaining the facts of rules, conventions, and frameworks and the way they change or succeed one another.

The primary problem for the historian is access to the meanings of texts and statements by historical agents. As Skinner puts it, historians face the "obvious difficulty that the literal meanings of key terms sometimes change over time." Indeed, we

. . . discover from the history of thought that there are in fact no such timeless concepts, but only the various different concepts which have gone with various different societies, is to discover a general truth not merely about the past but about ourselves as well.

So conceptual change and conceptual variation is ubiquitous, and the presently understood "literal" meaning of a text from the past may not have had that meaning in the past. In one sense this is a gift or opportunity, if, as Skinner says the "essential philosophical, even moral, value" of "the classic texts, especially in social, ethical, and political thought," is that they "help to reveal— if we let them— not the essential sameness, but rather the essential variety of viable moral


assumptions and political commitments.9 Indeed, the exercise can tell us something about ourselves that may have been previously hidden from us, namely the fact that we assumed and politically committed to a different framework. In either case, we are compelled, in order to understand the language as it was written, to refer to something else, something that does change, namely assumptions, commitments, conventions, and so forth. The explanation of the meaning of the literal words is referred back to the thing that did change, namely the framework.

Skinner has written much more since these arguments were originally given, and we may reasonably ask whether his views have changed in ways that make any difference.10 The key question is this: has Skinner abandoned the idea of meaning-bestowing facts? In his earlier replies to his critics, he was unremittingly hostile to the obvious point that in order to understand past texts, historians needed to translate into terms intelligible to present audiences, a point made by Hollis and myself.11 In my case the point was posed in more or less holistic Quinean terms, and Skinner found the argument, according to our private correspondence, utterly uncompelling. Now he seems to have embraced holism, and even treats it as his main point.12 But for holism


there are no meaning-bestowing facts, there is rather the web of belief, and meanings are a matter of the place of a claim in the inferences making up the web of belief. Foundational accounts, in contrast, provide a meaning-bestowing fact. The two approaches are antithetical in theory and produce different kinds of historical writing in practice.\textsuperscript{13} Skinner formerly favored “convention.” His current work abounds in clichés of the same kind: “We are of course embedded in practices and constrained by them.”\textsuperscript{14} The newly favored term “vision” itself functions as a meaning-bestowing explainer. Skinner suggests, for example, that the use of normative language by the “innovating ideologist” who composes a political text “will always reflect a wish to impose a particular moral vision on the workings of the social world.”\textsuperscript{15} Unless this is an empty metaphor, the vision presumably determines the meanings, and to understand the meaning we need to understand the vision that motivates the speech.

Skinner’s original solution to the explanatory part of the problem of change comes at an odd price: the thing that is fixed, the meaning of the original text, is accounted for by something else that is fixed, namely a set of conventions, which is different from the one we now have, and associated in some way with a different society. This produces a conflict: the means we have for talking about meaning involve notions, such as rules, assumptions, and the like, that are fixed and atemporal. They vary, as Skinner says, between societies, but they don’t themselves change. So while the point of appealing to these notions is to account for meaning change, or at least


\textsuperscript{14} Skinner, \textit{Visions of Politics}, Vol.1, 7.

\textsuperscript{15} Skinner, \textit{Visions of Politics}, Vol.1, 182.
meaning difference, in history, this just pushes the problem one step back to the point where change itself becomes a mystery, a mystery wrapped in the enigma of “society.” The new Skinner acknowledges this problem, and says that as a result of his study of “the classical theorists of eloquence” he has “come to share their more skeptical understanding of normative concepts and the fluid vocabularies in which they are habitually expressed” and to “appreciate their sense that there will always be a degree of ‘neighborliness’, as they liked to call it, between apparently conflicting evaluative terms.”

Where do such claims leave us? Is there an alternative, such as a dynamic notion of meaning, which would allow for and account for meaning change as a normal historical phenomenon? Or is there no alternative to theories of meaning that depend on supposed meaning–producing facts– rules that are hidden behind usages which give them meaning, for example– that are themselves static. Skinner’s language of fluidity suggests that there should be, but his continued appeal to “practices,” “vision,” and similar terms suggests that there is no alternative to appealing to rigid meaning-bestowing structures, be they climates of opinion or conventions. Skinner’s more recent writing turns to a genealogical account of meaning change, exemplified most recently in his essay “The Sovereign State: A Genealogy.” Does this provide us any clues? In one respect this essay does represent an about-face: the style of argument, and its focus on the unit-idea of sovereignty and its variations, would fit comfortably into the work of


his former *bête-noire*, Arthur O. Lovejoy. But Skinner’s “genealogy” is largely a recounting of literal quotations: what one gets is variation, but very little understanding of the structure of inferences in which these variations were meaningful, or the problems they solved for their authors, or why one followed another. Lovejoy’s learned inquiries into what he himself called “the amazing diversity of meanings” of such terms as Romanticism, in contrast, are all about related ideas and the problems they produce when they are fit together, and about how this explains why one followed another and how usages changed when they got into the hands of people whose related ideas were different.

