

FROM IDEAS TO CONCEPTS TO METAPHORS:
THE GERMAN TRADITION OF INTELLECTUAL HISTORY
AND THE COMPLEX FABRIC OF LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the diffusion of the so-called “new intellectual history” led to the dismissal of the old school of the “history of ideas” on the basis of its ahistorical nature (the view of ideas as eternal entities). This formulation is actually misleading, missing the core of the transformation produced in the field. It is not true that the history of ideas simply ignored the fact that the meaning of ideas changes over time. The issue at stake here is really not *how* ideas changed (the mere description of the semantic transformation they underwent historically), but rather why they do. The study of the German tradition of intellectual history serves in this essay as a basis to illustrate the meaning and significance of the recent turn from ideas as its object. In the process of trying to account for the source of contingency of conceptual formations, it will open our horizon to the complex nature of the ways by which we invest the world with meaning. That is, it will disclose the presence of different layers of symbolic reality lying beneath the surface level of “ideas,” and analyze their differential nature and functions. It will also show the reasons for the ultimate failure of the “history of ideas” approach, why discourses can never achieve their vocation to constitute themselves as self-enclosed, rationally integrated systems, thereby expelling contingency from their realm. In sum, it will show why historicity is not merely something that comes to intellectual history from without (as a by-product of social history or as the result of the action of an external agent), as the history of ideas assumed, but is a constitutive dimension of it.

Keywords: intellectual history, history of ideas, metaphorology, Reinhart Koselleck, Hans Blumenberg, neo-Kantianism, *Begriffsgeschichte*

As it is usually formulated, the German school of *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts), initiated by Reinhart Koselleck along with Otto Brunner and Werner Conze, introduced a sense of the historicity of concepts that was absent in the former tradition of *Ideengeschichte*. Ernst Cassirer’s *The Myth of the State* is one of the best expressions of *Ideengeschichte*; in it the idea of the state stands as a transhistorical category, supposedly to be found at radically different epochs and contexts of thought. Yet, this formulation is rather simplistic. None of the thinkers normally associated with the older tradition of *Ideengeschichte* ignored that ideas change their meaning within the different discursive contexts in which they appear. Of course, there are substantial differences between the methods developed by authors like Cassirer and Koselleck, but they are not always that easy to find. To discover them we must penetrate the extremely complex issue of the tempo-

rality of intellectual formations: what is, according to each of them, the origin of conceptual change, and how should it be accounted for?

Certainly, recording the changes that concepts undergo historically is not enough for any theory in the field; an acceptable theory should provide, besides the description of how concepts change, an explanation of *why* they change. Rather than denying the temporality of ideas, the tradition of *Ideengeschichte* faced unsolvable obstacles when trying to explain the temporality of conceptual formations and the source of it. Yet, as we shall see, the *Begriffsgeschichte* could not manage to overcome these obstacles either. Indeed, for Hans Blumenberg, the issue raises a broader epistemological question. According to him, the difficulties found by Koselleck cannot be attributed to any shortcoming in his theory that might eventually be solved; rather, they reveal that the source of contingency in intellectual history simply escapes the frame of conceptual history. Blumenberg thus redirects the focus of reflection from concepts to a more primitive realm of symbolic reality, which is the one that his “metaphorology” intends to penetrate.

In any case, as we will see in the following pages, in the course of the search for the source of the contingency of conceptual formations, the German tradition of intellectual history that spans from Wilhelm Dilthey and Cassirer to Koselleck and Blumenberg dramatically expanded our views of the universe of symbolic reality. It revealed the plurality of strata lying beneath the surface level of the referential contents of the forms of discourse, which was the sole object of the history of “ideas.” And this entails in its turn, as I intend to show, the redefinition of the very sense and object of the historico-intellectual enterprise.

I. CHANGE AND PERMANENCE OF IDEAS

Cassirer is normally considered one of the main representatives in the German tradition of *Ideengeschichte*. In the *Myth of the State* he defines his historical methodology on the basis of a discussion regarding the nature of myths and the possibility of understanding them from a rational perspective.

On the one hand, he says, contrary to James Frazer’s statement in *The Golden Bough*, a myth’s intellectual procedures cannot be assimilated to those of the sciences without distorting the former and obliterating the distinctive features of the latter. But, conversely, if, mythical procedures were absolutely alien to us, if they were radically incompatible with our rational mind, as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl asserted in *The Primitive Mind*, scientific knowledge of myths would not be possible. As a result, Cassirer tried to steer a middle course between these two extremes. For him, concepts, categories, and intellectual procedures cannot be extrapolated from one type of mentality to a different one; indeed, myth and reason are two closed and self-contained symbolic universes. However, this does not prevent them from being mutually translatable. But such a translation demands arduous exegetical work to disclose the particular keys governing worldviews foreign to our own, like the mythical one.

In this, Cassirer’s program seems not that different, *mutatis mutandis*, from Koselleck’s approach to the two basic worldviews he analyzes, the modern and the premodern (which are separated by the *Sattelzeit*, 1750–1850). For Koselleck,

there is no common ground between the two regarding their respective ideal contents, but the mission of conceptual historians consists in recovering and rendering meaningful for the present reader the symbolic universe of premodern times. But at this point we meet what for Koselleck is *Ideengeschichte's* fundamental shortcoming. Ideas as such cannot serve as the analytical unit of any historical understanding of this kind, because ideas lack an inherent principle of historicity. An *idea* eventually appears—or not—in a given context, but this is a circumstance entirely external to it. The link connecting an idea with the context in which it appears is a merely contingent one. Only in *concepts* do the semantic deviations foregrounded by the changes in the context of their utterance become integral parts of them and constitutive elements of their definitions.

