New Meanings in the History of Ideas

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I.

1) How many new ideas do we have? This question is so familiar that we can hardly imagine there is a conclusive answer to it. Whenever we have an idea of some kind, we feel that perhaps other people may have thought out the same thing – and yet we feel that our ideas never quite match those of others. There is not always reason to care. But when our opinions are at odds with those of others, then it makes sense to ask 'how deep' the disagreement goes, and on what terms we could agree to be convinced by the other. *Then,* we cannot escape asking what is particular about *our own* ideas. Are they really all that 'different' from what people have been thinking for ages?

The situation I am sketching comes close to a 'Creation Myth' of philosophy. Settling disagreement by determining on what terms we could agree to be convinced: that is what we are taught to think of as 'how philosophy started'. And yet the problem, *how many new ideas do we have?,* requires something more than contemplation or debate. It is a historical question. If you want to know whether you thought out something new then you must know what has been thought before. Now if we think of it like this, the history of ideas is a *mer à boire;* we cannot say that we think something new before we know everything that has been thought throughout history. If we were to treat the problem as a matter of historical fieldwork, then the answer would be in God's archives.

2) There is no straightforwardly 'historical' way of determining whether two ideas are really the same. 'Ideas' are not historical givens. Comparing ideas over time is a matter of linguistics, in so far as it comes to *settling meanings,* and it is a matter of philosophy, in so far as it is about *what ideas are.* When we ask how many new ideas we may have, we quickly get from the practical problem of being at odds to the theoretical problem of 'the identification of ideas over time'.

The point is not simply knowing better than the mighty dead or tracing ideas back to ever more remote ancestors. These are rather impish ways of dealing with the history of ideas, and they do not make your argument stronger. The 'identification of ideas over time' is a problem when it comes to settling disagreement on arguments alone, that is, when we do not know how to prove what we claim. *Most* cases of disagreement can be settled by some kind of demonstration ('look, *this* is how you cook boeuf bourguignon', 'here's the map', 'Q.E.D.') – but philosophers make a profession of picking precisely the kind of problems which can't. Whenever we get into some kind of disagreement we don't know

how to get out of, we get the itchy feeling things are getting philosophical.
How to get rid of this itch? If we don't know how to settle our disputes in the here and now, we won't find a solution in the past. Nor will we discover whether the disagreement makes sense at all by putting it in a historical perspective. The question of how many new ideas we have is not so much a *historical* problem as it is a *metaphilosophical* one: how can we claim that our views are more compelling than others, that there is some kind of systematic way of dealing with problems which yields some kind of advantage, in short, that *philosophy brings forth new ideas?*

3) Saying that two ideas are the same requires that we identify meanings. In the here and now, we can infer something about people's beliefs from their behaviour; but in the history of ideas, we have little else to deal with than words. So the problem also has a linguistic side: how to compare the different jargons and languages, to establish equivalence relations between different syntactic structures, to explain what counts as valid and competent reasoning in terms of language use, but also to show how identical expressions can be brought to mean different things. The metaphilosophical problem, then, has a linguistic as well as a philosophical and a historical side.
Now the history of ideas is something like a linguistic ideal situation, with regard to well-formedness of the sentences and coherence of the texts. This is not entirely an advantage. Theoretical jargon obeys to such strict conventions precisely because it is not self-evident, because you don't know in a few lines what it is all about. At the grocer's, I need five words and the rest is small talk. My intentions and presuppositions can be inferred as well as required from a very conventional and limited context. So I can throw in a pun or make myself understood with a nod and a wink. In a book, there are of course nods and winks, puns, conventions and play with conventions. But there is a fundamental difference between communicating my intentions and desires in a sentence, and communicating my beliefs in a book. At the grocer's, I communicate my intention to buy apples in order to buy apples. In a book, say, regarding the present state of our educational system, I may have the intention to change the educational system, but first and foremost I am trying to make clear what I mean. What I *want* is not an established given, like the apple transaction which is carried out daily in x varieties in grocer's shops worldwide. Even if Quentin Skinner is right in arguing that the history of ideas is first and foremost about what an author was *doing* in writing a particular text, this does not imply that the author's *intentions* are given with the context: for these intentions are connected to beliefs which require explanations, and which are supposed to have consequences which go beyond the given situation. Although there is a lot of small talk in the history of ideas, it is not meant as an ornament to a discourse pattern: theoretical discourse is to some extent communication for its own sake, communicating beliefs in order to get the proper meaning across. If this was all we could just as well get rid of it; but if this was no concern at all then the history of ideas would not be very meaningful either.
No historian believes that the history of ideas takes place in the realm of ideas. If it was purely a

matter of matching and counterpoising ideas, then there would be nothing to distinguish it from philosophical reflection. Disciplines such as the history of science or philosophical history may enjoy some degree of autonomy, but they do not stand apart from the broader and more urbane 'history of mentalities' and are not free from historical contingency. Likewise, the language that people use to express their ideas has the same grammar and basic vocabulary as more practical and colloquial language use. So no matter how well-formed and coherent some theoretical discourse may be, it is still governed by the linguistic conventions of the period – in less abstract terms, we still don't know which passages in Plato are jokes. The history of ideas may contain much more fun than we are capable of enjoying.

4) When new ideas get rooted, we call that *conceptual change.* So how can we recognize conceptual change in language use? One sure thing is that the overwhelming majority of the sentences we make are new, whereas most of the words we speak are not. As competent language users, we are able to compose a potentially infinite amount of expressions from a limited set of elements and rules: this is what is called the 'principle of compositionality'. But we are also able to pun on words we use, to interpret each others' malapropisms correctly, and to make ourselves understood with inarticulate sounds and gibberish.

Neither words nor sentences seem to provide a good criterion for what counts as conceptual change: neither type of language creativity is equivalent to developing new ideas. If we had a new idea every time we made a new sentence, then our statements would all be incomprehensible in their newness: for how could we make out the meaning of what one says if not by indicating what follows from it, what is included and excluded in it, and how it might have been phrased differently? As for puns and gibberish, it seems that these are more tolerable the easier the situation is; whereas when you are contrasting your views with those of others, and fine-tuning the contrast, you do not use gibberish at all, you avoid malapropism, and make jokes only in the margins. Of course we *can* have a new idea and make a joke about it, or say something new in a slip of the tongue, but this does not yet amount to effecting conceptual change. Conceptual change is a *public* affair, and so is the history of ideas.