Dictionaries vs. Conventions

Do we need to appeal to meaning-bestowing structures at all? An interesting hint as to what the alternative might be is provided by Nathan Tarcov, in his review of Skinner’s earlier volume of methodological writings, when he remarks that “every textualist [namely, the target of Skinner’s complaints, meaning for us a literal reader] who has used a historical dictionary or learned foreign languages has implicitly agreed with Skinner.” This gives us an alternative way of thinking of the problem. Dictionaries are fixed documents themselves. They are not means of explaining change, and not intended to be. A definition is precisely the same kind of fixed, non-

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dynamic thing that allows for or enables interpretation but does not correspond to the dynamic fact of meaning. But dictionaries are the kinds of documents that consciously abstract from actual usage to something standard, or even “correct.” And this is useful for interpretation: to know what is taken as correct usage may help in understanding the non-conforming usage in a text as a transgression. But dictionaries do not bestow meaning. They reconstruct meanings from usages that are already there, and ideas about correctness that are already there.

Tarcov’s comment begins to show a way out of the muddle, by implicitly separating two things: the supposed historical facts about assumptions, climates of opinion, worldviews, conventions, and whatnot on which interpretation allegedly depends, and the banal stuff of dictionary definitions, which are clearly reconstructions, approximations, and simplifications of actual semantic usage, usually, given the didactic aims of dictionary writers, with a strong whiff of the normative, not to say the snobbish. Although dictionary definitions are an aid to getting at the meaning of something, but only that—a practically indispensable short cut for the non-native speaker that can never be regarded as wholly adequate as a guide, rather than a fact about something in the heads or the social world of the historical agents whose words are being interpreted. In short, assumptions, climates of opinion, and the like are doing double-duty, as means of interpretation that provide access to meanings and as (perhaps bogus) explanatory concepts; in contrast, dictionary definitions are post hoc simplifications that explain nothing, but help provide access to what people mean. What people mean does not depend in any explanatory way on these definitions; rather, the construction of the definitions depends on what people mean.

This allows us to rethink the muddle with which this section began. The problem of access involves two things that need accessing: the meanings of texts or actions in history and
the rules, conventions, assumptions, and so forth governing the meanings. The standard account reasons that one must first access the conventions and then use this knowledge to determine the meanings of the terms and speech acts. The dictionary model, if we can call it that, works the other way around: it proceeds from actual usage and reconstructs definitions from what is actually said and how terms are applied. The reconstructed definitions can then be re-used to understand other texts. The actual process of making sense of the texts, and the material on which the interpreter works, are the same in both cases: there is no direct access to conventions, rules, assumptions, and the like— they are simply inferred from usage, just as dictionary definitions are. The only difference is in the status of these things as theoretical objects— namely, as explainers. Dictionary definitions are idealizations of usage; conventions and rules are bestowers of meaning that lie behind and explain usage in its normative aspect. It doesn’t matter that the dictionary definition is fixed—the definition is self-consciously retrospective, though these definitions can be taken as norms, if someone chooses to be didactic about correct speech. It does matter that meaning-bestowing rules, frameworks, and so on are fixed: they are supposed to account for an infinitude of possible applications. So the difference between the two is a matter of explanatory status.

