Reinhart Koselleck

His Concept of the Concept *and Neo-Kantianism*

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ABSTRACT

The present article intends to trace the conceptual roots of Koselleck's concept of the *concept.* Koselleck's distinction between ideas and concepts has its roots in the logic of Hegel, who was the first to elaborate on the multivocal nature of concepts as their distinguishing feature vis-à-vis ideas. The main hypothesis proposed here is that Koselleck reformulated Hegel's view on the basis of the neo-Kantian philosophies developed at the turn of the century, with which his theory maintains a tense relationship, without breaking, however, some of its fundamental premises.

KEYWORDS

conceptual history, Hegel´s logic, neo-Kantianism, Reinhart Koselleck

> *"[No concept] can be so new as not to be virtually constituted in the given language, or not to take its meaning from the linguistic context inherited from the past."*
>
> *Reinhart Koselleck*[1]

As is frequently remarked, the German school of the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) that was initiated by Reinhart Koselleck, along with Otto Brunner and Werner Conze, emerged as a reaction against the antihistoricist tendencies of the old German tradition of the history of ideas (*Ideengeschichte*), one of the best representatives of which is Ernst Cassirer and his work *The Myth of the State* (although Koselleck's criticism of this tradition also applies to its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, the school of the history of ideas founded by Arthur Lovejoy). On several occasions, Koselleck sought to clarify the differences

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1. Reinhart Koselleck, "Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte," in *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland: Entwicklungen und Perspektiven im internationalen Zusammenhang,* Wolfgang Schieder and Volker Sellin, eds. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), vol. 2, 102.

between these two schools.[2] However, that distinction still remains elusive, and the same question resurfaces: What distinguishes the history of concepts from the history of ideas? As a matter of fact, some of the current work on the history of concepts could be perfectly inscribed within that older tradition.[3]

The confluence of these two traditions might crucially blur the differences separating their respective ways of approaching history, thus missing the sense of the transformation that Koselleck introduced into the discipline. He centered the discipline around a precise object—the *concept*—and proposed a new way of approaching it as well. Yet such a confluence is not merely incidental. Ultimately, these two schools have their intellectual roots in the same categorical soil. As this article intends to show, to understand both the differences between ideas and concepts and the problems that this distinction still raises, one must place Koselleck's elaborations within a broader intellectual context and investigate the specific set of problems against which his historiographical program took form. This article, therefore, intends to trace the simultaneously intimate and conflicting connections that his *Begriffsgeschichte* maintains with the neo-Kantian philosophical tradition within which *Ideengeschichte* is inscribed, as well as to reveal fundamental connections linking Koselleck's concept of *concept* with a different line of reflection, rooted in Hegel's elaborations on the topic.

The *Ideengeschichte* and its Neo-Kantian Roots

The *Begriffsgeschichte* school, it is widely agreed, introduced a new awareness of the *temporality* of discourse formations. Unlike ideas, which are by definition eternal entities that can be observed in the most dissimilar cultural and intellectual contexts, concepts, for this school, are thoroughly historical realities. However, what this means remains unclear even for many of the followers of that school themselves.

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2. Koselleck normally refers to the tradition of *Ideengeschichte* and criticizes its methodologies by including it under the broader label of the neo-Kantian notion of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. See Reinhart Koselleck, "Richtlinien für das Lexikon politisch-sozialer Begriffe der Neuzeit," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 11 (1967): 81–89, and Reinhart Koselleck, ed. *Historische Semantik und Begriffsgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979).

3. At times this is explicitly suggested. Take for example Irmline Veit-Brause's seemingly out-of-place proposition: in an article in the newsletter of the *History of Social and Political Concepts Society,* she postulated the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas,* organized by Philip Wiener, as a model to be adopted by historians of concepts. This book is, in fact, the culminating work of the school inspired by Lovejoy's writings. See Irmline Veit-Brause, "The Interdisciplinarity of History of Concepts: A Bridge Between Disciplines," *History of Concepts Newsletter* 6 (2003): 8–13.

A first possible way of interpreting it is that concepts, unlike ideas, cannot be understood if they are detached from the particular context in which they emerged. Having framed the issue in this way, it could be said that the history of concepts is nothing but a form of radical historicism—a statement that is not only somehow vague as the definition of a historiographical project (and simplistic as a theoretical proposal), but also fails to differentiate it from that of Cassirer and his followers.[4]

Certainly, neither Cassirer nor any of the thinkers normally associated with the tradition of *Ideengeschichte* (the name of Friedrich Meinecke is here the most frequently cited) ignored the fact that the meaning of concepts shifts along with the different discursive frameworks in which they appear. As remarked above, this does not imply that there is no substantial difference between Cassirer's method and Koselleck's historical program and their ways of conceiving of the temporality of conceptual formations. Yet finding these differences is not as simple as it appears. The core of their theoretical disagreement cannot be grasped by any simple formula. In order to discover them, it is necessary to penetrate and analyze the epistemological foundations on which each of these schools is based.