5) It seems to follow that ideas are somewhat slower than words, and that conceptual change is a long-term process of shifting frames. If we cannot identify 'ideas' with either words or sentences, then the likely next step would be to locate them in a larger 'conceptual scheme' or 'web of beliefs', in which meanings change as the web expands and old knots are untied. When words and ideas are not in a one-to-one relationship, but defined in relation to other meanings and beliefs, then conceptual change becomes visible in the use of language only in the long term, as words change meaning under the impact of new terms and new facts. So then, we would describe conceptual change as semantic change. This is indeed what has been done in a particular branch of the history of ideas, which is alternately described as 'historische Semantik' and 'Begriffsgeschichte' – Reinhart Koselleck's

lexicon of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* shows this type of research in its paradigmatic form.
I have no intention of pleading for or against Koselleck's methods in this essay. Since the discourse of political theory is historically dispersed, I think it makes good sense to analyze this history in terms of changing vocabularies. But I do not think that semantic holism (the theory that meanings are tied up in a 'web of beliefs') provides an argument unambiguously in its favour. Quine, who has coined the notions of 'semantic holism' and 'web of beliefs', uses them to argue against a 'museum myth of meaning', against the idea that meanings are 'things' which define the properties of words. For Quine, semantic holism entails that the meaning of words is to a large extent ('ontologically') *indeterminate,* and that its basis is behavioural and contextual. From a Quinean point of view, it makes no sense to compile a historical lexicon if you want to get a clearer grasp of what words mean: not that words do not have a history, but it is of no consequence for their actual use.
(Not surprisingly, then, Koselleck prefers to explain his project in a more 'hermeneutical' jargon.)

6) This is not a knock-down argument against historical semantics, and there might be ways to redescribe semantic holism in such a way as to make it compatible with the 'historicity of meaning'. But no matter how much the conventions that regulate language use are historically determined, you can be unaware of this history and be a competent language user all the same. Meanings may be historically rooted, but they are not historically *given.* History does not speak, or think; *people* do that. Even though meanings are public, and meanings are vague and elusive, and meanings are played with and misused and constantly re-established, all this does not in the least get round the fact that a language needs speakers, and that ideas have actors.
The history of ideas is so much like an 'ideal situation' because it is also a 'free zone'. Although its traditional source material is written in a language much more like what is learnt at school than what is heard in the street, it is detached from the ostensible world and made to fit private purpose to the point of incomprehensibility. (That is, incomprehensibility not in the sense of not knowing what the words mean, but of not getting the point.)

II.

7) Incomprehensibility is not a virtue. To introduce a new idea may require a break with expectations and established meanings, and so every creative act has something incomprehensible about it, but the reverse does not follow from that. Certainly the history of ideas is not a gallery of incomprehensibilities. Some of the difficulty in interpretation is simply because we *have the free use of words,* that we are not restricted to the set of conventional phrases that we call 'idiom' and can make a liberal use of this idiom as well. But there are other reasons.

8) The free use of words is to some extent *forced upon us* by the natural vagueness of words. The meaning of words is vague first because there is no such thing as a self-evident definition: it always

involves other words, pointing out things, and using more words to make clear what exactly is being pointed out, to define the meaning of a term. Second, words would be not too much use if they all were rigidly defined. Proper names require rigid designation, but properties, actions and generic terms are not given their verbal label in a performative speech act: all that you can point out of the meaning of *blue, sleeping, car* are examples of *blue, sleeping, car.* For dealing with novel situations, or including things, actions or properties under the extension of a term, you cannot escape using words innovatively.

Both because meanings are not 'things', and because we have no use for such 'things', the application of terms requires a competence beyond the ability to construct sentences from particles.

Meanings change over time. But this does not mean they are fixed for a given time.

9) Meanings are vague, but *ideas* are worse. If some ideas seem 'clear' and others seem 'confused' this is not only because some people are smart and other people are stupid. If ideas were evident and well-defined there would be no such distinction. But in fact, we do not have anything like a clear definition of what ideas are, or even a family of objects that we commodiously agreed on to call 'ideas'. Even when I speak of an elephant, what does it mean to say that you have the same idea of an elephant as you have? Is some lobe or knot of our brain in the same state? Do we both have a picture before our inner eye of something that looks like Jumbo and like other elephants, and that looks less like Alfie the alligator? Do we share a disposition to say 'yes' when we see a big grey beast, or a wildlife documentary, or the abstracted image of an elephant in the Ravensburger logo, or a child's drawing?

Enough Wittgensteining on this topic. What matters is that ideas have an indefinite shape even if they pertain to things in reality (my idea of John or pingpong is not a miniature of John or pingpong) and that this is even more so when there is a deontic aspect to them, i.e. when they refer to something which *should be,* which has no counterpart in a *thing* at all. It can be argued that all attempts to give 'proofs' and 'reasons' have such a deontic aspect, even if they are given with respect to actual matters of fact instead of envisioned futures, because if these matters of fact must be *proven* or *argued for* then they are not self-evidently 'there', and they must be taken to be the case because this is how it *should be.*

10) For some types of reasoning, artificial languages have been developed to avoid confusion. The terminology of these languages is constrained by much stricter rules and conventions than 'natural language', and their domain is accordingly restricted. The more 'closed' these domains are, the less attention they have received in what is traditionally called the 'history of ideas': mathematics, for instance, mainly occurs in the shape of 'the development of mathematical thought', 'the measuring of the world', the 'statistic' and 'calculating' mentality, etc. The tacit assumption seems to be that ideas matter in history when they 'open up' to the world, when they affect practices and mentalities. Under

this assumption, the history of ideas would not be concerned as much with ideas proper as with *the relation between ideas and the world.* Not with how ideas describe or intend reality, but with how they are part of the world and interact with it.

11) I do not believe in such ethereal entities as 'insights' and 'deeper meanings'. But I do not believe either that the problems of historical interpretation can be solved in a three-step analysis: (1) determine the meaning of words; (2) analyze how these words make up, and function in, a sentence; (3) establish the relations between sentences. Primordial to all 'hermeneutical' considerations, there are three technical objections to such a procedure:

- meanings are not stable.
- ideas can be confused.
- we have the free use of words.