But this raises, in turn, a fundamental problem for historical research. The basic difficulty that the history of ideas faces with regard to semantic changes is how to identify the persistence of a given idea, how to discover what it is about it that identifies it through the series of its variations in meaning. Within the framework of the history of ideas, the only possible way to pursue this is to suppose the existence of a conceptual core that remains unchanged beneath the semantic transformations that the given idea undergoes. Otherwise, if nothing of the preceding definitions of a term is preserved after any redefinition of it, we would simply be facing a brand new idea. Writing the history of the idea of the “state” or of any other idea without such a core would amount to creating a fictitious entity out of the accidental recurrence of a term that does not refer back to any common object or shared conceptual nucleus. In short, intellectual history would be reduced to a pure sequence of singular, discursive events.

Yet, the original question still lingers. What would happen if historical analysis could not reveal the existence of any common core underlying and identifying a given idea, no definition encompassing all the historical declinations of it? In other words, what would happen if the semantic variations were so wide that no set of principles or statements were applicable to all the members of its given class (the different definitions that the term comprises)? As a matter of fact, this is the most frequent problem intellectual historians face. They persistently witness the difficulties, if not the plain impossibility, of finding a univocal definition of political categories that, like liberalism, republic, democracy, justice, and so on, are heavily loaded with historical and ethical connotations. Every definition of them seems condemned to be simultaneously too wide and too narrow. In order to include all the meanings it should include, a definition must become vague to the point of losing any discriminatory effect. And yet, even such vague definitions cannot succeed in being applicable to all the cases for which they were destined, since these are, in many cases, mutually contradictory. Historians of ideas are thus condemned to handle categories (since they cannot do without them) deprived of any hermeneutic power.

In the last instance, *Ideengeschichte* makes manifest an aporia intrinsic to neo-Kantian philosophies of history: they introduce a historical sense that leads them to postulate the existence of conceptual ruptures, but they are radically unable to account for these ruptures without destroying the epistemological premises on

which they rest. The whole of Koselleck's historiographical project is aimed at confronting that aporia, which leads him to elaborate his concept of "concept."

II. THE CONCEPT AND ITS MEANINGFUL INCONGRUENCE

According to Koselleck, only when a term incorporates a diversity of particular connotations does it become a "concept" ("a word," he says, "becomes a concept only when the entirety of meaning and experience within a sociopolitical context within which and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word"¹). This statement involves a complete reframing of the issue. Whereas an idea, to preserve its identity, must progressively narrow its content and, in its limit case, become an empty category, a concept instead becomes semantically richer as it incorporates widely diverse contents. Yet, this semantic wealth gives concepts an inevitably plurivocal character.

As Nietzsche's maxim, which Koselleck adopted as his motto, states: "Only that which has no history is definable."² In effect, that concepts cannot be defined means, for Koselleck, that there are no uniform, conceptual nuclei that keep their inner identity through the changes they undergo. Yet, in the course of the modifications in their meaning, a semantic web is interwoven; the different definitions become articulated, conforming a unit of sense. In this fashion, any present use of a concept mobilizes the heterogeneous fabric of meanings sedimented in it. Such synchronous plurivocity has, then, diachronic foundations; it indicates an inevitable semantic asynchrony. Hence the fundamental characteristic that, for Koselleck, is the trademark of a concept: the ability to overcome its original context of utterance and to project itself forward in time ("social and political concepts," he assures, "possess a substantial claim to generality";³ "once 'minted', a concept contains within itself, purely linguistically, the possibility of being employed in a generalizing manner"⁴). And this capacity of concepts to outstrip their original contexts of utterance, to generate semantic asynchronies, provides conceptual history with its specific performance:

Insofar as concepts . . . are detached from their situational context, and their meanings ordered according to the sequence of time and then ordered with respect to each other, the individual historical analyses of concepts assemble themselves into a history of the concept. Only at this level is the historical-philological method superseded, and only here does *Begriffsgeschichte* shed its subordinate relation to social history.⁵

If conceptual history goes beyond social history and stands for itself as a particular discipline, it is because only it can provide keys to reconstruct long-term historical processes. Insofar as concepts serve to articulate diverse social experiences meaningfully with one another, thus forming discursive networks that cross

1. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 85.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, transl. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60. Quoted in *ibid.*, 84 and *passim*.

3. *Ibid.*, 83.

4. *Ibid.*, 89.

5. *Ibid.*, 80.

through different epochs and transcend the spheres of immediate sociability, they become the indices of structural transformations. But, conversely, if they serve in retrospect as indices of these transformations, it is because they are, at the same time, active factors in their production. Each concept, Koselleck says, “establishes a particular horizon for potential experience and conceivable theory, and in this way sets a limit.”⁶ In fact, concepts provide social agents with tools to understand the sense of their actions. They raise crude experience (*Erfahrung*), the purely sensitive perception of facts and events, to living and lived experience (*Erlebnis*). In this fashion, they also mutually communicate the diverse experiences. Concepts thus work as the underpinnings for structural connections.

However, while conceptual history exceeds social history insofar as it articulates long-term, meaningful, conceptual webs, for Koselleck, the former is at the same time deficient with respect to the latter, never exhausting it. Social facts, the extra-linguistic series, surpass language to the extent that the performance of an action always exceeds its mere enunciation or symbolic representation. This explains why concepts, *qua* crystallizations of historical experiences, can possibly be altered; that is, how events eventually frustrate the existential expectations deposited in concepts, thereby gaining new meanings. Thus, we can speak of a double excess in the relationship between conceptual history and social history, between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic series.

At this point, we must cope with a second, and much more complex problem. On the one hand, it is necessary to postulate the existence of an ineradicable remainder of facticity that prevents the logical closure of conceptual systems and opens them to temporality. Only this postulate may explain the openness of conceptual formations: why change is intrinsic to conceptual history. But, on the other hand, this postulate raises a number of new issues: how to approach this realm that resists symbolization according to the categories available in a given language, and that dislocates it. If this realm is not already invested with meaning, what is its ontological nature, and what are the ways by which it eventually enters the symbolic ambit and forces it to become reconfigured?

