

Week One: Introduction

1/ Skinner's third critique

Nevertheless, the philosophers in question were surely right to insist that the provision of causal explanations in history must to some extent depend on our capacity to relate particular instances to wider generalities. Elton strongly disagrees, arguing that generalisations are 'no help at all' in the search for historical explanations, since historians are always concerned with 'the particular event'. [...]

Despite Elton's assurances, moreover, I cannot myself see how historians can hope to solve any puzzles about the occurrence of facts or events without making some attempt to relate such particulars to a broader explanatory background.

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. 11-12.

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