As I would summarize paragraphs 7-10, we cannot stick to the words themselves. What an author is trying to say, or what the text can be consistently taken to mean, let alone why it matters to know, is not evident from the source material as such, even given the vocabulary and grammar of the language in which it is written.

12) The *historical significance* of the source remains indeterminate under the proposed structural (logical, syntagmatic) analysis of how it is constructed from its particles. But this is not just because 'taking a position' or 'participating in a debate' is not something you do on your own, but also because there is no 'given' meaning to start from, on which the historical significance is layered as a second-order phenomenon. One possible consequence to draw is that the structural analysis must be supplemented by historical analysis, that 'meaning' in the history of ideas can only be established together with historical significance.

This would be the 'historical' version of a more general claim: that a language is not given by its rules and lexicon, but that these give only a general basis for interpretation. This is not a very controversial claim, but it *is* controversial to what extent this claim is detrimental to the logical structure of language.

This philosophical controversy is by no means bracketed in the history of ideas. Both when we leave the meaning of what someone is arguing indeterminate, and when we read it too much 'historically', we are bracketing the *logical* aspect of debating and taking a position.

III.

13) Historians are fond of saying that their job consists of 'putting things in context', 'seeing relations', etc. In isolation, historical facts are only of antiquarian interest; the quibble over historical facts (what was when, and what happened?) is relevant for the writing of *history* proper only because it hammers in the nails on which their historical analysis is hinged. Or at least that is how many

historians perceive it. Fair enough. Even in the history of ideas, we cannot *prima facie* discard non-theoretical texts such as archive records or songbooks, or even non-written sources. Since a historical text is always *about* something, and generally written with some *purpose,* with a certain *audience* in mind, and addressing certain *issues* which are supposed to be relevant not only to the author, every tiny historical fact can contribute to an understanding of the situation at hand.

Putting things in context is something we do both with Hobbes' *Leviathan* and the practice of buying red apples. But for understanding *Leviathan,* it is not so clear what counts as context: the public sphere in 17th-century England is a far more extended, and far less defined, context than a grocery store. Moreover, when Hobbes bought red apples, he did not mean to innovate on the practice of grocery, but when he wrote *Leviathan,* he proposed to change the public sphere, and using arguments which were not limited to that sphere, but which he believed to be the universal principles of political science. So the 'context' would include conceptions of science, scientific practice, knowledge of world history and pre-established notions of 'politics' and the 'public sphere', as well as how Hobbes may have encountered them.

The 'context', in the history of ideas, is a very vague container notion, and if 'the meaning of a text' is vague, to conceive of the task of the historian exclusively or essentially as 'putting things in context' is to explain something vague by something still vaguer.

14) Historians of ideas are lucky bastards because they deal mainly with what a text *says,* and need to have less concern for what is *true* about it. For instance, it is easier to determine what conceptions of 'valour', 'Christianity', and 'the East' underlie Froissart's account of the battle of Nicopolis, than to establish what actually happened on the battlefield. There are enough sources telling us that a Turkish army destroyed a crusader army, that most captives were beheaded afterwards, and who were the leaders involved; but the size and composition of the armies, and the course of the fighting, and the reasons why the Turks won, are harder to dig out of the archives and out of the ground – not to mention the 'historical significance' of Nicopolis. The historian of ideas, at least, does not have to dig in the Bulgarian ground.

But historians of ideas are poor bastards as well, and for quite the same reason. A battle is a pretty straightforward event: two armies clash until there is only one left standing. There are material conditions for raising an army, political motives for waging war, decisions made by the people involved, and uncertainty about the outcome; but the event itself has a solid causal basis. The 'ideal of Chivalry', on the other hand, is not something taking place at Nicopolis, or in the head of Froissart: it is not a situation or an event. We can say that something 'happened' to the ideal of chivalry at Nicopolis, historian can disagree over whether it 'ended' there, but there are no causal conditions under which this would or would not be the case. When we speak about 'the ideal of Chivalry', we refer to something which existed in different forms in the mind of Europeans over centuries, which includes Charlemagne, feudalism, court culture, the military predomininance of cavalry, initiation rites

etc. When we say that Nicopolis gave a blow to Chivalry, we make a statement which entails all *that,* and there is no model under which we can transcribe it in causal terms, even though there are all kinds of causal processes involved. As objects of historical enquiry, ideas are scattered and polymorphous.

14) Interpretations, in the history of ideas, go beyond interpretations of what a single text means, like historical descriptions are more than inventories of facts. The 'context', after all, does not consist only of background knowledge but also of shared ideas and rival views. If a text makes sense, then the ideas behind it are not the author's privileged asset and others can agree or disagree with him, or hold altogether different views. The fact that we still can at least suggests that there is some continuity in the history of ideas, that conceptual change is gradual and can be charted.
Yet here the historian is facing a dilemma. Either he emphasizes the continuity between past and present ideas, which turns them into things which we could have thought out for ourselves; or he emphasizes the discontinuity, which turns them into things which are of no concern to us, or even entirely beyond our grasp. Of course, he will be likely to search for some 'middle way', arguing that this is a false dilemma: things can be fundamentally different and still be accessible to understanding. But if it is so different that we cannot say whether it is consistent with our conceptions or not, then how can we know what it is about? And if we can, why is it different from an idea which we could have constructed independently? In its extreme consequence, the identification of ideas over time tends to make all ideas synchronic.

15) One might say that ideas are different not because they are 'beyond our grasp', but because they are concerned with different *issues* and *problems.* After all, ideas do not emanate spontaneously: even though people may have new insights at random ('serendipitously'), these flashes of insight only become meaningful when they fit to some concern or problem. This may be a plausible theory of concept formation, but it does not solve the dilemma between continuity and discontinuity. If ideas are meaningful only with regard to problems and issues, then this renders the history of ideas irrelevant, because it means that ideas are meaningful for us only with regard to our present problems and issues.