Beneath these questions lurks an even more radical question: not how the meaning of particular concepts changes, but how the system that articulates them is eventually reconstituted. And this raises a problem of an epistemological nature. What if not only concepts, but also the horizons of meaning within which they are formed and transformed, were also discrete and contingent constructions? How to think the logic of their succession, how to articulate them and provide some unity and intelligibility to intellectual history? In short, we face again the above-mentioned problem, but now projected and replicated onto a more primitive level of symbolic reality: no longer on the plane of individual concepts but on the formal structures that determine the conditions of their enunciation. Koselleck, as we saw, tackles the former question, which constituted the ultimate limit of all history of *concepts*, but he leaves the latter unanswered, which actually lies at the basis of the former (how to articulate horizons lying beyond the points in which

6. *Ibid.*, 84.

the semantic fabric woven by concepts become torn apart). This is precisely Hans Blumenberg's central concern.

III. THE FACTICITY OF CONCEPTS

One of the most enduring and shocking experiences of his childhood, Blumenberg narrates, were the long sessions in the darkroom with his father, who was an amateur photographer. Bottles and fluids seemed to him magic brews of a sort. The most astonishing thing was not the result—it mattered little if the pictures were good or not—but seeing how an image emerged out of nothing, a mystery his father's chemical explanations did not make any less mysterious. They offered him an image of an even greater mystery. He already knew how the Creation had taken place: "Shaking with care the plates in the baths, a world arose—without all the stress and commotion of the Biblical prelude, but, in principle, by the same basic procedure."⁷

The scene condenses the preoccupation that accompanied him throughout his intellectual career and presided over the elaboration of his truly monumental work. "Since then," he would shortly afterwards affirm, "I had at least an idea of how concepts are born."⁸ The Biblical image of "becoming light out of darkness" expresses, for Blumenberg, better than any other image, the ungraspable bottom that underlies and precedes the origins, the primitive void that predates meaning, and out of which the latter emerges. That image symbolizes the impossibility of a conceptual language accounting for that which is at its very foundation. In this way Blumenberg alluded to what he considered the intrinsic limit to all conceptual history. As he stated in his first methodological work, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (1960), which originally appeared in the *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* (the journal founded by Erich Rothacker, along with Hans-Georg Gadamer and Joachim Ritter, with the goal of accomplishing Wilhelm Dilthey's project of a history of concepts⁹), concepts entail a given theoretical grid within which they can be constituted, and, therefore, no history of concepts may give us an insight into the structure that lies at its basis and that, as a consequence, is always already presupposed by it.

For Blumenberg, that which does not lend itself to being described with concepts becomes, nevertheless, manifest in images and finds expression in the figurative language of metaphors. As the Ancients discovered, metaphors are not merely ornaments of language, transposed names for something that is perfectly defined by its proper name. They come to fill a meaningful void, a lacuna of language. "An analysis," he says, "must investigate that logical lack for which the metaphor serves as a substitute."¹⁰ In the last instance, he states, a history of concepts is self-defeating. Once it reached its goal of fixing the meaning of concepts, it would

7. Blumenberg, *Conceptos en historias* (Madrid: Síntesis, 2003), 28.

8. *Ibid.*

9. This project intended to prevent the terminological confusion resulting from the transposition of concepts from one worldview to a different one.

10. Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 10.

lose any reason to exist. The endpoint of a history of concepts would be its own progressive cancellation. “History,” he says, “is here nothing but precipitation and prevention, the loss of the exact presence whose methodical recovery annuls historicity.”¹¹ Put another way, if the Cartesian project of self-evidence of sense were achievable, history would be only a way-station fated to be transcended, a circumstance deriving merely from the empirical limitations of our cognitive capacities.

Actually, this criticism was addressed to conceptual history as Rothacker and Ritter conceived of it, not to Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*. In effect, Koselleck’s project, like Blumenberg’s (and unlike many current practitioners of conceptual history tend to interpret), cannot be reduced to the enterprise of tracing the semantic changes undergone by a concept. For him, these changes are relevant only insofar as they serve as indices of broader transformations in the horizons of understanding within which concepts may eventually unfold (Koselleck actually identifies two great horizons, the modern and the premodern, which are separated by the *Sattelzeit* or “pivotal period”). The political languages Koselleck intends to reconstruct are not merely sets of concepts. They send us back to a second order of symbolic reality. Here we find the crucial difference between Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* and the kind of history of concepts proposed by Rothacker and Ritter, which explains Koselleck’s greater affinity with Blumenberg’s phenomenology of the horizons of understanding.

This is the first premise of Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*: the need to refer concepts back to the broader intellectual matrices within which they become deployed and that determine the conditions of their enunciation. The second premise results from the first: if concepts are never completely definable, it is due to the contingent nature of the foundations (the horizons of understanding) on which they rest; they contain within themselves an irrational remainder that prevents the logical closure of conceptual formations. This explains why—and Blumenberg here agrees with Koselleck—the alterations of the horizons of understanding cannot be reduced to the series of meaningful displacements produced in the interior of them. This double premise is what leads Koselleck, on the one hand, to open conceptual history to social history, and, on the other hand, to transcend it in the direction of a *Historik*, that is, of “a more general theory of the conditions of possibility of histories (*Geschichten*).”¹² This allows him to place conceptual changes in a wider cultural perspective and to relate linguistic alterations to broader epochal mutations. Ultimately, this is the distinguishing feature of Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*, turning it into much more than a mere history of concepts.

However, Koselleck faced unsolvable theoretical problems in trying to account for that which escapes the conceptual realm, and, in the last instance, that lies at its foundation. His explanation of that great epochal mutation produced in the course of the *Sattelzeit* is a good illustration of this. As he says, the modern mind has its origins in the marine voyages that opened the horizon of the Europeans

11. *Ibid.*, 8. “Viewed from the perspective of the ideal of a definitively valid terminology, the history of concepts can have only a critical-destructive value, a role that would end once it attains its goal” (*ibid.*).