In *The Myth of the State,* Cassirer's discussion of the nature of myths and the possibility of comprehending them from a rational perspective provides him with the framework for defining his own method. As he remarks, there are two main strands of myth-interpretation. The first is best represented by James Frazer, who in *The Golden Bough* rejected the idea that the mythical and rational forms of thinking were radically different. The intellectual procedures they follow are, for him, substantially the same. Both are based on the shared assumption of the regularity of phenomena, that the same causes will produce the same effects. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who in *The Primitive Mind* affirmed that there is no common measure between primitive and modern mentalities, represents the opposite current. For him, the prelogical mind is, by definition, not able to sustain the kind of formal argumentation and reasoning Frazer attributed to it. Which of these two opposite interpretations should we endorse?

In order to tackle the issue, Cassirer goes back to Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant underlined the two different principles on which these currents hinge: the *principle of homogeneity* and the *principle of specificity.* However, according to Kant, the two principles are not incompatible, since they express not differences present in nature itself, but two different forms in which the researcher may eventually approach it; that is, the adoption of one principle or another depends, in each particular case, on what we are inter-

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4. In the course of a discussion with Otto Brunner, Koselleck in fact rejected the radical historicist versions that assert the absolute incommensurability of premodern and modern concepts. See Reinhart Koselleck, "Begriffsgeschichtliche Probleme der Verfassungs- geschichtsschreibung," *Der Staat,* Beiheft 6 (1983): 7–21.

ested in, what we concretely intend to know. Ultimately, human knowledge is achieved only by combining both principles, that is, simultaneously developing those two opposite drives.[5]

Kant thus provided Cassirer with the basis for defining his own project. For Cassirer, the two currents of interpretation of myth are at the same time valid, yet insufficient. On the one hand, it is true that mythical intellectual procedures cannot be plainly assimilated to scientific ones without distorting them, obliterating their characteristic features. But on the other hand, if they were completely alien to us, radically incompatible with our rational mind, no scientific knowledge of them would be possible.[6] In sum, for Cassirer, concepts, categories, and symbolic procedures cannot be extrapolated from one kind of mentality to another; if they are detached from the particular intellectual context in which they appear, they lose their concrete meaning. Myth and reason thus indicate two closed and self-contained universes of sense. However, this does not prevent mutual translatability between the two worldviews. It simply demands a well-developed exegesis to grasp the particular keys to intellectual universes alien to us, such as the mythical.

So far, Cassirer's program seems, *mutatis mutandis,* not very unlike Koselleck's approach to the two great worldviews he analyzed—the modern and the premodern, which are separated by the *Sattelzeit* or "saddle time" spanning from 1750 to 1850— intended to combine the two principles Kant spoke about. For Koselleck, although there is no common measure between the two kinds of mentalities on the level of their ideal contents, the conceptual historian's mission is to recover the premodern categorical universe and render it meaningful for contemporary readers. Here, however, we find *Ideengeschichte*'s fundamental shortcoming. Ideas cannot serve as the unit for this kind of historical comprehension since they lack, by definition, an inherent principle of historicity. An idea eventually appears (or not) in a particular context, but this is a circumstance external to it. Between an idea and its context there is a merely contingent tie. Only in concepts do semantic shifts resulting from alterations in the context of their utterance become inscribed, thus forming an integral part of their definition.

Here lies the core of Koselleck's disagreement with Cassirer's method. The *state* Cassirer analyzes, although it shifts its meaning over time, is still conceived of as an *idea,* not as a *concept.* What does this mean? A thorough explanation requires some prior clarifications.

For Cassirer, there are two radically different ways of perceiving the *state:* the mythical and the rational. In his long review of it, he shows how the conflict

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5. See Immanuel Kant, "Anhang zur transcendentalen Dialektik," *Kritik der reinen Vernunft,* Kants Werke, Vol III (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 426–64.

6. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 7.

between these two opposite modes of approaching the state can be observed in every historical context, from ancient Greece to the present. The ubiquity of this antagonism, he says, can be explained only by the fact that the two types of mentality embody contradictory dispositions inherent in human beings. The *state* appears, in effect, as an eternal category—an idea—but not in the sense that its meaning remains unchangeable, independently of intellectual coordinates within which it is defined. The ways of conceiving of the world are discrete, yet such diversity is not really a historical outcome; rather, it has its roots in a deeper, anthropological layer. More concretely, what Cassirer aims to show is that radically diverse ideal contents can nevertheless serve the same function of satisfying the innate intellectual needs and dispositions of humans as *symbolic animals.*

Kant's scheme thus repeats itself here. The a priori forms of consciousness constitute a transcendental subjectivity; its changing forms of historical manifestation are therefore only different varieties of one and the same fundamental structure. Cassirer applied such a scheme to intellectual history. The concept of *state* is a subject, and the historical forms it assumes are permutations of that subject. Neo-Kantianism[7] later translated this transcendental subjectivity to a higher, more abstract, phenomenological level, that is, from the a priori categories of experience to innate *dispositions.* This made room for the introduction of a historical sense in the realm of the forms of transcendental consciousness, thus adding a foreign element to the Kantian system.

However, this raised a series of new problems. The first question *Ideengeschichte* faced was how to identify the persistence of a single idea and how to locate the marks that identify it through its semantic variations. In principle, the only means of doing so is to assume the existence of a conceptual core that remains unchanged despite the shifts of meaning that that idea undergoes. Otherwise, if in every new definition of an idea nothing were preserved of its earlier definitions, we would simply have a new idea. In such a case, writing the history of the idea of *state* would imply a nominalistic fallacy: the creation of an artificial entity based merely upon the accidental recurrence of a term that does not refer to any common object or to any identifiable conceptual nucleus. Intellectual history would thus be shattered and reduced to a sequence of singular discursive events.

Now, after setting aside that nominalistic fallacy, the original question still remains: what if, in spite of this situation, historical analysis discovered no persistent conceptual core underlying a given idea, no definition that encom-

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7. The "return to Kant" started in Germany during the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet neo-Kantianism flourished in the last decades of that century and the first decade of the next. It had two main centers—the Marburg and the Baden schools. Its best representatives were Paul Natorp and Ernst Cassirer (Marburg) and Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Ernst Troeltsch (Baden).

passed all of its historical declinations? In other words, what would happen if there was too wide a semantic variation for any set of principles or maxims to be applicable to all the members of that class? As a matter of fact, this seems to be the most frequent problem faced by intellectual historians. This would lead them to experience once again the difficulty, if not the plain impossibility, of finding an acceptable definition of semantically heavily loaded terms such as *liberalism, republic, democracy,* and *justice*. All proposed definitions seem fated to be at the same time too wide and too narrow. That is, in order to include everything these definitions should include, they must become vague to the point of losing their discriminatory force (such empty labels would comprehend practically all known systems of ideas), and even such vague definitions could not manage to grasp the whole picture. In sum, the historian of ideas would be condemned to use categories (since he or she cannot simply disregard them) that lack effective hermeneutic capacity.

For Koselleck, however, this had less to do with a limitation inherent in historical knowledge itself than with a particular kind of intellectual procedure, namely *Ideengeschichte.* In the neo-Kantian framework, the idea of the essential homogeneity of humankind, which in principle referred exclusively to innate dispositions, somehow has to reveal itself in the realm of semantic content in order to permit historical intelligibility, which necessarily entails a relapse into an essentialist perspective of intellectual history. If *Begriffsgeschichte* hoped to avoid this relapse, it had to separate these two instances, and then dislocate the articulating principles of intellectual history from the realm of content to that of the forms of historical discourse, that is, to the empty structures of temporality.

From *Ideas* to *Concepts*

Basically, *Ideengeschichte* simply made the aporia inherent in the neo-Kantian philosophies of history stand out. On the one hand, neo-Kantians introduced historicity, leading them to postulate the idea of conceptual ruptures. On the other hand, however, these philosophies would not be able to define these ruptures without dislocating in the process the essentialist premises on which they rested and rendering the past unintelligible—that is, without relapsing into relativism. Ultimately, Koselleck's entire project revolves around the goal of facing this aporia, and this led him to elaborate his concept of *concept.* This statement must be understood in the sense that even though Koselleck's immense oeuvre displays a wide spectrum of topics and issues (such as the criticism of nationalist German historicism; a sustained attempt to find an alternative way of writing the social history of modernity, different from the

Weberian model; and a search for a solution to Gadamer's insistence on the omnipresence of language), they all should be seen as different expressions of this fundamental concern of his.