16) The language that we use to express ideas is learnable. So are the languages that people used in the past, and some of these are still closely akin to living languages. Even in the case of dead languages, those of which we have a sufficient record to make history of them have also left deep traces in the living. They are, of course, different; but not quite as different as Chinese and English are. In so far as ideas are connected to words, the continuity of language development suggests a similar continuity in the history of ideas.
If this solves our dilemma, it does so at the cost of cultural relativism. For if it is *on account of* etymological connections that I am still able to understand some of Plato's ideas, and for no other reason, then the explanation must be that I inherited the ideas with the language. Phrased like this, we

ignore entirely the processes of language acquisition and concept formation; but this is exactly what happens if we take the continuity of language development for a sufficient explanation of how we can identify ideas over time.

17) I *do* believe that the continuity of language development indicates a continuity in the history of ideas. But it is not a sufficient argument. If it seems plausible enough, that is because of some tacit assumptions about language acquisition and concept formation which the continuity itself does not explain. I do not believe (does anyone?) that historical analysis can provide a theory to cover these matters: such a theory involves both logical model-making and empirical psychology.
In summary, to say that we can understand what people from the past meant because their language is partly identical to, and partly an identifiable transformation of ours, calls for a theory of learning which itself beyond the scope of historical enquiry. Unnecessary to say, I do not pretend to have such a theory. What I am concerned with is how assumptions about it function in historical explanations, and determine what goes for 'ideas' in the history of ideas.

IV.

18) For learnable languages, 'historical development' is produced by a chain of teachers and learners, who gradually change the language consciously and unconsciously to adapt it to different circumstances. (The same, I suppose, goes for techniques, utensils, pictorial conventions, and other non-written testimony of ideas.) When explanatory value is attributed to this cultural continuity, that is a particular model for 'seeing things in context'.
Now what is this 'explanatory value'? It is obvious enough that people from different times and places hold different ideas; but although we talk about particular 'Western', 'Japanese', or 'Medieval' ideas, but the fact that you are a modern European does not define a set of 'modern, European ideas' which you are compelled to believe. You will be *likely* to believe a great deal of things, but you will not adhere to *all* of them, nor *only* to them. There may be a *core set* which you are bound to adhere to, and perhaps this core set is different in other times and places, but then again this core set does not consist of isolated, self-evident meanings. One consequence of semantic holism is that the difference between fundamental ('core set') and contingent ideas is only gradual – so your 'core set' is meaningless without your less restricted ideas. Therefore we cannot *isolate* a core set, and make an explanation model of the kind 'if your place in space and time is *x, t,* then you will be bound to believe *p*'.
In such a model, ideas would be determined as *fixed meanings.* Now this is counterfactual with regard to pragmatics, and too rigid with regard to language change. The model would work only if ideas would be isolable entities – and all the ways in which we *use* ideas and *have access* to them lead to the conclusion that they are *not.*

19) Most types of (cultural, historical, conceptual) relativism adopt a more indirect model of

explanation. Of course, you have the free use of words – *to some extent* – but this is possible only because you can anticipate on people's understanding, because there is a whole body of tacit shared assumptions and related practices which developed over time, and which form the 'bottom layer' or 'deep structure' on which we build. In this geological view, even though we hold ideas individually, our individual interpretation of the world is a surface phenomenon, and conceptual change is a slow process of sedimentation. The explanation of conceptual change, accordingly, becomes a causal explanation in conceit: ideas cannot always have been *there,* they cannot emerge spontaneously, they do not change because we decide, in an act of agreement, to change them: the emergence of new ideas in the individual consciousness must be due to 'deeper necessities', a 'changing world', 'natural responses' and the like.

I am not sketching the model of a specific relativistic theory. As a *theory,* the model of conceptual change as slow and causal has been generally associated with Marxism; however, it is not alien to other theories, and as a tacit assumption, it is behind most work in the history of ideas that does not explicitly adhere to the opposite. It is, in short, a 'common-sense' view. This, then, would be one way of dealing with the 'relation between ideas and the world' which I referred to under (10): since there is no formal language in which the history of ideas can be charted, the appeal to common sense is a way to 'keep it grounded'. In effect, this means that you bracket the logical structure of concepts in favour of a causal model.

20) There are several objections to this. First, there is no successful causal model. If you want to describe conceptual change at a 'deeper level', then you must first lay it bare; and this again means isolating core sets, imposing logical hierarchies. You may argue that the structure of knowledge is not all that 'logical', and that the relation between deeper and surface levels is not a logical one – but still you need a model of conceptual structure, in which some concepts are loose and some are rooted. For such a model, to be successful is to develop into a formal language. Then again, such a formal language itself belongs to the 'surface level' of easily adaptable ideas.

Second, common sense itself is historically contingent. In fact, one of the great puzzles for historians is what goes without saying and classifies as sound in one past or the other. It is one of the historian's rules of thumb that you must not 'project' your own ideas on the people you are describing. Now if even our 'core set' is not a secure basis for understanding the past, no sophisticated model-making will help us out of the fix, and historical enquiry becomes in part the self-enquiry of common sense. This must be what is called 'putting things in perspective'. The problem is that this 'perspective' does not replace the common-sense model of description, but rather the 'putting things in perspective' is ambivalent between two different models.

21) Let me distinguish these two models somewhat more sharply. In the 'causal' model, the linguistic aspect of ideas is only an epiphenomenon: 'reference', 'meaning', 'intension', 'entailment' etc. have

an explanatory value only in so far as they correspond to physical actions and processes. Now no historian of ideas ever goes far beyond these epiphenomena, but the point is that if you appeal to 'historical necessities' and 'underlying changes', which are not *logical* necessities, there is hardly any alternative to plain causality as a model. The idea that there would be a specific kind of 'historical causality' which is not like ordinary causality, is sheer mystification: history does not do anything, *people* do things, and things *happen.*

The alternative model would be to describe ideas in terms of *relations between signs.* We can call this model 'logical', provided that we do not define 'logical' as commensurable to a specific formal language or algorithm, but as relating signs to signs, meanings to meanings. In this model, it is the relation of ideas to the world that is secondary to the relations between the ideas themselves.

For a decent history of ideas, this is a poor alternative. Ideas are not all that autonomous: they do not *do* things any more than history does. They are not givens any more than 'history' or 'context' is a given. Moreover, a 'logical' model, even under a liberal definition of 'logic', would impose upon the ideas of others a set of assumptions: even if the historian's task were to reconstruct the 'logical grammar' that regulates the relations between signs and meanings in the source text, the identification of such relations would still be subject to logical constraints.

V.