12. Koselleck, “Histórica y hermenéutica,” in Reinhart Koselleck and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Historia y hermenéutica* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1997), 70.

to the immense cultural diversity that existed on the planet, and in the technological developments of the eighteenth century that fostered the idea of progress. Even more fundamental, however, was the revolutionary upsurge in France, an upheaval that gave rise to a new awareness of the constructibility of history (that is, that humans make it). Subjective agency is, in short, that which prevents the repeatability of historical processes (the premise on which the old idea of *historia magistra vitae* was based) and which generates the gap separating the “horizon of expectation” from the “space of experience.” It is also the premise for its intelligibility. Following Kant’s dictum, Koselleck affirms that the condition for the understanding of history lies in the fact that “the soothsayer himself makes and organizes the occurrences which he announces in advance.”¹³ “History seems to be disposable,” concludes Koselleck, “in a dual fashion: for the agent who disposes of the history that he makes, and for the historian who disposes of it by writing it up. Viewed in this way, both seem to have an unlimited freedom of decision. The scope for the disposition of history is determined by men.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, this analysis still does not explain how the relevant phenomena took place. In the last resort, following Koselleck’s very premise that concepts are not merely indices but also historical factors, we must assume that neither the marine voyages nor the technological developments, and not even the French Revolution, would have themselves been possible, in turn, without a series of conceptual transformations that preceded them. (Husserl indicated in *The Crisis of European Sciences* that the secularization of the Western mind was not the result of scientific developments, but rather the other way around: it was first necessary to have a world stripped of its mysteries for the technical attitude to it to emerge.)

Without human action there would be no change in history; but, in turn, all human action, all subjective agency, entails a given conceptual framework within which it can display itself. As Koselleck states, by “establish[ing] a particular horizon for potential experience” concepts “set a limit”¹⁵ to it. But this raises the further issue of how, on the premise of the particular categorical grid circumscribing the subjects’ universe of what is thinkable and doable, these subjects might elude its constraints and give rise to horizons of understanding foreign to that universe, dislocating its inner logic. As Koselleck postulates, no concept “can be so new as not to be virtually constituted in the given language and not to take its sense from the linguistic context inherited from the past.”¹⁶

The problem, then, has now become reversed. It is no longer, as in Cassirer’s case, a matter of how to conceive the consistency of historico-conceptual processes without falling into some kind of essentialism, but, on the contrary, of what to think of the contingent nature of the formative processes of concepts. Once the teleological assumption that history has a principle of development inscribed

13. Quoted by Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 204.

14. *Ibid.*, 199.

15. *Ibid.*, 84.

16. Koselleck, “Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte,” in *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland: Entwicklungen und Perspektiven im internationalen Zusammenhang*, ed. Wolfgang Schieder and Volker Sellin (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1987), II, 102.

in its own objective mechanism that tends to its own self-transformation just by following inherent tendencies is discredited, the only alternative that apparently remains open is resorting to an intentional agent placed outside history who might eventually introduce temporality within its field. Only this assumption can explain the breach separating the “horizons of expectations” from their given “space of experience.” As Koselleck says, “there always occurs in history more or less than that contained in the given conditions. Behind this ‘more or less’ are to be found men.”¹⁷ In sum, without a subjective intervention, if the course of events were to be trusted exclusively to its own intrinsic dynamics, there would be no true history at all. But, on the other hand, as Kant’s maxim states, if history were fully at the subject’s disposition, nothing would be unforeseeable either. There would be nothing in history beyond his control since he would be his sole demiurge.

Contingency is thus blocked from two directions: from its front, by its prospective logic of development, and, from its back, by the determinism of its preceding accomplishments. Hence Koselleck’s resort to *social history* as the last explanation of intellectual changes. Without the presence in the symbolic order of a remainder of inexpressible facticity, conceptual formations could become perfectly constituted as fully self-contained and coherent systems, stabilize their semantic contents, and, in this way, expel temporality from their realm. Nevertheless, although this resort is necessary to think the historicity of concepts, it is, at the same time, destructive of Koselleck’s historical model. Once we are transported to the primitive moment of the origin of concepts, these reveal themselves, once again, as mere indices of processes happening behind their backs (thus frustrating all possible historical intelligibility, since, on this level, the rule of subjective agency on which intelligibility rests would be broken, and it would be founded here on something that predates its own—conceptual—conditions of possibility and is therefore inexplicable).

In this way, by positing social history as an original context detached from meaning, the question that Koselleck’s own model raises is eluded: how is the emergence of new systems of knowledge, of new meanings that are necessarily founded on the hitherto available categories but are not compatible with the pre-existing conceptual frameworks, possible? How can concepts be factors of phenomena that are ungraspable to them and dislocate their own premises? In short, how is it possible to introduce the *event* as a *constituent* instance of conceptual history (and not merely as a by-product of social history)? This, indeed, is the question that underlies Blumenberg’s entire work: the problem of “*passages*.”

As Blumenberg says in connection with Husserl, the idea of an *origin*, a primitive act of instituting meaning, is not verifiable; “it entails a primary stage that does not bear yet the seal of theory.”¹⁸ Resorting to such a pre-theoretical instance (a subject or a world of self-evident certainties, whose objects appear immediately to consciousness independently of the linguistic milieu, hints at a vestige of Cartesianism.¹⁹ No new horizon of understanding emerges from scratch, but springs

17. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 212.

18. Hans Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben: Aufsätze und eine Rede* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), 22.

