

# Foundations of Modern Thought

Katie Ebner-Landy  
katie.ebnerlandy@qmul.ac.uk

## Week One: Introduction

### **1/ Skinner's sixth critique**

A second and more intractable problem arises as soon as we ask how far we can hope to carry Elton's idea of confronting a piece of evidence such as a house and allowing it, as he repeatedly demands, to force its questions upon us. Elton is adamant that 'the only proper ambition' for an historian is 'to know all the evidence', with the result that the task of the apprentice historian must be to begin by acquiring 'total acquaintance with the relevant material' if he is to end up by telling the truth about it. The underlying aspiration to arrive at a definitive reading of a body of evidence dies surprisingly hard. Elton's commitment has more recently been echoed, for example, by Peter Gay, who has written of his regret at his decision to entitle his major work on the eighteenth century *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. Gay remarks that while '“*the Interpretation*” would have sounded immodest' this would nevertheless 'have been what I meant'.

But what would it mean to offer *the* interpretation of the Enlightenment? It would mean, at the very least, offering an analysis sufficiently comprehensive to enable us either to incorporate or to set aside every rival reading of every piece of evidence that might be thought relevant to the provision of a total picture of the high culture of the eighteenth century. Not merely is such a project of doubtful intelligibility, but the mere attempt to undertake it would consume endless lifetimes.

Quentin Skinner, "The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact," in *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 16.

### **2/ Reasons for history**

Elton's fundamental reason for wishing to emphasise technique over content appears to have been a deeply ironic one: a fear that historical study might have the power to transform us, to help us think more effectively about our society and its possible need for reform and reformation. Although it strikes me as strange in the case of someone who spent his life as a professional educator, Elton clearly felt that this was a consummation devoutly to be stopped. Much safer to keep on insisting that facts alone are wanted.

Quentin Skinner, "The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact," in *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 26.

## The Athenian-Melian Dialogue

It is 415 BC, the sixteenth year of the Peloponnesian War between the two great empires of **Athens** and **Sparta**. For the last six years they have avoided open hostile action against each other. But now, with hostility rising, a number of small, 'independent' states are now being forced to take sides. One such state was Melos.

After strategically positioning their powerful fleets at the shores of Milos, the Athenian generals send envoys to the island to negotiate the island's surrender...

Break into 2 groups (one side Athenians, the other Melians) and negotiate the best outcome for your people.

Athenians	Melians
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Empire of 170 city-states</li><li>● 13,000 troops</li><li>● You have overwhelming military and naval power and surround the island before landing</li><li>● You send envoys to negotiate the surrender of Melos</li><li>● Your offer to the Melians is simple and unpretentious: submission or annihilation</li><li>● You are engaged in a proxy war with Sparta.</li><li>● You are representatives of an empire - you cannot afford to look weak with all your subjects looking on</li><li>● You are under orders from the empire to return with either the Melians dead or under Athenian control</li><li>● Rational</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The leaders of Melos face a terrible choice: Have their countrymen die as free men or live as slaves.</li><li>● Island nation of 3000 people with no trained army</li><li>● Friendly with Sparta but neutral in the war</li><li>● Melian negotiators meet Athenians in private, out of sight of the population</li><li>● You have been a free state for 700 years</li><li>● The law of nations gives you the right to remain neutral and be free from unprovoked attack</li><li>● Religious</li><li>● Hopeful that your Spartan cousins will come to your aid</li><li>● Proud - to submit would be cowardly and shameful</li><li>● Believe in the justice of your cause</li></ul>