As Koselleck remarked, only when a term or idea gains diverse, particular connotations does it become a *concept*. "A word," he stated, "becomes a concept when the plenitude of a politico-social context of meaning and experience in and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word."[8] And this completely shifted the issue. While the idea, in order to persist as such, must progressively narrow its meaning, and in the end become an empty category, the concept, contrarily, is semantically enriched to the same extent that it gains diverse content. This semantic enhancement, however, confers upon it an unavoidably multivocal character.

As Nietzsche's maxim, adopted by Koselleck as his motto, goes: "all concepts escape definition that summarize semiotically an entire process; only that which has no history is definable."[9] In effect, concepts do not accept definition. There is no uniform conceptual core that identifies a concept through the changes of meaning it undergoes. Nonetheless, in the course of its own meaningful transformations, a semantic fabric is woven; its different definitions become intertwined, constituting a certain unity of sense. In this way, any present use of a concept brings with it the heterogeneous web of meanings deposited in it. Such a synchronic multivocality therefore has diachronic roots; it indicates a semantic asynchrony. This is what Koselleck identified as the defining feature of a concept: its capacity to transcend its primitive context and project itself in time ("social and political concepts," he says, "possess a substantial claim to generality"; "once minted, a concept contains within itself, purely linguistically, the possibility of being employed in a generalized manner").[10] It is because concepts can overcome the particular contexts of their utterance and generate semantic asynchronies that the history of concepts gains analytical significance:

> 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.[11]

8. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time,* trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 85.

9. Quoted in Koselleck, *Futures Past,* 84.

10. Koselleck, *Futures Past,* 83, 89.

11. Koselleck, *Futures Past,* 80.

If the history of concepts distances itself from social history, it is only because it must do so in order to re-create long-term processes. Insofar as concepts can meaningfully articulate different social experiences, forming discursive webs that span epochs and transcend immediate social spheres, they serve as the indexes of structural transformations. But, on the other hand, if concepts retrospectively work as effective indexes of the transformations in social experience, that is so because they simultaneously play a role in its constitution. Each concept "establishes a particular horizon for potential experience and conceivable theory, and in this way sets a limit."[12] As a matter of fact, concepts provide agents with the tools to render their own actions meaningful; they elevate raw experience (*Erfahrung*), the pure perception of facts and events, into living experience (*Erlebnis*).[13] And in this way concepts also mutually articulate living experiences into a unity of sense; they work as pillars for their structural connections.

Now, although conceptual history transcends and overcomes social history insofar as it articulates long-term meaningful webs, it still cannot fully exhaust it. Social events and the whole extralinguistic historical fabric can be overwhelming for language, since the realization of a deed always exceeds the mere symbolic enunciation or representation of it. This explains why a concept, as a crystallization of historical experience, may eventually become altered, and the living expectations deposited in it may become frustrated, thus furnishing that concept with new meanings.

To this point I have shown how Koselleck addresses the question of facing, from the point of view of intellectual history, the evidence concerning the radically contingent nature of conceptual formations. However, this still does not explain how Koselleck managed to elaborate his concept of *concept;* what categories and conceptual tools he had available to accomplish and go beyond the task at which *Ideengeschichte* had failed.

The Hegelian concept of the *concept*

The search for the conceptual roots of Koselleck's project leads us back to Hegel. In fact, the parallel between Koselleck's criticism of *Ideengeschichte* and Hegel's criticism of Kantian philosophy is noteworthy. Although it cannot be attributed to a direct influence, it is not incidental either. In any case, it sheds

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12. Koselleck, *Futures Past,* 84.

13. "All history," states Koselleck, "becomes such due to the oral and writing communications of coexistent generations, which transmit to each other their respective social experiences": Reinhart Koselleck, "Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte," in *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland,* W. Schieder and V. Sellin, eds. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), vol. 1, 97 (my translation).

light on the intricate intellectual path through which Koselleck would arrive at his concept of the *concept.*

Hegel elaborated his concept of *concept* in the third part of his *Logic* (which originally appeared in 1817 as an introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* and was reprinted after his death in an enlarged version, under the title of *Science of Logic*), the title of which is "The Doctrine of the Concept."[14] In the concept, he said, it is possible to find the identity between the individual and the universal, subject and predicate. Yet this unity still lacks mediation between them. The result is pure tautology: in the predicate we can find only that which is already immediately present in the very notion of it (like God's "I am that I am" in Genesis). It is only in judgment (for example, "the rose is red") that the idea is presented as something different from itself; that it is revealed as *processus* (the movement of positing itself without remaining itself); in sum, it becomes a *determinate* idea.[15] However, philosophies of understanding conceive of judgment as a putting together of two originally separate terms, while keeping a purely contingent relation. The subject is a pre-given substance to which diverse predicates are added; they are not inherent. The adjectives red, yellow, etc. qualify a subject that exists independently of them; the fact that a rose is red or yellow is an accident that does not affect its definition. In sum, for the "philosophies of understanding," in judgment, the particle *and* causes two terms to overlap but does not establish between them any kind of *conceptual* link.