This is not an approach that “rule” theorists of meaning will accept. For them, mere reconstruction is not enough. Their reasoning is, oddly enough, temporal. And they insist on something analogous to agentic powers. For them, there is no meaning without rules, or something like rules, which lie behind and give meaning to a sentence or concept, warranting the infinitude of its application. These have to be there in the first place, in order for a term to mean anything. Rules, or whatever assures meanings, are in the realm of fact, or at least of normative fact, and they have a special explanatory job—they explain the normative fact of a speaker’s
meaning. For these thinkers, the explanatory regress is central: the whole point of a theory of meaning is to provide the right kind of explanation. Dispositions are the wrong kind. Rules are the right kind. But these are odd explanations. They depend on a special kind of analogy. The terms assumption, presupposition, rule, and the like are terms with an explicit sense, which is being extended to a sense which is tacit, and entirely a matter of ascription by the analyst. There is no explicit rule governing usage, nor are there assumptions actually made, as one might make a stipulation in a legal proceeding, nor are there actual conventions, as there are in international law, made by entering into covenants with others. One can give a definition of a word, but the words we normally use aren’t “defined” for us by anyone. Rather, these terms are all analogies, which point to supposed tacit facts that shadow and give meaning to the things they explain, rather than the kinds of rules, conventions, and assumptions that are made in historical moments, by temporal acts of enactment, agreement, or statements of what one will assume. So this analogy is odd in another way: the normal use of the term refers to an act in history; the analogical use to the results of an act which is outside of history.

So how do rules, conventions, and the like relate to, or enter, history? The answer, if we follow the metaphorical usages, is some variant of this: they may be adhered to or assumed by different people or groups at different times, and these acts of adherence or assumption are historical. As intellectual objects they are historically inert and changeless. Terms like “adhere” simultaneously serve as substitutes for a genuine explanation and point to the analogical character of the whole picture of concepts in society of which it is a part. To bridge the gap between the atemporal character of the explanatory concepts themselves and the fact of their historical location in groups requires some sort of analogy to the convenings that produce
conventions, or the rule-givers who produce rules. But there are none. This is explanation by myth.

Behind the Dictionary

The “rule” theorists of meaning nevertheless have a point, which can be put in the form of a question. What is it that the dictionaries reconstruct into meanings? Their answer is “rule-following speech behavior.” So for them, rules have to be part of the story. Is there an alternative? A simple alternative answer, suited to the idea of dictionary definitions as reconstructions of usage, might be this: language is “intelligible speech.” We understand what people say, including the extended usages, “erroneous” usages, misapplications of terms, and so forth. Many of the extensions of application we understand are analogical or metaphorical. Sometimes we make sense of what we are told by treating it as intelligible error. Sometimes it is not so much error as a novel but intelligible extension of the application of the term. Once the extension becomes widely enough used, or used by acceptable people, it can be entered into the dictionary. The dictionary is not a framework, or at least not the kind of framework that is prior to the meaning, but it is a means of gaining access to the meaning of an expression used by a person in the historical past.

This sense of language, as what is intelligible at a given time, does enter into history, at least on occasion, as the subject matter of history. It is an explicit part of the history of law, for the simple reason that legal concepts have to be extended to apply to new cases. Sometimes these extensions have dramatic consequences. One might give as a paradigmatic and historically
interesting example Max Weber’s dissertation in the history of commercial law.\(^{20}\) Weber’s problem was to identify the processes by which the law of corporations developed, which is first and foremost a matter of making contracts that distribute liability.

A similar problem arises in terms of the history of legal personality: in Roman times, it extended to the whole of the household of the free man, including the persons of his slaves, wife, and children. Over time, this diminished to the modest “person” we have today, whose right even to self-defense is circumscribed. At the same time, more categories of people acquired these rights. This case involves another process of meaning change that applies very generally as well: changes in the beliefs about classes of people or things lead to the extension of meaning to these things. The morality of slavery was challenged by writings like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* because they humanized the slave, bringing them into the category of beings for whom notions of rights and human dignity could be appropriately applied. Something similar might be said for the application of the concept of the soul: when different groups were taken to have souls, the usual meanings that applied to possessors of souls also applied to the newly recognized possessors of souls.

There is an interesting literature in history itself on another kind of change, the problem of oppositions, or counterconcepts, such as civilized and barbarian, associated with Rienhardt Koselleck\(^ {21}\) and plausibly derived from Carl Schmitt.\(^ {22}\) Schmitt famously said that:


Words such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state, and so on, are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such terms.23

The interesting feature of these counterconcepts is that they persist because they make some sort of useful distinction. But when we characterize something as a barbaric practice, we no longer have in mind the barbarians that the Greeks made the contrast with, nor the ones the Romans did. So the distinction persists, but the objects of the distinction change, and the intentions behind using them change as well: what sort of negation or refutation is involved is not determined by the term, but by the intelligible use to which it is put. To call one’s political opponents barbarians is often merely to announce that one is not going to treat them civilly.