19. As Blumenberg indicates, this is precisely the point that separates Husserl’s phenomenology

from the preceding signifying configurations. In effect, the intentional *telos* delimited by a given horizon of understanding can be exhausted, but never overcome or reinvented, since there is nothing placed above or outside it. The phenomenological project intends to overcome the factual level of history and refer it back to the meaningful connections underlying it, on the basis of which it operates. It is this that in his later work Husserl referred to as “lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*). It gives rise to permanent, meaningful reconfigurations, but it itself constitutes by definition an untranscendable horizon.²⁰

Lifeworld is, precisely, that universe that was neither chosen nor can be chosen through a free determination, and that can be left only by means of a transformation of the spirit, through a “theoretical transformation” such as occurred, for Husserl, at the beginning of European history. This world is, among all worlds, the only factual one of which cannot be said: “I am over it”; its validity—since obviousness belongs to its very definition—cannot be voluntarily suspended. For that reason, in Husserl, that world is radically distinguished from the factual historical world, which not only can be, in an act of free imagination, considered as “only one of the conceivable possibilities,” but also phenomenology itself kindles the hope of a revision of its sense and direction regarding its course and factual state.²¹

For Blumenberg, beyond the lifeworld lies radical facticity; moving there would simply confront us with naked contingency (the specter of the instituted character of the very horizons of understanding within which concepts deploy). But it is also what the concept of lifeworld renders unthinkable. “Hence,” he assures, “*passages* are the ones that underline the specificity of the metaphor and its expressive forms.”²² In effect, for him the experience of the passage from a horizon of meaning to another one, which is inexpressible by concepts, does not send us back to a natural, presymbolic realm,²³ but to a different order of linguistic reality lying beyond concepts. The theory of unconceptuality, as Blumenberg conceives of it, connects his thinking with Husserl’s phenomenology, but pushes it beyond its borders, leads phenomenology to its final term, realizing the program implicit in its premises but that, at the same time, is inconceivable within its framework.

from neo-Kantianism. Husserl rejects the idea of an opposition between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, that is to say, he does not allow for the existence of natural objects that are not already ideal objects for intentional consciousness. The conception of nature has thus, for him, a character not less ideal than that of history.

20. Perhaps paradoxically, no one better synthesized this point of view than Claude Lévi-Strauss. As the anthropologist affirmed in one of his writings included in *Structural Anthropology*, “The shaman and His Magic”: “Only the history of the symbolic function would allow us to account for this intellectual condition of man: that the universe never means enough, and that thought always contains an excess of meanings vis-à-vis the objects to which they can be connected. Torn between two referential systems, that of the signifier and that of the signified object, man obtains from magical thought a new referential system, at the bosom of which hitherto contradictory data can be integrated” (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Antropología estructural* [Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1984], 167).

21. Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, 27.

22. Blumeberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, 112.

23. “The double meaning of the Husserlian ‘lifeworld,’ on the one hand, as a historical starting point of theoretical transformation, and, on the other hand, as the fundamental, and always present, layer of life differentiated according to a hierarchy of interests, loads this concept with the risk of being placed in the same line as the—repeatedly failed—attempts to find something like a “natural nature,” a norm of a life to which, properly and originally, it will be indebted” (Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, 23).

IV. THE INSTITUTION AND RUPTURE OF HORIZONS

Actually, resorting to Husserl serves Blumenberg as a platform for his own project of expanding traditional views of the symbolic universe and incorporating in it a whole dimension of linguistic reality, so far ignored, that is not reducible to a purely referential one. Like concepts for Koselleck, metaphors for Blumenberg transcend immediate living experiences, putting us into contact with the signifying structures that underlie them, and articulating them into meaningful totalities. But, unlike concepts, although metaphors have a history that can be traced, their plurivocal nature is not a historical product, the purely contingent result of the sedimentation of a chain of meanings historically generated, but a constituent dimension of them. Hence, the more we move away from the realm of immediate living experience and we interrogate ourselves about the totality of the world, the ultimate meaning of our worldly existence, the more necessary becomes the resort to metaphor. At its limit point (that marked by the “absolute metaphor”), it becomes essential. It is its inherent ambiguity that allows the metaphor to give expression to that which does not lend itself to representation by means of concepts. The analysis of that preconceptual level thus allows us to reconstruct the ways in which our senses of the world, the elementary forms by which we symbolically relate to it, become historically reshaped. “The historical change in a metaphor,” he says, “throws to the forefront the metakinetics of the historical horizons of meanings and forms to observe reality, in the interior of which concepts undergo their transformations.”²⁴ However, the expansion of Blumenberg’s original project of a metaphorology, and the incorporation into it of other kinds of manifestation of *unconceptuality*, involved a fundamental theoretical displacement.

According to him, the starting point for his theory was Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which, he says, moved beyond neo-Kantianism and introduced a number of issues alien to it. The definition of a human being as an *animal symbolicum*, by replacing “the determination of human *essence* as *zoon politikon* by a functional presentation,” introduces artifice “in the very functional system of the basic human performance of ‘life.’”²⁵ In short, Cassirer breaks the dichotomy established by Dilthey between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* and, in this way, leads the neo-Kantian project to its end term, in the double sense of “end” (that is to say, he completes it and at the same time concludes it):

This system about the symbolic function constituted the final piece where the, implicit or explicit, intention of all neo-Kantianism is realized: considering the categorical grid of natural objects only as a special case of the categorical system of cultural objects, among which, at the end, the natural ones emerge once again, methodically arranged. But, thanks to the effects of the network of symbolic forms and their vertical structure, a new world of objects and subjects was opened to philosophical theory—or became integrated in a new fashion.²⁶

24. Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, 13.

25. Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, 115.

26. *Ibid.*, 165.

