

# Foundations of Modern Thought

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## Week One: Introduction

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

Does this mean that all the facts I might discover about Chatsworth are of equal interest? Am I just to go there and start making a list of anything it occurs to me to say about it? [...] I imagine the apprentice stunned at this point into incredulity. So it doesn't matter in the least what facts I find out about Chatsworth, so long as I employ the right techniques to find them out? This is precisely Elton's point. 'The University', as he patiently explains, 'must train the mind, not fill the untrained mind with multi-coloured information and undigested ideas, and only the proper study of an identifiable discipline according to the rules and practices of that discipline can accomplish that fundamental purpose.' But what of our ability to learn from the past about unfamiliar social structures, about developments in art, religion and philosophy, about the conditions and mechanisms of political and economic change?

Quentin Skinner, "The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact," in *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 21-22.

### **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> |