The point for Hegel is that if detached from their predicates, concepts become devoid of content. What can then be predicated of a thing is merely that it *is,* a purely indeterminate existence. Only the predicate concretely says what that thing *is.* "The predicate is, as it were, the soul of the subject, by which the subject, as the body of this soul, is characterized through and through."[16] According to Hegel, individual components of judgment do not designate entities that predate their mutual relationship. An object is what it manifests itself to be; in Hegelian terms, it is the very movement of positing itself outside itself (becoming something different) while remaining the very same object.

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14. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic,* trans. A. V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1969), 60. "Die Lehre vom Begriff" was translated by Miller and others into English as the "doctrine of the notion." However, *Begriff* as used in Hegel's logic is better rendered as *concept.* See Jon Mills and Janusz A. Polanowski, *Ontology of Prejudice,* Value Inquiry Book Series, vol. 58 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 98.

15. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic,* trans. A.V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1969), 601.

16. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel: Translated from the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences,* trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1873), 172.

That *necessary* (definitional) tie between two different terms is, more precisely, what the word *concept* (*Begriff*) designates for Hegel, and is at the basis of all dialectical relations.

Missing this link implies reducing understanding to a merely formal classification grid, in which general concepts represent a class of a superior order vis-à-vis its determinate concepts, which are thus downgraded to the status of a mere disaggregate of the general class. Therefore, in order to build the concept of an object, understanding must include only those features that are shared by all the members of its class, removing from it everything that it encompasses but that is not part of its definition, that is, all its purely contingent predicates (for example, the definition of *fruit* can comprise only the features that pears, apples, oranges, etc. have in common, thus excluding all that which characterizes each one of the elements forming that class). This gulf between what properly belongs to a class and what it effectively includes forms a kind of residue that is present but cannot be represented in it. As we move forward, from class to order, and so on, concepts become progressively emptied of positive content and can ultimately end up defining nothing.[17] What matters, for Hegel, is finding the means by which all that is present in a category is also represented in it. We find here the conclusion to which Hegel's argument in this work converges: the logical expression of the *concept* is the *disjunctive* judgment (that is, a rose is either red, yellow, or white; it has either this form, that one, or that other one, and so on). Only in this does the concept reveal itself as a totality of particular determinations, a concrete universal (*Sittlichkeit*).[18]

Yet the elaboration of a disjunctive judgment demands a double movement: an upward dialectic (that moves from the individual to the universal, crossing through the genre, the species, the order, the class, etc.) and a downward one traversing the same series in the opposite direction. Only through this double movement can what the concept presents be represented in it, thus bringing us closer to a totality in which the increase in generality does not entail semantic deprivation but, on the contrary, progressive enhancement of its content.

This method combines analysis and synthesis in each of its phases. Analysis reveals the different particular elements that compose a disjunctive judg-

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17. This results in the paradox of the identity between totality and nothingness, or of an empty totality (since, in the framework of this kind of intellectual procedure, any single predicate attributed to the totality would exclude something, therefore causing it to cease being such). Another result is Spinozian *acosmism:* what understanding excludes, what cannot be represented in it, is the entire reality of the world, with which it becomes reduced to a set of abstract categories, with no positive content.

18. Hegel regarded ethical life as the concrete universal, in opposition to Kant's abstract morality. On this topic, see Timothy C. Luther, *Hegel's Critique of Modernity: Reconciling Individual Freedom and Community* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

ment and together form a concept. Synthesis, in turn, shows us the *conceptual* relation that these particular contents keep with their concept (since otherwise the diverse terms of a disjunctive judgment would merely appear as an unarticulated chain of disjointed predicates, keeping among them a purely accidental link). However, this should not be understood in the sense that synthesis and analysis are two separate moments, or that they respectively correspond to the two abovementioned dialectics. As stated, analysis and synthesis are inextricably associated in each phase. Without analysis, the concept would remain in its empty, generic immediacy. But without synthesis, which indicates what is already immanently contained in a concept, there would be no way of knowing whether two different predicates revealed by analysis belong to one and the same object or to two different ones. This brings us to a sort of hermeneutic circle. Analysis tells us what a thing is, but we must possess the concept of that thing beforehand in order to establish which predicates can be validly attributed to it. Ultimately, this double process is nothing other than the *work of the concept upon itself* (which is, in the last instance, the logical matrix for the broader phenomenon of the singularization of concepts, the best example of which is, as Koselleck remarks, the constitution of *history* as a collective noun, an *in* and *for itself,* as revealed by the Hegelian expression of *the work of history*).