22) Hans-Georg Gadamer's solution, in *Wahrheit und Methode,* is to give what I would call a model of 'non-explanation'. There is, according to him, no 'hermeneutic method' on basis of which we can understand the past, no sure clue to what would go without saying in the author's time. All we can do is see where our own assumptions fail, and adapt them piecemeal. That is, we are required to 'enter into discussion' with the past. Gadamer's model is not causal, for the simple reason that causality itself is a preconception to be put at stake. Same for 'logic'. Still Gadamer's model is logical to some extent, in that language is the medium for discussion; but for him, language is not restricted to a delineated domain of signs, it is the container notion for everything which presents itself to the understanding. Language, then, is bigger than the people who use it, and the generation of ideas is something which goes on in the history of its use: 'we are involved in a process of truth (*in ein Wahrheitsgeschehen einbezogen*) and come too late when we wish to know, where we should believe.'[1]

23) In my immodest opinion, this model of non-explanation is a non-solution. For Gadamer, there is no limit to what we can express in language, as there is no limit to what we can understand: everything appeals to the understanding, and 'Being, that can be understood, is language' (*Sein, daß verstanden*

[1] *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 1960; 4th edition, Mohr, Tübingen 1975; p. 465; my translation.

werden kann, ist Sprache).[2] Yet what Gadamer seems to be suggesting, is that there is something 'deeper' going on in history (namely, 'Being' comes to words) of which our historically situated understanding is only a fragment; and since our understanding is historically situated, to understand is to partake in this 'Wahrheitsgeschehen'. Now what if I did not give a damn for history? Sure my concepts have been developed by other people, but I am capable of using these concepts without knowing their history, and if I am indebted to the past that does not give it authority over my thoughts and decisions. For Gadamer, with his Heideggerian mumbo jumbo, such a position would be 'inauthentic'.

I mention Gadamer mainly because his model is incoherent precisely on the point of how many new ideas we have. On the one hand, he states that understanding is rooted is everyday practice, and so everyone has a valuable perspective; but on the other hand, his conception of the history of ideas is entirely canonic. The history in which our understanding is rooted consists of glimpses of Being; but the more of Being you glimpse, the greater your relative weight in the history of ideas. Gadamer's conception of the history of ideas is based on a notion of *privileged insight:* the tradition that we must rediscover all the time, or even reinvent all the time, consists of eternal words whose depths we cannot sound. So everyone has his own unique insights, but some privileged insights are unique in a more unique way.

24) Such inconsistencies are not uncommon in the history of ideas. Two standard answers to the question 'why history matters' are a) that it helps us to understand ourselves, and b) that it still has an actual portent. For the history of ideas, I take this to mean that a) we are in a continuous tradition of thought, and b) the work of some author is an inexhaustible source of insight. Many contextualists, who are ill at ease with these standard answers as I am, have bracketed the question as one which is outside the scope of their enquiry.

Accordingly, the issue of how many new ideas we have is dismissed as 'subjective' or 'philosophical'. Authors as different as Quentin Skinner and Michel Foucault, who seem at first sight to have only one common aspect in that they have a rigorous conception of their discipline, have argued that the concern is irrelevant or distorting to a historical view. I think they have good reasons for this. I do not have the opportunity to give either of their theories the full attention they deserve. Still, since they touch upon my point, it is necessary to produce something of an argument against both.

25) Skinner, in his paper 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', attacks two 'mythologies' which he finds at work in conventional history of ideas, the *mythology of doctrine* and the *mythology of coherence.* The former tells us that there are such things as ideas which develop in the course of history, the latter that texts are unities in which a coherent presentation of such ideas as

[2] Idem, p. 450

attempted. According to Skinner, these tacit assumptions lead to the ascription of impossible intentions to authors (how can Petrarca have intended to 'start the Renaissance'?) and to completely inappropriate criticism (Petrarca's notion of the Renaissance is 'undeveloped'). What historians should focus on, is *what an author was doing in writing a particular text;* and so it is crucial to realize that ideas have agents, that they do not exist on their own, that there is only 'a variety of statements made by a variety of different agents with a variety of intentions.'[3] So it is methodologically unsound to seek for eternally valuable answers to eternal questions: instead, Skinner argues, 'we must learn to do our thinking for ourselves'.[4]

I am largely sympathetic to Skinner's proposals and even to his conclusions; but I think it somewhat strange that with such a negative view on conceptual continuity, he wrote a two-volume history of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought.* Obviously, Hobbes and Macchiavelli must have done *some* of our thinking for us if their argumentative speech acts are part of the foundations of modern political thought. Now to give his argument a Davidsonian turn, Skinner may suggest that ideas are not a separate ontological domain, and so having and expressing an idea is one action among others, and belongs to its own time just as much as less conceptual deeds; but this does not rid him of the problem of identifying ideas over time. For if they are not at all like ours, how must we understand them? In Skinner's methodology, the history of ideas becomes a field of action; and his argument seems to be that action takes place in a limited span of time. Whatever the later consequences of such actions are, they are not the action itself.

A simplified presentation would be to picture this field of action as a layer of time, and history as the sequence or pile of such isolated synchronic layers. Apart from the fact that this is a rather outdated picture of temporal progress, it is not sufficient for the interpretation of historical meanings either. For an analysis of what is being said and meant, Skinner appeals entirely to speech act theory; what he leaves out of regard is that expressing ideas is a matter of *giving reasons*. A speech act, in the history of ideas, is an appeal to the audience's reasoning and imagination; and as such, it entails what Robert Brandom calls a 'discursive commitment' to indicate what you mean, and also what you do not mean, what makes your view plausible, how it relates to the status quo, and other kinds of *inferential* operations. So to define ideas is to give reasons.

26) I shall put this in capitals, because it is the slogan that sums up my argument:

MEANINGS AND REASONS ARE INTERDEPENDENT.