The mechanisms by which terms get extended and concretized in new ways are well known. Metaphors end up as mundane usages: philosophical terms such as true and norm, for example, are carpentry terms. The language of political theory and law, including notions like sovereignty, bodies, the nation, and so forth derive by more or less visible past steps of extension from the concept of the monarch, the medieval problem of the king’s two bodies, and metaphors


about contracts. Metaphors, metonyms, analogies, similes, synecdoches, and the like harden into abstract usages along with theories that provide a web of beliefs in which they play an inferential role, and the original uses are sometimes forgotten. The extension of terms and the invention of theories go hand in hand in this process, along with the creation of new equivalences by the adjustment of belief and the alteration of categories—categories like capable of feeling pain, possessing a soul, capable of moral conduct, rights-bearing, and so forth.

The common thread in all these cases of change is this: the novel application, extension, or usage needs to be intelligible at the time the extension is made. It must at least be intelligible to the speaker or author. And these usages are normally directed at an actual audience, which will understand them or not. To imagine otherwise is to imagine an author writing for an unknown audience. But unless the author had some idea of what the audience would understand—unless it was a hypothetical audience constructed on the model of an actual audience that would take the terms in known ways—the author would be faced with the problem of communicating with an audience which might take the words in hitherto unknown ways. Nor is this an empty fear. Nietzsche’s counter-genealogies of terms were designed to illustrate this point. And there are many other cases. Terms like objective and subjective reversed meanings in the course of their history. Terms like proprio and manner went from being descriptive terms for individual conduct to terms like proprieties and manners that came to describe abstract de-individualized normative standards. Each step in the evolution of these terms is intelligible, in the sense that we
can provide a reconstruction of the way in which the extension made sense to its author and to some possible audience at the time of the extension.\textsuperscript{24}

This leaves us with a stark and problematic opposition: between the sense of meaning bound to the ongoing process of making intelligible utterances, which is a sense of meaning in the flux of speech and understanding, and the fixed sense of meaning captured through the identification of conventions. The distinction is between this practical ability and its theoretical reconstruction. The ability is in flux; the reconstruction is fixed, but also fails to ever adequately capture the practical ability to understand and to be understood.

\textsuperscript{24} Skinner has a generic theory, quoted earlier, about the motives of ideological innovators, namely to impose a vision. This doesn’t fit well with his critique of Leo Strauss’s \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing} (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), which is attacked for offering a generic motive, namely the need to write in such a way as to avoid of persecution in the face of the religiously intolerant regimes of premodern Europe and elsewhere (Skinner, \textit{Visions of Politics}, Vol. 1, 71), though Strauss is far more cautious and his suggestion, \textit{pace} Skinner, and the suggestion itself far more plausible. The more important issue is this: does Skinner’s account of “manipulation” and “imposing a vision” fit cases like \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}. Certainly there was a “vision” of the humanity of slaves: but wasn’t there a real intellectual and moral problem about slavery to which this romanticized vision of slaves was an intelligible response? A similar issue arises with Ian Hacking’s version of the child abuse story, and for the same reason: charges of manipulation make sense only when salient facts are omitted (S. Turner, “The Limits of Social Constructionism” in I. Velody and R. Williams (eds.), \textit{The Politics of Constructionism} (London: Sage, 1998), 109-20).
If we leave the issue with this contrast between the flux of meaning and the necessarily false theoretical reconstruction of meaning, however, we still face some muddles. There is a long tradition of thinking that meanings, once established, cannot be lost: Mill gave an account of this, influenced by Coleridge, and one can find similar ideas in many other writers, including Heidegger. Indeed, the nineteenth century passion for philology reflected a kind of mysticism about the recovery of meanings which implied some sort of notion of meaning as hidden in the remains of texts, which the later reader can unlock. And there is a problem here, however muddled. We live with texts from the past. We read them, interpret them in order to appeal to them as interlocutors and, in various contexts, including the law and religious settings, as authoritative. At first blush, this is a problem that arises from the fact that there are texts: literate societies have this problem of the ongoing transformation of intelligible speech, the flux of meaning as intended and understood by speakers, and the contrasting fixity of the written word. And indeed there is a sense in which the problem of meaning vanishes if we are in an entirely oral world, in which nothing is preserved which could have a meaning that differs from the meanings of the present. But even in the world of orality, there is an analogous problem: epic poems that are repeated according to formula become archaic, and have contents that may no longer mean, in the flux of speech, the same thing, or anything at all. But in this case the muddle is not about theoretical objects, “rules” and the like. It is about actual forms of expression—epic poems and texts—that happen to be transmitted in a different way than the ordinary flux of usage, and detached from the practical knowledge of the original users.

