

# Foundations of Modern Thought

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## Week One: Introduction

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

By this stage I imagine the apprentice beginning to feel slightly bewildered. Elton has offered him the example of a house as an instance of the type of evidence from which he is expected to extract the facts in such a way as to arrive at the truth. But how can one hope to set about seeking the truth, *simpliciter*, about such a thing as a house? Will it not be necessary to approach the study of the house with some sense of why I am studying it, why it might be of interest, before I can tell how best to go about examining it?

Elton has of course foreseen the anxiety and offers an interesting response. The opening chapter of *The Practice of History* introduces a distinction between 'real' historians and amateurs. Amateurs such as Lord Acton or G. M. Trevelyan (who was 'a really fine amateur') intrude themselves and their enthusiasms upon the past. By contrast, real historians wait for the evidence to suggest questions by itself. [...] [This] embodies a salutary reminder about the need to be aware of our inevitable tendency towards pre-judgement and the fitting of evidence into pre-existing patterns of interpretation and explanation. Moreover, the warning seems all the more valuable in view of the fact that the premature consignment of unfamiliar evidence to familiar categories is so hard to avoid, as even apprentice historians know.

There remain some difficulties about applying this rule in practice. [...] Consider again Elton's example of a house as an instance of the kind of raw evidence that an apprentice might confront. [...] Elton has already begged the question by characterising the object under investigation as a house. It will be unwise for Elton to retort that the object under investigation must be a house because it is described as such in all relevant documents. The House of Commons is described as a house in all relevant documents, but it is not a house. Nor will Elton fare any better if he replies that the object must be a house because it looks like a house. On the one hand, an object might look nothing like a house and nevertheless be a house. (Think of lighthouses now used as houses.) On the other hand, an object might look very like a house and nevertheless not be a house. (Think of the mausoleums designed by Sir John Vanbrugh.) [...] we are already caught up in the process of interpretation as soon as we begin to describe any aspect of our evidence in our own words.

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. 14-16.

### **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>