

What's wrong with getting things right

In a widely read and discussed article from 2019, Christia Mercer declared that the scholarship on early modern history of philosophy had achieved a 'contextualist revolution.' According to Mercer, contextualism has supplanted rational reconstruction as the dominant methodology within early modern philosophy scholarship. She argues that this revolution stems from the endorsement, by any reputable early modernist, of what she calls the 'getting things right constraint' (hereafter GTRC) as a means to achieve the goal of explicating 'as clearly as possible the authentic views of a wide range of historical texts' (Mercer 2019: 545). To hold the GTRC is to hold that "historians of philosophy should not attribute claims or ideas to historical figures without concern for whether or not they are ones the figures would recognise as their own' (Mercer 2019: 530). Consequently, the GTRC becomes a standard of good practice in the history of philosophy. Mercer presents her project as ecumenical, suggesting that reconstructionists and contextualists alike agree on the fundamental rules and aims, differing only in their 'skills' and 'training'.

Tóth (2022) challenges Mercer's ecumenical project by questioning the possibility of uniting reconstructionists and contextualists. Tóth contends that these two camps hold an irreconcilable difference regarding the truthmakers of their claims. While I find the worry convincing, the contextualist could rebut by pointing out that it risks circularity. Additionally, some critics argue that Mercer's GTRC is merely a version of Quentin Skinner's criterion, first articulated in his 1969 essay, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas'. Skinner's criterion states: 'no agent can be said to have meant or achieved something which they could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what they had meant or achieved' (Skinner, *Vision of Politics*: 77). Due to the apparent similarity between these principles, critics suggest that Mercer's GTRC inherits Skinner's insurmountable difficulties. Mercer counters by pointing out that her principle avoids reference to authorial intentions and instead focuses on the 'claims and ideas' of historical

figures as the object of historical inquiry. In other words, historical inquiry targets collections or systems of beliefs.

This talk explains why Mercer's rebuttal is bound to fail and why GTRC risks being at best vacuous, at worst unintelligible. The main claim is that one cannot simply discard or replace the reference to authorial intention while preserving the core of the principle. Contra Mercer, I show that we cannot actually aim at – never mind show 'concern' (to use Mercer's term) for – what an author actually thought if we drop Skinnerian authorial intentions. For Skinner, the object of historical inquiry is an event – something that actually occurred. Beliefs and meanings are not events; intentional speech acts are. Secondly, understanding authorial intention is a precondition for understanding literal meaning. Comprehending an utterance requires more than recognising the meaning (sense) and reference (what it denotes) of the words used; it necessitates understanding what the speaker is doing by saying it – their intention. Language functions as a form of social action, and meanings depend constitutively on the type of intervention the author engages in when expressing them. Skinner's criterion is grounded in a philosophy of language that makes intention part and parcel of grasping of meaning. This is why Skinner's criterion works, and also why I doubt that Mercer's does. The point of the talk is not to offer a defence of Skinnerianism. The paper will also raise an objection to Skinner's criterion, thus showing that we should drop every version of GTRC. If I am right here, then whatever a contextualist turns out to be, she will not be someone who gets things right.