27) Let's think of the matter like this. If Hobbes contributed to 'the foundation of modern political thought', he did not do so by force of arms, or mass indoctrination: he made some intelligible and

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[3] 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', in: James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics,* Princeton UP, 1988, p. 56

[4] idem, p. 66

plausible statements, or at least he made them appear intelligible and plausible. Now if this kind of action is what we are interpreting in the history of ideas, how are we to understand the content of these statements without making plausible and intelligible what would have passed, for Hobbes' audience, as plausible and intelligible? In a more simple phrase, the historian must give reasons for what counts as reasons. Now I cannot believe that this kind of reason-giving on behalf of the historian takes place entirely on a meta-level. I am not suggesting that writing about Hobbes is the same as pleading for or against Hobbes, but I hold that these two levels of reason-giving are impossible to separate categorically both in theory and in practice. In practice, because we do not have a formal language of historical analysis; and in theory, because such a layering of levels of reasoning suffers from infinite regress: we can construct a meta-rationality on top of meta-rationality and so on until there are infinitely many types of rationality.

Skinner's own model suffers from a similar regressive tendency, in that it renders past rationality discontinuous with ours and still wants to make sense out of it. (Eat the cake without touching it?) So this world of thought and action can be entirely different from ours but still it can be charted with the help of speech act theory. This would only work if Skinner had a covering model for the whole field of speech action at time *t.* But then he would need to have another model to make sense of the model. This is what I referred to under (13) as 'explaining something vague by something still vaguer'.

28) Michel Foucault, in *l'Archéologie du Savoir,* propounds a theory of interpretation that is analogous to Skinner's in several aspects but yields completely different results. According to him, the question of how many new ideas we have is misleading because it suggests a false continuity in the history of ideas, in which authors invent upon another and are scaled in a hierarchy of newness. Foucault identifies such continuities with the 'history of ideas' proper, to distinguish it from it own 'archæology': according to him, such continuities are not to be found in the *énoncés* (statements, expressions) themselves, and presuppose a unifying rational consciousness. But there is no such one-to-one connection of words to ideas via the consciousness; the *énoncés* stand out alone, as isolated products of their rules of formation. The structure of our statements and expressions is not reducible to logical, grammatical, social or cognitive structure: it belongs to the domain of discourse, which is a domain *sui generis.* How 'new' ideas are, what 'reasons' there are for them, and who are their 'authors', are all concerns only with regard to a certain ordering of discourse, in which Man is at the centre and in charge of affairs. In the archæology of knowledge, these orderings exist only relative to an established discursive practice.

So no 'thinking for ourselves' here, or even 'thinking with history'. At best, Foucault's analysis will help to arm the critical consciousness against all kinds of structured discourse, and prompt it to thinking *against* history; at worst, we merely replace one kind of discourse by another, and sit out time waiting for the Death of Man. It is Foucault's avowed intention to 'liberate the history of thought from

transcendental subjection'[5], and this brings him to bracket all notions of diachronic development in favour of synchronic relations between *énoncés*. If the order of discourse changes, this is not a process of adaptation or accumulation, it is simply a break. Foucault is at pains to emphasize that a discourse is not a 'realm of ideas', an 'underlying structure' or a 'conceptual scheme' which guides our perception: it is a whole lot of dispersed expressions and actions, between which all kinds of relations are established. Archæology, accordingly, is not concerned with linguistic *competence* but with linguistic *performance:* what matters is not how statements are understood, but how they are made.

29) Foucault does not offer either a logical or a causal explanation. 'Discourse' is a container notion rather than an explanatory notion: as Paul Veyne puts it in *Foucault révolutionne l'Histoire,* discourse is like an iceberg: although indeed the greater part of it is hidden from our view, the bulk that we do not see is made of the same stuff as its top, it is not the motor of the iceberg, and it must be explained in the same way as the visible part.[6] Although I agree with most of the critique that has been levied against Foucault's sweeping statements in *Les Mots et les Choses,* and I find his reply that archæological analysis is only local a rather weak defence for such claims as that 'Man will be effaced like a face in the sand',[7] I do not think it touches upon the heart of the matter. Regardless of the explanatory value of the notion of discourse, there is good sense in the conviction that reason did not create the world, but rather is built upon a whole lot of humdrum. Equally, it is a sound linguistic principle that words can mean different things, that this 'meaning' is not an entity which evolves through time, and that therefore tradition does not determine linguistic performance. So if Foucault is concerned with the whole lot of humdrum rather than with 'structure', 'development' or 'consciousness', then I have no quarrel with that.

But Foucault *is* putting forward a theory of concept formation. Or at least, that is what the notion of 'discursive formation' amounts to. What Foucault seems to be saying is that words are not heaped upon concepts, but rather concepts are built upon heaps of words. So at some point in the ordering of discourse, meanings pop up. But since these meanings are not intrinsic to the words, they differ with regard to function in discourse. For instance, in Veyne's example, a king is a shepherd in one model, and a father in another. (Or a sign is an organic counterpart, a representation, or a symbol.) But there are no such things as raw meanings; there are no such things as 'kings'. Meanings exist relative to a discursive practice because without discursive practice, there is nothing to refer to: objects are not given, they are *made objective.* Foucault, then, is bound to disavow the 'Myth of the Given' at all terms.

This is problematic because his analysis brackets the notion of meaning, and yet it is applied to inherently meaningful items. He begins with texts that have meanings. Now if 'discursive practice' is

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[5] *L'Archéologie du Savoir,* Gallimard, Paris 1969, p. 264
[6] in: *Comment on écrit l'Histoire* suivi de *Foucault révolutionne l'Histoire,* Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1978, p. 210
[7] Final sentence of *Les Mots et les Choses.*

not some kind of deep structure behind such meanings, but is rather their plain occurrence, how to identify it as such? It is not some 'deeper meaning', but it is not the material basis of meaning either. The relationship between meanings and discourse is neither logical nor causal. So what is discourse? According to Foucault, it is a field of *relations,* which bring forth both meanings and objects. Only how to arrive at these fundamental relations remains a mystery. No observation language will capture them, and no amount of reason-giving will get Foucault outside the domain of meanings and reasons. So Foucault seems to treat them as 'givens' all the same, and fall prey to the 'Myth of the Given' in his attempt to explain meanings from outside the sphere of reasons. Whatever else Foucault claims to be doing, he *is* identifying ideas over time.