Going back to Koselleck's concept of *concept,* we can see now how far his criticism of the history of ideas parallels the Hegelian critique of philosophies of understanding. The latter clarifies fundamental aspects of the former. After all, what Koselleck sought, like Hegel, was to transcend the alterity between an idea and its concrete predicates. As seen above, for Koselleck, a concept, unlike an idea, must by definition contain a plurality of diverse contents. A concept, then, does not antecede the ways in which it becomes manifest in reality. It cannot be defined a priori*,* that is, independently from the set of predicates that historically have been attributed to it. A concept is nothing but the very semantic web woven through the series of its changing definitions, which are deposited in it and become reactivated in the present uses of that concept. In sum, the logical expression of Koselleck's concept of *concept,* like Hegel's, is the *disjunctive judgment.* But at this point it is also possible to see the substantial differences that separate Koselleck from his predecessor.

For Koselleck, the diverse, particular predicates denoted by a term like *state* form not a closed system, but a sequence that is always open to new possible definitions. And this is so not, as Hegel thought, merely due to strictly epistemological limitations (the factual impossibility for human reason to gain an insight into all that is contained in a concept), but rather to ontological ones. The historical sequence of the changing definitions of a concept is not simply the external manifestation of that which is already immanently contained in it. For Koselleck, a concept is *constructed,* and not only *revealed,* in history.

From the Hegelian point of view, what this picture misses is the work of the concept upon itself. As a consequence, the series of attributes that qualify the term *state* appears as an unarticulated sequence of contingent predicates that lack a logical nexus. And this leads us back to the history of ideas' original problem: in such a case there would be no way of establishing whether two dissimilar definitions of an idea refer to the same subject (in this case, the idea of *state*) or to the qualification (definition) of two different subjects. This shows the complexity of the challenge Koselleck faced in his attempt to recover temporality and contingency as immanent dimensions in intellectual history. In order to make a concept something more than a merely nominalistic entity, one founded exclusively in the recurrence of a term with no common object or reference, as happens in the history of ideas, he had to find the means of conceiving of some kind of articulation among the different definitions of it, which does not involve, however, a logical, conceptual link, as in Hegel. Devising this link demanded a different categorical apparatus than the one employed by Hegel. As it happened, such an apparatus would be provided by the neo-Kantian currents of thought that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century (currents from which, as we will see, Koselleck would later distance himself, albeit without completely breaking his ties to them). In particular, the analysis of Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophy will allow us to observe, beyond the clear analogies between Koselleck's and Hegel's concepts of *concept,* the disparate ontological assumptions that separate the two German thinkers.

Hegel, Dilthey, and the Constructability of History

In fact, both Hegel and Koselleck have a constructivist view of the world (as an object of knowledge) and history (as such). Ultimately, both were on the same side of the watershed marked by the *Sattelzeit.* However, they understood it in two very different fashions. As Koselleck remarks:

> Men have to be accountable for the incommensurability of intention and outcome, and this lends a background of real meaning to the dictum concerning the making of history.… 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, whether they wish it or not.[19]

That history is a human construction for Koselleck means that it is an open, contingent process. For Hegel, on the other hand, a perspective like Koselleck's contains a theological assumption: it is founded on a mystic view of the subject as a kind of transcendent demiurge. At this point a clarification is in order.

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19. Koselleck, *Futures Past,* 211–12.

Hegel's main goal is precisely to explain the regular functioning of a world and a history already deprived of any providential protection, a world that spontaneously follows its own tendencies of development. His philosophy also strives to explain how one can come to know the laws presiding over that development; that is, how it is possible that the intellectual procedures by which we conceptualize reality may eventually match the objective structure of it, without assuming some kind of "preestablished harmony," which would entail the reintroduction of a theological premise. This concern is what the "evolutionary" concept of history condenses.

Hegel's concept of history is founded on two premises. In Koselleck's terms, the first can be formulated as follows: if we accept that a situation B necessarily arises from a historically antecedent situation A, and if we discard the possibility of any external intervention—any kind of supernatural agent that may introduce into history a given course from outside it—we must therefore assume that the seed of all that is contained in B should have been somehow already contained in A. The statement that we may find in B something that could not be present in A, as Koselleck says, implied for Hegel a relapse into metaphysics.