The Mystery of Practical Knowledge
Consider a real historical problem about the fighting ship of antiquity, the Trireme. We know the Greek word from the texts. The name refers to the three levels of oars. We know from the context and what is said about them that it is a ship with specific properties. We have plenty of pictures on ceramics. But we lack the practical knowledge that the Greeks themselves had, of making these objects, and of operating them. The knowledge was lost in late antiquity. In the 1980s, a project attempted to reconstruct a trireme based on ancient sources, which included images and a great deal of recorded “literal” information about the capabilities of the vessel, together with the present knowledge of naval architects. The vessel, the Olympias, was subjected to sea trials, including one with a crew of 170. The sea trials showed that the reconstructed vessel had many of the capabilities attributed to the ancient triremes, including their recorded straight line speed and their ability to turn 180 degrees quickly. Some things could not be duplicated, notably the bracing ropes, which had to be replaced by steel cables which did not flex with the hull as the original natural fiber rope did.

Do we now know what “trireme” really meant? And with it also know what the nautical descriptions and accounts of naval battles in the ancient world really meant? Do we know what the practical meaning of the coxswain’s command to “feather,” or its ancient equivalent, “means” for a trireme with a large number of oarsmen? Or do we now at least have a much better theory, and better practical knowledge, because the theory and practical knowledge which we now have does a better job than previous theories of accounting for such things as the recorded capabilities of these ancient vessels? It seems clear that the answer is that we have a better theory, as well as a good surrogate for some of the practical knowledge which was lost. The Olympias is an “as if” trireme, one that is reconstructed “as if” it were the same as the ancient one. It is a functional substitute for the ancient ones, designed to have the same properties, and
also to resemble the ancient images and conform to the properties in the ancient texts. It is constructed for us, by us, and with the materials available to us from the evidence available to us. Aside from these tests, we can never know if the reconstruction is correct. Our reconstructed trireme is outside of the flux of intelligible discussion and practical knowledge that ended in late antiquity. We can guess that it is close enough that it would be recognized as a trireme, but this depends on whether the theory and the practical knowledge on which the reconstruction is based is right: another reconstruction might produce a vessel with sufficiently different features that the ancient mariner would find it acceptable and the Olympias an anomaly. We cannot test that meaning hypothesis.

The Olympias is literally a model: it is not an exact model, but a kind of ideal-type of the ancient trireme, which, as it happens, we can experiment on. It uses different material for lines, and thus flexes differently. But this is a kind of difference we understand in our own terms. There is a lot about the physical act of rowing we understand as well, so we know what the differences between our experience of rowing and what that of the smaller men of the ancient world would have been. So in constructing and using this model we rely on a background that does not change, and to a large extent is not a matter of theory. The physicality of the act of rowing, of the features of sea water and wind, are all part of the background that we don’t need to alter or account for. We know a bit about the properties of wood in sailing vessels, and have reason to think that the wood used for the model is close enough to the original, though like the bracing ropes it is not the same. But we have tested the theory with this model. And we can say that we know better what “trireme” meant as a result. We have more confidence in the meaning of ancient texts about sea battles, and we may be able to make sense of previously obscure passages and claims.
At the same time, we know that this is only a model, and that we are missing a vast amount of practical knowledge and oral content—the kind that is preserved, at least partially, for the period 1800-1813 in the Aubrey-Maturin series of historical novels by Patrick O’Brian, and by the passed down practical knowledge and vocabulary of the sailors who continue to sail the “Tall Ships” that most navies still maintain. We know that techniques and practical knowledge must have changed and varied over the millennia during which the trireme was used, and among the navies that used them. This vast web of usage and knowledge, which was oral or largely so, is what is lost, and for which our model ship is a substitute of limited value. We had to import our own oral tradition, and indeed the physical experience of rowing under command and giving commands, to actually get the trireme through its sea trials—we had to use our language, and our nautical language, as a functional substitute for the one that the ancient mariners possessed, in order to sail the model trireme, along with our functional knowledge and the knowledge concealed in the tools and materials we used to create the model.

Meaning Without Theory?