A key concept in this movement of philosophical anthropology beyond its original neo-Kantian matrix (and closer to Husserlian phenomenology) is that of “institution” as conceived by Arnold Gehlen in *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*. The fundamental anthropological question, says Blumenberg, is how man, in spite of his poor biological disposition, has been able to survive. The answer is, he states, by “not establishing immediate relations with reality.”²⁷ “The relation of man with reality is indirect, postponed, selective and, above all, ‘metaphorical.’”²⁸ Predicates are “instituted” things. Every judgment has, in the last instance, a metaphorical structure. Subjects can know themselves only insofar as they posit themselves as something different. But this split reference to the self is not, as Hegel thought, a mere manifestation of that which is already contained in its notion. The series of a subject’s predicates is not merely the making explicit of his or her concept, but the way by which that emptiness of meaning placed at its center is filled with sense. This process is rhetorical by nature; more specifically, it is catachrestical. The subject is thereby named, but this labeling is not merely an artifice of language; it does not come to designate allegorically (*all-oitros*) an entity that already has a proper name defining it.²⁹

The metaphor is not only a substitute for a concept that is absent, in fact, but which is, in principle, possible and, for that reason, requirable, but also a projection factor, that widens and occupies the empty place, an imaginative procedure that, through resemblance, creates its own consistency.³⁰

This gives metaphor its specific value. Unlike a concept, a metaphor does not have a *referential* but a *pragmatic* function. “Its content determines, like an orienting reference, a conduct; it gives structure to a world; it represents that which cannot be experienced, uncomprehensible: the totality of reality.”³¹ Its value does not lie in what it indicates, but in what it *does*: it does not seek to represent an object; rather, it puts itself into the empty place of an absence, of the inexpressible object, serving as a substitute for it, and thereby allowing us to symbolically control it. In this fashion, humans construct a universe of signs to interpose between themselves and reality. It is by means of rhetoric’s mediating faculty, its capacity as a dilator of effects, that humans overcome their chronic misadjustment vis-à-vis their surrounding environment that springs from the unspecified nature of their biological constitution (which makes reality an always-threatening appearance to them).

The rhetorical nature of the process of constitution of both objects and the subject indicates the last limit of neo-Kantianism, a limit before which Blumenberg himself, as he admits, succumbed in his early work:

The modern age, after a series of historical-philosophical roundups, bets on the affirmation that it is man who “makes” history. What that expression means can be understood only if we perceive the “change of roles” that it produced. I have introduced and explained the concept in my *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1966), but without noticing at the time the

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. This is the definition of that figurative procedure provided by Quintilian in *Institutio oratoria*.

30. Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, 132.

31. Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, 25.

whole theoretical process it implied. Since, in this fashion, it is neither discovered nor demonstrated who the agent of history is, the subject of history is merely “named.”³²

Underlying modernity’s self-perception as the era in which the subject becomes the *a priori* of intelligibility, Blumenberg discovers an empty place that can be filled with many different contents. That it is humans who make history (or, to put it in Koselleck’s words, behind the “more or less” that separates a subsequent state from the precedent one are humans) remains, in fact, just one of the possible ways of (rhetorically) filling the vacant position of the subject, putting in it a figure to which has been ascribed attributes previously conferred upon God.

In the traditional explanatory system there is an empty place for this agent of history with the signs “vacant” and “occupied.” The imposition and confirmation of that change of roles are rhetorical acts; the “philosophy of history” does nothing but thematize the structure of this process; it is not its barrier. Not by chance did the act by means of which the subject of history is determined and legitimized take the name of a foundational rhetorical figure: a *translatio imperii*. The “translations,” the metaphorical functions, have played here, repeatedly, an essential role. . . . The God of the Old Testament, by means of a contract, transfers his sovereignty to history.³³

We may say that Blumenberg, by indicating the radical non-representability of the subject, by positing it as something that escapes the objectual field, goes back to Kant. But we may also notice how far away his concept is from Kant’s.

[With this verification] the substantialism of identity falls to pieces; identity must be made, becomes a kind of performance, from which a whole pathology of identity arises. Anthropology does not have another subject matter than a “human nature” that never has been nor will be “nature.” The fact that it appears under metaphorical disguises—like those of an animal or a machine; a stratification of remainders or a current of conscience, different from God or in competition with him—does not justify the expectations that, at the end of so many confusions and so much casuistry, we will have it before us, with no masks. Man understands himself by going beyond himself, only through that which he is not. It is not his situation that is the first potentially metaphorical thing in him, but it is already his very constitution.³⁴

There is no “subject” predating its own rhetorical constitution as such; the only thing that preexists it is an empty place that demands designation. Neo-Kantianism’s great contribution is, then, to have initiated a dynamics that tends to strip the veil of naturalness from objects and to make manifest the meaningful connections on the basis of which objects stand and that make these latter conceivable as such (that is, the primitive, necessarily contingent, act of their [rhetorical] institution). Its error, however, derives from there as well. The verification of the instituted character of objects leads neo-Kantian philosophy to take the metaphor that “man makes history” at face value—projecting upon this statement, in addition, a normative connotation: the constructibility of history would also be the premise of any possible ethics. In a Hegelian vein, for Blumenberg the subject constructs itself in the process of its own representation. But the rhetorical nature of this constructive procedure entails a permanent, inner incongruence that is also con-

32. Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, 129.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, 134-135.

stitutive of it. And implicit in it is a more drastic and more disturbing conclusion: not only the predicates whereupon that empty center that the subject designates is filled with sense, but also the very definition of the subject as something unrepresentable is something “instituted.” That definition does not merely designate a natural object: it involves a certain figurative procedure, that is, the paradox of the conformation of an object (the subject) as non-objectivable.