Thus in Hegel's view the breaking of the idea of transcendence that permits the systematic development of the world and history is also that which ensures their intelligibility. It is here that we find his second premise. This happens because the subject no longer addresses an object that exists independently of him: that is, its observer is at the same time its author. The point here for Hegel is to recover in consciousness the modes in which the subject appears objectified in the world, and recognizes himself in objects. In sum, for Hegel, the constructive character of historical processes, far from entailing a principle of indeterminacy, of radical contingency, is what ensures the immanence of the field of historical relations that determines their systematic nature and also permits its intelligibility.

Koselleck's constructivist view of history, in contrast, lies on this side of the deep fissure opened by the *fin de siècle* (a conceptual crisis that actually was as profound as that marked by the *Sattelzeit*). The emergence of a "strong" notion of the constructability of historical processes was inextricably tied to the dislocation of the evolutionary doctrines that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, when the concept of *organism* became detached from its former teleological connotations. In the field of biology, this process culminated in 1900, when Hugo de Vries delivered the final blow to the holistic-functionalistic evolutionary concepts.[20] For him, evolutionary phenomena on the phylogenetic level resulted from sudden, random, and global recombina-

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20. Hugo De Vries, "Sur la loi de disjonction des Hybrids" [Concerning the law of segregation of hybrids], *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Sciences* (Paris, 1900) 130: 845–47.

tions of elements. Mutations (change) thus became reduced to unpredictable happenings that were internally generated but did not follow any perceivable goal. The notion of *totality* was thereby detached from that of *finality,* thus disentangling, this very movement, necessity from contingency. The category of *totality* now referred to self-integrated systems, whose immanent dynamics tended to the preservation of their own internal balance (*homeostasis*) and self-reproduction. Historicity (contingency) thus could come to them only from without; it would indicate a sphere of intentional action. And this entailed, in turn, the reintroduction of the idea of a transcendental agent beyond systems and structures (a "subject," which is, however, no longer Hegel's, but rather the denial of it).

This distinction opened a new field of problems and issues around which the different currents of neo-Kantian thought would revolve. It also provided the theoretical soil upon which the tradition of *Ideengeschichte* would be built. The search for an answer to that interrogation would thus determine a regression to Kant, or properly speaking it would update the challenge posed by Jacobi in *Zu Hume.*[21]

As we know, in the *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant stated that the object of knowledge, or *phenomenon,* is configured by intuitions coming from the external world, on the one hand, and on the other by categories or forms of transcendental apperception, which are the conditions for the possibility of experience, since they structure sensory data in a meaningful way. What lies beyond the world of phenomena, the *thing in itself,* is unknowable for us. However, Jacobi showed that this statement faced Kant with an aporia: his system entailed a premise (the presence of a world lying beyond the reach of our intellect) that could not possibly have any rational justification. All of it is thus erected upon an undemonstrable assumption or belief (*Glaube*). And this necessarily gives birth to the inquiry into the nature of the primitive intuition on which that system is based, thereby pushing reflection beyond its frontiers. As Jacobi remarked: "Without a *thing in itself* I cannot enter Kant's system, but, with a *thing in itself,* I cannot remain within it."[22]

We find here the ultimate sense of the neo-Kantian philosophical system (which, as we can see, is much more complex than is often recognized): it aims at thematizing that primitive instance which is the provider of primary senses, the precategorial modes of institution, of horizons of comprehension of the world (as Koselleck himself remarks,[23] all historical reconstruction already in-

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21. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, "Beilage" to *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus, ein Gespräch* (Breslau, 1785), in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's Werke* (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1812).

22. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, "Beilage", in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's Werke,* vol. 2, 304.

23. Reinhart Koselleck, "Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel: Eine historisch-anthropologische Skizze," in *Zeitschichten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 27–77.

volves some sense of it, which is not really the result of historical research but is rather the premise of it). That instance, then, refers back to what Husserl designated as the *transcendental egological* sphere, the penetration of which takes us beyond conceptual history to the realm of *transcendental phenomenology* (the science of the appearance of objects).[24]

This is associated with what Koselleck would later call a *Historik,* or "the doctrine of the conditions of possibility of histories (*Geschichten*)."[25] As a matter of fact, the expression refers to Dilthey, who at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth intended to complete Kant's project by means of a "critique of historical reason." The first step in understanding how historical intelligibility is possible, for Dilthey, is to trace the form in which the purely sensory, presymbolic datum is introduced into the conceptual realm. Here lies the core of all neo-Kantian philosophies of history (distinguishing them, not least, from the phenomenological currents of a Husserlian matrix). It postulates the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften,* between nomothetic and ideographic sciences. As Dilthey remarks, unlike what occurs in the natural sciences, historical material does not refer the subject to a purely external object, alien to and independent from it, but to ideal objects that are immanent in the cultural sphere. This is so because history is not merely a succession of events but a web of living experiences. That is the nuclear category of Dilthey's philosophy of history (living experience or *Erlebnis*).[26] What matters here is not how events took place but how they were actually experienced by their agents (to use a contemporary example, to determine exactly how the planes struck the Twin Towers would be much less important for historical comprehension than to understand how people experienced that event, its repercussions on the symbolic level in which facts become invested with meaning).