The Olympias is a model, made with a combination of physical elements, some of which are close to those we believe to be characteristic of triremes in the ancient world, some of which are functional substitutes with different properties. Not everything is the same, nor does it need to be, for the purpose at hand. And what is this purpose? To see if the model as constructed could perform as the ancient sources said the trireme performed, and thus test our theory of trireme construction. By having the model, some of the missing links in our understanding of ancient navies could be filled in. But we also know that this is an artificial model. We think we know
enough to correctly conclude that certain functional substitutes, such as the steel cables, won’t affect the experience. One aspect, perhaps not the most obvious but nevertheless essential to its character as a test, was the human element of the sea trials— the test of whether actual rowers could actually make the model trireme perform the feats that the ancient texts recorded. The real rowers were of course themselves “models” in a sense: it was known that ancient rowers were smaller, and this needed to be taken into account. Nevertheless, if the test had required capacities that were physically impossible for accomplished rowers, the model as a whole would have failed the test. And we would again be unable to say that we knew any better than before what trireme meant in these ancient texts.

The situation with the model is similar to the situation we have with appeals to convention, presuppositions, and the like. They are as artificial as the Olympias. But if they work, in this case to illuminate and enable the kinds of inferences that make the texts intelligible to us, they do their job of explaining how the authors could reason as they apparently did— to come to the novel conclusions that Machiavelli and Hobbes did, for example, or to the conventional but alien conclusions of other authors. In short, we can use “as if” constructions, and we do: it is “as if” people were following conventions, had coherent world views, scientists had paradigms, and what not, as long as these crutches get us where we want to go— to the facts about what someone meant. Once established, these meaning hypotheses can receive additional support, by making sense of more texts, and eventually depend less on the scaffolding of “as if” statements that were needed to reconstruct the meaning in the first place. Perhaps this deepened understanding would allow us to detect nuances of change and variation that can enable us to come closer to the fluid and variable “meanings” of actual speech and communication of the historical addressees, rooted in a distinctive set of experiences, and so forth.
With this kind of knowledge, we would approximate the situation of a person who was capable of interacting with the authors in their own era, and possessing the practical knowledge that gives meaning to the terms, such as “feather.” And this was the goal with using actual rowers to do the work of the ancient rowers—to provide substitutes who would have to be able to do what the ancient rowers did, to not only lift the oars, but to respond to the commands. To be sure, we are limited in our ability to test our understanding. The dead cannot talk back. And we cannot be sure that the samples of material on which we are working, the texts, represent fairly the experiences we would have had if we were interacting. We are even more limited when the material itself is limited, as with the ancient world. But this is a difference of degree: interaction with the living itself provides only a sample, and not every aspect of our understanding is subject to test in these interactions.

So what is the lesson of all this? Making historical claims about what some past thinker meant on the basis of a theory of meaning seems to make history depend on the validity of particular kind of metaphysics, at least a metaphysics of meaning, and thus to lose its independence from philosophy. There is the danger that in using such notions as convention, as Skinner does, one is elevating the (inevitably passing) philosophical language of one particular era to the status of universal historical truth. With Skinner’s original writings, this has perhaps already happened: Skinner has to explain the history of speech act theory to explain his former views and what he now claims. If we are treating claims about conventions and the like as an “as if” serving our particular purposes of understanding, however, we can accept the utility of these notions, if indeed there is the payoff of an improvement in understanding over the literal reading, that is to say if the texts make more sense and reveal more connections in the web of belief and practical action. We should, however, take “literal” literally, to refer to the contrast between
writing and speech. The issue of recapturing what it meant to say something at a given point in
the past and a given setting is a genuinely historical one. Appeals to convention, worldviews, and
the like are crutches in solving this problem. It is of course an illusion that there actually is a set
of shared assumptions, a Brandom-like space of reasons composed of normative inferential
linguistic relations, a system of Skinnerian conventions, and so forth lying underneath actual
language and making it operate at any historical moment. But debating this is not the point for
the historian. These are not historical facts. The point is to know what it meant to give a
command like “feather” on an ancient vessel, or to plead for judicial independence in the wake
of the English civil war, or what it meant to affirm one’s patriotism in the Weimar Republic, in
1920, and in 1933. And in these cases we need a simulacrum of the practical knowledge of the
world in which inferences were being made from these acts of speaking and writing. If doing this
is to fall into what Skinner describes as “the discredited hermeneutic ambition of stepping
empathically into other people’s shoes and attempting (in R.G. Collingwood’s unfortunate
phrase) to think their thoughts after them,”25 perhaps it is time for Skinner to grasp that
attempting this is better than uncritically relying on problematic historical fictions about
practices, conventions, and the like.