30) How much of a theory of concept formation do we need? The problem with Foucault is that he disavows the need for such a theory, since what he describes is not how concepts are acquired but how they occur – *and still he explains this occurrence in terms of concept formation.* True, this is not concept formation on an individual, cognitive level. It seems, if we read the notion of concept formation into Foucault's model, then we must distinguish between two levels of concept formation: how concepts are acquired (learned) on an individual basis, and how they occur in a larger context. Only such a distinction between micro and macro levels does not solve Foucault's problem, because it does not get concepts out of the sphere of reasons. In fact, the 'description of concept formation on a macro level' is not a bad description of the traditional approach that Foucault rejects, and in which the history of ideas becomes the learning process of mankind. Foucault would aver that he does not speak about concepts at all; but the énonçés which he claims to describe instead do not come as raw data, and as bearers of meaning, they cannot be identified without reference to other meanings. So disavowing the terms does not get Foucault rid of 'concepts' or the 'history of ideas'.

Still, how much of theory of concept formation do we need? The history of ideas is not developmental psychology. With regard to the question how many new ideas we have, and the problem of identifying ideas over time, the 'macro level' understanding of how ideas are created, developed and used seems more important than the psycholinguistic understanding of language acquisition and language creativity. Nonetheless, ideas must come from somewhere. Even where concepts do not emerge in the individual mind, but are produced by collective processes or material causes which have no 'author', they function as concepts because individual people use them.

Wilfrid Sellars, from whose work I have distilled the gist of my argument so far, has traced his own philosophical development from the insight that 'what was needed was a functional theory of concepts which would make their role in reasoning, rather than supposed origin in experience, their primary feature.'[8] It has been argued (most pointedly by John McDowell) that such a theory does not only

[8] Wilfrid Sellars, *Action, Knowledge and Reality,* ed. Henry Castenada, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis 1975, p. 285; I have the quote and reference from Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: an Introduction to Inferentialism,* Harvard UP, Cambridge (MA) & London 2000, p. 25, n8.

make concept formation a secondary concern, but that it renders the 'origin of concepts' inexplicable. Indeed, Foucault may argue, what do you mean, no getting outside the sphere of reasons? How do you get *in*?

31) This is not a question I feel pressed to answer. I repeat, I do not have a theory of concept formation to provide a knock-down argument. Before I drift off too far, let me recapitulate why the matter was reared upon at all.

Under (17), the notion of concept formation was introduced with regard to the problem of identifying ideas over time; and this problem again arose from the question how many new ideas we have. I concur with Foucault that there is no point in making a 'hierarchy of originality'; the quibble over what counts as a discovery and how it was discovered is not much of a philosophical concern. But it *is* a concern with regard to actual disagreement: if we are merely repeating familiar arguments then the discussion serves only as a contest, not as a way of getting nearer to the truth. The reason why this is a *philosophical* concern is that if you claim to present a new idea, then you commit yourself to explain both why it is different from other ideas, and why it is more plausible. One reason why this is a philosophical concern is that it touches upon issues of justification; another is that it touches upon the capacity of philosophy to bring forth new ideas.

All this has already been brought forward at the beginning of this paper; but so far, these issues have been left open. Why then this whole detour about semantic indeterminacy and historical interpretation? What I believe to have shown is that although we do not reinvent our ideas at every instance, the history of ideas is not an accumulation of unit ideas and arguments either, and interpretation in the history of ideas requires an act of thinking with history. The 'newness' of our ideas, that is, is relative to a practice of giving reasons and reasoning about what counts as reasons. So indeed, what I advocate is closer to a 'functional theory of concepts' than to a theory of concept formation. But a description of how concepts function is not enough. Provided that a functional theory yields an adequate description of how concepts are used, the remaining task for philosophy is largely therapeutical; but 'thinking with history', if it is not an empty phrase, calls upon the capacity of philosophy to bring forth new ideas. Why this is so, and how this relates to the indeterminate nature of meanings, is something which I hope to make clear in the final section.

VI.

32) In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* Richard Rorty claims that there is no particular method of 'philosophical analysis' that distinguishes philosophy as an independent discipline. Rather, he pictures philosophy as one voice in the ongoing 'conversation of Man'. One of his arguments is that, with the collapse of the analytic/synthetic-distinction, there is no procedure of 'conceptual analysis' independent of historical and empirical import, and so 'the division of labour between the philosopher

and the historian no longer [makes] sense.'[9] There is no privileged 'rational' way of either prompting or responding to a change in beliefs; so a historical and a philosophical approach differ only in degree.

Although this is quite in keeping with my argument, and I more or less agree with Rorty's characterization of philosophy as a matter of 'edification' or Bildung, I think that he disregards a problem concerning semantic holism and the normativity of language use. This problem concerns what was introduced under (9) as the *deontic aspect of meaning,* as well as the role of ideals in conceptual structures.

33) From my earlier claims under

(9) *all attempts to give 'proofs' and 'reasons' have a deontic aspect*

and

(26) *meanings and reasons are interdependent*

it follows that

all meanings have a deontic aspect.

This is not much of a shocking conclusion if the 'deontic aspect' is only the commitment to explain what you mean. If this was all, then 'deontic' would mean nothing more than 'situated in a normative structure'. But as I suggested under (9), all attempts to give 'proofs' and 'reasons' have a deontic aspect because they refer to something which *should be.* And this *is* something more than abiding by norms.

Let me explain. Meanings function with reference to beliefs and knowledge, not in the sense the meanings correspond to ideas but in the sense that we need beliefs and knowledge to explain what we mean. But our beliefs are fallible, and our knowledge is essentially incomplete. Invoking beliefs and knowledge, therefore, is submitting them to possible correction, and anticipating facts which are as yet unknown. The whole practice of giving reasons would make no sense if our capacity for giving reasons was not limited. (If we could give reasons for every reason, then either we would know everything or we would be making a circular argument.) But the limits of this capacity are impossible to draw: whatever the basis of our understanding is, it is not definable as a 'core set' of valid reasons, and there is no exit venue from the domain of meanings and reasons. So the 'foundation' or 'origin' of our knowledge is something which, from these Kantian/Sellarsian principles, cannot be determined meaningfully: to invoke such an origin or foundation as an argument is foul play.