Every metaphor is thus a metaphor of itself, and of its ultimate failure to give account of itself. “That existence is *being-in-the-world* means precisely that the world of this *being-in* is not composed of ‘objects’ but cannot be grasped in metaphors, either.”³⁵ We find here the root of the disruptive character of primitive metaphors, something that their discursive neutralization and reduction to “mere metaphors”—ornaments of language—completely misses. In their origin, metaphors are disturbing of the lifeworld, and they erupt dislocating the natural unfolding of the teleological horizon that this lifeworld erects. More specifically, this is the function of what Blumenberg calls “explosive metaphors.” They send us back to that which is conceptually ungraspable, which is not, however, the content of the ground of immediate evidence that makes all thinking possible (and that Husserl grouped under the category of the *lifeworld*, which indicates an unsurpassable horizon, by definition). They rather bracket this evidence to reveal the radical contingency and irrationality of its foundations (that is to say, they produce that which is inconceivable for a phenomenology of a subject’s experience). In short, “absolute metaphors” indicate *events* of language, they put the symbolic realm into contact with that which exceeds it but which is not located beyond it—indeed, inhabits it: the void that is constitutive of it.

The theory of unconceptuality is, then, no longer a historical phenomenology, the science of the appearance of objects, trying to reveal their instituted nature, but one that tries to show the non-natural character of the nonobjective correlatives of thinking that are inexpressible in conceptual language. In this way, metaphors serve as intralinguistic indices pointing to that remainder of irrationality at the basis of every conceptual formation that explains why concepts never manage to stabilize their semantic content and fulfill their vocation of constituting themselves as closed and self-contained systems. Metaphors indicate the points of fracture inherent to a given horizon of understanding that cannot become manifest without breaking the set of idealizations on which that horizon rests.

Hence, it is metaphor’s specific performance that allows us to understand how, beyond conceptual change, the *lifeworld* is reshaped, how the very ground of immediate certainties on the basis of which concepts operate eventually becomes dislocated; in sum, how *passages* take place. If phenomenology (like the history of concepts, according to Koselleck’s definition of it) seeks to comprehend the meaningful connections that articulate historical developments into a unity of sense, the theory of unconceptuality tries, in turn, to reconstruct the critical moments when these connections are put in question. But this entails the reversal of Koselleck’s perspective regarding the origin of the temporality of concepts.

35. Blumenberg, “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality,” in *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 99.

In effect, time, contingency, is no longer, as Koselleck postulated, something that comes to intellectual history from *outside* it (social history). The collapse of the horizons of understanding does not refer us back to some kind of macrosubject (God or Man) that introduces the “more or less” that interrupts the repeatability of historico-conceptual processes. For Blumenberg, the subject (an empty place that must be filled with meanings through allegorical procedures) is nothing but the name put to the simultaneous necessity-impossibility of language to represent the non-representability of contingency as such. “What is up for descriptive discussion,” he says, “is not the existence of correlatives of an asserted speechlessness, but that of the striving, which is part of the history of our consciousness, to represent inexpressibility itself in language.”³⁶ It is that inexpressibility that makes it unbearable, since it frustrates all attempts to symbolically control it. “To live with the scandal of the spatio-temporal contingency,” concludes Blumenberg, “means not only to give up the normativity of the present time and its immediate future; it also means the inextinguishable consciousness of its unbearable character.”³⁷ In short, all metaphor is nothing but a metaphor of its very impossibility, of its ultimate failure, that forces language to fold upon itself.³⁸

V. FROM THE HISTORY OF IDEAS TO THE THEORY OF UNCONCEPTUALITY

Up to this point we have observed how the line of thought that starts with Dilthey and Cassirer and culminates with Koselleck and Blumenberg reshaped our ways of approaching intellectual history. In the first place, it introduced a set of categories that dramatically expanded our perspective of the symbolic universe, showing the diversity of figurative procedures operating under the visible surface of “ideas” (namely, the manifest contents of discourses, that which a given text states), and the complex mechanisms through which subjects manage to make sense of their surrounding reality and their own place in it. This universe is revealed as complex and multi-layered, hosting plural levels and instances, of which that of “ideas” is only the most superficial.

This attempt to transcend the plane of the explicit contents of discourses leads, in the first instance, to rendering problematic the relation between ideas and their reference, introducing an ineliminable incongruence between them that is con-

36. *Ibid.*, 90.

37. Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, 171-172.

38. In fact, Blumenberg did not manage to resist that unbearable character of contingency, either, and, in opposition to all of his previous argument, he tries to find a natural foundation to it. Following again Gehlen’s view, in *Work on Myth* (1979) Blumenberg refers contingency back to an innate biological disposition: man’s genetic lack of adaptive instincts (on this, see Paltí, “In Memoriam: Hans Blumenberg [1920–1996]: An Unended Quest,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 108, no. 3 [1997], 503-524). Unlike Koselleck, the last object of Blumenberg’s historical theory or *Historik* is no longer the development of a typology of the different possible ways of historical figuration; it, in fact, does not refer to any positive content, but to that which frustrates it (historical figuration); in sum, it does not intend to determine the conditions of possibility of history as an object of knowledge, but to trace what makes all historical narrative inevitably precarious. However, by referring the source of inexpressibility back to the plane of natural objects, he manages to turn it into something perfectly definable and comprehensible regarding its origins and last foundations. Inexpressibility has no historical origin: it is not an “instituted” thing, but a given, something that plunges its roots to the level of generically human, innate determinations.

stituent of the very object and that confers upon ideas (now redefined as *concepts*) an inevitably plurivocal character. In the second instance, it forces intellectual history to render topical, and thus to turn into an object of analysis, the figurative procedures of the non-objectivable correlatives of thinking, on which all conceptual order rests. This generates in its turn a further but less noticed displacement, leading analysis well beyond the semantic level of language on which conceptual history traditionally unfolded. Reflection reveals not only new linguistic realities, but also functions of language that go beyond the purely referential ones.

The value of metaphors, unlike that of ideas or concepts, does not lie in that which they represent; their sense is not in their wording, in what they state, but in what they *do*, and, lastly, in what they give rise to. As we saw, according to Blumenberg, metaphors are not merely figurative devices used to designate objects that elude other conceptual procedures. They refer to that which does not lend itself to representation, namely, the totality of the world and its ultimate meaning (an issue whose confrontation after the death of God and the consequent loss of the transparency hitherto provided by the assumption of a transcendent origin of the world, we cannot avoid). Metaphors do not *represent*. They are rather signs put in the place of an absence of that which confers on the world an intelligibility, thus allowing us to turn it, at least, into something symbolically controllable. In this way, they channel the anxiety born out of the confrontation of the evidence of the naked contingency of the world.

From beneath the two above-mentioned displacements (toward the non-objectivable correlates of thinking, and toward the non-referential functions of language), emerges the fundamental contribution of these theoretical developments, which, in the last instance, opened the doors to a truly monumental historical work that placed intellectual history on a completely new terrain, definitively beyond that of the tradition of *Ideengeschichte*.

Phenomenological-neo-Kantian thinking (and, after it, all the philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century) centrally oriented its search to try to understand how crude empirical data are introduced into the symbolic field (to put it in Cassirer's words, how the "impression" becomes "expression"), and are thereby constituted as data for consciousness (that is, what Peirce elaborated under the name of *abduction*, the third of the intellectual procedures that he identified, besides the traditional ones of deduction and induction, and which is, for him, at the basis of these two and makes them possible). This strain of thinking intended to understand how the mere happening of events, the empty experience (*Erfahrung*), is meaningfully invested and articulated into a chain of subjective intentionalities, thereby becoming lived experience (*Erlebnis*): in sum, how *history* (as such, and not merely as an object of knowledge) is produced.³⁹

Yet the fundamental question that these philosophies raise, but that, nevertheless, they are radically incapable of answering, is not how pure data penetrate the symbolic realm, but how is that possible for that other element that eludes figuration and that radically escapes the field of the conceivable and thinkable within a given horizon of understanding, to eventually force it to twist its logic in order to

39. The implicit assumption here is that history is not a mere becoming of events but a web of intentional actions addressed to an end.

account for that element? To put it in Peirce's terminology, how is an "explosive abduction" possible; what are the ways of figuration-institution of what is unconceivable as such (as something unconceivable)?

Thus, the first displacement induced by phenomenological-neo-Kantian philosophies, which actually constitutes their last object (transcending the surface of conceptual systems and referring them back to the primitive figurative procedures that, by meaningfully investing reality, allow us to subsequently conceptualize it), ended up producing a much more radical reformulation that opened the door to a view of the temporality of intellectual history that goes beyond the frameworks of these philosophies. In effect, that which exceeds the lifeworld, and that dislocates the horizons of understanding established by it, is no longer perceived as placed outside the symbolic field; it does not send us to something external to language. The expansion of the symbolic field that those philosophies produce rendered explicit the contact points through which that remainder of facticity that prevents the logical closure of the symbolic field is introduced into it, constituting an inherent element. The object of the theory of unconceptuality—what metaphors, myths, and other non-conceptual forms of symbolic figuration of reality allows us to approach—is not outside language (something that introduces new concepts or definitions from outside intellectual history itself), nor is it an instance internal to it (what would result in the mere recombination of the elements available within that very horizon), but a kind of "constitutive external," an element that belongs to the universe of symbolic reality but that does not have a positive value within its system, indicating its inherent point of fracture, an empty place that demands to be filled with meaning by means of figurative procedures, without ever completely exhausting it. (This makes semantic ambiguity a non-contingent dimension of conceptual formations, that is, something that does not arise merely from the factual conditions of their application to particular contexts, but that constitutes an intrinsic feature.)

As the *locus* of inscription of that which exceeds the field of representation, metaphors and other expressions of unconceptuality indicate a fold of that field (they are inner and outer at the same time). Hence their disturbing character. Contrary to the postulates of an entire line of thinking stretching from Husserl to Lévi-Strauss,⁴⁰ the bracketing of semantic crystallizations of figurative language, and the reactivation of that preconceptual substrate of thought that serves as the source for its productivity, far from reinvigorating horizons of sense, is destructive of them. This is the case because the ground of immediate evidence on which metaphors rest does not reveal the origin of meaning, a total presence (namely, the primitive web of intentionalities articulating a *world*), but, on the contrary, it removes that which is unthinkable within its frameworks, namely, the radical contingency of its own institution, the meaningful emptiness that lies at its very center, inhabits its interior, and confers on it an inerasable mark of precariousness.

We thus obtain a much stronger view of the temporality of conceptual formations, a view that ultimately explains why such formations can never fix their semantic content, a view of what underlies the vicissitudes of their meaningful dis-

40. See note 20.

placements, and, in the last instance, explains why they occur. According to this stronger perspective, if concepts can never stabilize their semantic content, it is not because they historically change—a postulate that implies that contingency is, in itself, something contingent, something that could well not have happened, even though, in actual fact, it always does; that is to say, that if it were not the case that certain subjects eventually introduced new definitions of concepts, the established ones could perfectly remain indefinitely. In the tradition of *Ideengeschichte*, there is nothing intrinsic to ideas that explains why they destabilize their meanings and eventually succumb—in other words, there is no inherent principle of historicity. In the stronger perspective of temporality, the inverse is the case: it is not that concepts cannot fix their semantic content because their definitions change over time, but rather the other way around: concepts change their meanings because intellectual formations can never stabilize their semantic content or fix their objects. This stronger view of the historicity of concepts, which perceives contingency as an inherent dimension in intellectual history (and not merely a by-product of social history), is the point that cannot be thought within the framework of the history of concepts, and that opens the door to Blumenberg's project of a theory of unconceptuality. It is still the implicit program in the broader theoretical transformation initiated by the neo-Kantian-phenomenological philosophies, which both initially gave rise to the German tradition of *Ideengeschichte* and eventually also produced its demise. This will pave the way for a new horizon for intellectual history; it will open the view to a whole new world of symbolic reality lying beyond the reach of "ideas" and the "philosophies of consciousness."

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