Now we are not entirely ignorant with regard to how things should be. Although we have no demonstrations or knock-down arguments for it, how things should be is just as valid a topic for discussion as how things are. Our ideals are not somewhere 'beyond' reasoning, they must be argued for, they stand subject to the same test of consistency, and they are not closed to empirical import even though we cannot infer ought from is. If reason-giving is to be more than a stimulus-response game,

[9] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* Princeton UP 1978, p. 272.

then it must be directed towards how things should be rather than based upon some impenetrable 'rock bottom'. So for a consistent 'functional theory of concepts', it must be recognized that ideals perform a *constitutive* role. Accordingly, I think that philosophy should be concerned with ideals rather than with foundations; and in this respect, it is more than 'therapeutic philosophy'. (But I agree with Rorty that there is nothing *exclusively* philosophical about it.)

34) As for the history of ideas, this is not a matter of determining ideal meanings, or making ideal authors represent ideal ideals. Understanding what kind of ideal was envisioned in anterior practices of reason-giving does not make their views any more consistent or compelling. Still, reconstructing ideals is crucial for understanding what people were doing in making a statement or writing a text: they call for a *diachronic* model in which ideas are identified over time. All ideals, so to speak, are in the future tense. As such, they do not fit in either Skinner's or Foucault's synchronic model of speech acts.

The history of ideas is a philosophical trade in that it subjects ideals to scrutiny. Historians are not the advocates of the past: if they are to figure out the ideals that operate in reasoning, then they must also understand why people adhered to them and how they changed or perished. Partly, this is an empirical question (the ideal of Chivalry did not perish because it was at odds with Humanism and the Reformation, but because of gunpowder, growing cities, the failure of the crusades etc.); but still it cannot be answered without reasoning along with the past. In Skinner's view, history teaches us to do out thinking for ourselves. I agree that history teaches us to mistrust the lessons of history; but for a proper scrutiny of current ideals we must do the same to them as to those from the past.

35) Opponents to my views will say that I 'reify' ideals, that I use them to suggest continuity or coherence where there is none in reality. My reply is that this can be done, but that ideals have no existence outside their use in reasoning and so they are not an 'invisible hand' in the history of ideas. Ideals create only a limited coherence or continuity: they do not quite fill the gaps in our knowledge and reasoning, but they give some direction to our use of them. Ideals are not 'fuzzy logic'. If I am right in saying that they perform a 'constitutive' rule, they do so by relating action and knowledge.

Another objection would be that the history of ideas is not governed by reason. Again, I agree with this; but you need reasons to make sense of what people mean. So the objection would be that reason did not create the world and does not govern it, but is only part of how we interact with it. I can live with that.

36) One view to which I have not been paying attention so far is that historical interpretations are not lines of argument at all, but that they have a narrative structure which does not translate into a logical structure, and that they generalize over historical events by means of metaphor. So the writing of history appeals to the imagination no less than it appeals to reason, and perhaps only through the latter

to the former.

Although the fact that histories have a narrative structure and include metaphor is a truism, I am not much impressed by the supposed consequences. Historians may use metaphors and tell stories, but they still have to explain what they mean and how they know. Ankersmit's argument that if we know how to check all the facts, the evaluation of the narrative is still an aesthetic judgement, drains the narrative of its explanatory value. If there are connections between historical events (I take this to include 'ideas') which come to light only in the narrative, then I wonder how narratives are constructed. Either we assume that narratives employ the same kind of connections as we use in factual judgements, in which case we must account for them; or we assume that some type of connections is inherently 'narrative', i.e. fictional, in which case a coherent picture of the world based on such connections would be a fictional construct. So if Ankersmit has a point, it is that part of our world view is fiction. But if such 'fictional' connections are needed to make the overall picture coherent, then I fail to see how they can be beyond argument.

Metaphors and narratives appeal to the imagination, and whether the image they produce can be true or false is a matter of dispute. But they cannot be used to create coherence from 'outside' reasoning. It is plausible that the appeal to the imagination performs a constitutive role in the process of understanding; but in so far as this is a problem of cognition, it belongs to a theory of concept formation, not to a functional theory of concepts.

37) If you want a new idea, take a bath. One way of getting a new idea is by solving an extant problem; but with regard to how things should be, these are the simpler cases. If something is recognized as an extant problem then a massive part of how things should be is already determined. Sometimes, new ideas don't come as solutions to problems. Then it is harder to say what makes them new, and harder to know what they are about. In either case, philosophy will not be too much help. Either you know what the problem is and then you use your imagination and experience or whatever to figure out how to solve it; or you don't know what it is, or even that there *is* a problem, and then you come up with a new idea all the same. In the latter case, you can also take a walk or go shopping. It is not something philosophy has much to say about.

What, then, about 'the capacity of philosophy to bring forth new ideas'? There is no solution to the problem how things should be. That is why there is not a science of deontonomics, or optimalogy. But wherever we get our ideals, they are not an ornamental bric-à-brac to decorate our actions with. The fact that ideals play a role in reasoning implies that they must and will be scrutinized, explicated, acted from, elaborated, corrected and renewed in a more or less systematic way. There is no sharp distinction here between theoretical and practical reasoning, nor between 'philosophical' and other perspectives. But there is no substitute for this type of reasoning about ideals which includes philosophy, and it is *creative* work to the extent that ideals do not pop up in history as readymade ideologies, but rather as ill-formed inarticulate conceptions of how things should be. If systematic

reasoning has something to add to these preconceptions, then there is no conflict between 'historical' explanations of how ideas came up in the course of history, and 'philosophical' discussions of what is right. Ideals, as they are made manifest in the history of ideas, are largely philosophical constructs. Without a certain amount of philosophical construction, they would not function in the sphere of reasons, or be identifiable over time. So without addressing the issue of 'original insight', which is an unwieldy concept anyhow, we can say that when we have ideals we have philosophy, and in that sense, *philosophy brings forth new ideas.*

Afterword

This paper has been a long time in the making. It was only when I abandoned the hope of writing a 'well-made' paper, and present my thoughts fragmentary as they are, that the thing materialized. (I must add that my model for the use of sections and paragraphs has been the work of Wilfrid Sellars, not Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen.*) I hope to give a more detailed and coherent account of what ideals are and how they work in my yet-to-be-written thesis, which will be about the ideal of Bildung. As may be expected, I will argue that this is not some historical given or imposed ideology, but that we must enquire how ideals function in webs of belief and practices of reasoning. Michiel Leezenberg has given me the suggestion to focus more on how the ideal of Bildung is present within this philosophical perspective, than on how it leads us to reconsider the historical facts. If the present paper has anything of a conclusion, it is because of this suggestion.

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