The *ontological,* and not only the *epistemological* identity of the subject and the object of knowledge (that is, not only is the object *qua* object of knowledge a subjective construction, as in Kant, but also, in this case, the object in itself is a human, subjective construction) determines the structure of the historical world, thus providing human sciences with a different and superior basis from that of natural sciences. All living experience is exactly as we experience it. The work of the historian thus consists of an *Innewerden,* a bringing into consciousness, making explicit what is already implicit in it, unraveling the fabric of historical experiences and reactivating the web of meanings that articulates it.

The distinction between two opposite forms of approaching their objects (the natural world and the historical world) not only delimits two different

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24. Edmund Husserl, "Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft," *Logos* 1 (1911): 289–341.

25. Reinhart Koselleck, "Historik und Hermeneutik," *Zeitschichten,* 99.

26. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teuner, 1961).

spheres of knowledge but also provides the basis for Dilthey's project of a "critique of historical reason." It allows him to break the idealist tradition that dominated philosophy throughout the preceding century. For him, the presence of an ineradicable vestige of a Nature external to the subject prevents history from instituting itself as a *system,* as Hegel thought. Being's dealing with the world as a reality that transcends it and conditions it from outside itself (thus "invading us with the feeling of fragility," the "finitude of all that is life")[27] results in the essentially open, ever-changing character of history. The kind of historicity that arises from the interconnection of the living experiences displayed in time no longer follows any design, nor is it headed toward the realization of a goal that can be determined a priori. In sum, it is not a logically integrated process, but one only vitally, immanently articulated.

The critical point here lies in the fact that the assertion of the occurrence of historical ruptures also entails the rupture of the ontological unity of the subject and the object of knowledge upon which the neo-Kantian philosophies of history ground the condition of the possibility of historical knowledge. A knowing subject would now address a transcendent object, which, as in the case of natural sciences, should be recreated by means of concepts, that is, through the mediation of a priori categories taken from itself instead of from its very object. And this would send us back to the idea of an unfathomable *thing in itself:* "the community of the units of life," Dilthey says, "represents the premise for all the relations between the particular and the universal … ; it is the precondition for understanding."[28]

Dilthey's answer to this dilemma was crucial, since it would eventually open the door to a new historico-philosophical perspective, distancing it from its neo-Kantian roots. As he states, even though one cannot have an immediate comprehension of the other's living experience, we may recover it in consciousness insofar as it is somehow present—objectified—in cultural institutions. Dilthey insisted that although there is no continuity between different epochs on the level of ideal contents, there are yet some links articulating them, which are provided by the formal structures supporting the connections of historical life. Dilthey defines these diachronic structures supporting historical becoming in terms of "cultural systems" and "organizational systems." *The state, law, religion, art,* etc. (the organizational systems) represent the institutions in which values develop and become established in shared norms of behavior. Nations, epochs, etc. (the cultural systems) are articulated, in turn, on the basis of the formerly constituted "psychic structural units" of a superior order by means of which "individuals can constitute a connection."[29]

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27. Dilthey, *Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt,* 183.
28. Dilthey, *Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt,* 171.
29. Dilthey, *Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt,* 263.

Here also lie the philosophical roots of Cassirer's project. The *state,* as a category, far from representing an "eternal idea," incarnates one of those objective supports that serve to articulate diverse, substantive living experiences. The point is that although Dilthey's definition regarding the objectivity of the world senses is still somehow precarious, it is a landmark in the contemporary history of thinking, since it would work as a kind of moving platform leading from the neo-Kantian philosophies of history to the hermeneutic tradition, and furthermore to the line of conceptual history culminating in Koselleck. However, getting to this latter point needed the intercession of Gadamer, who introduced a "linguistic turn" into that view, providing it with a much more solid intellectual sustenance.

For Gadamer, the fundamental institution supporting historical experience is language. The horizons of meaning in which intentional action takes place are always already objectified in language. As he states in *Truth and Method:* "Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us"; "all this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it, i.e., that it allows something to 'emerge' which henceforth exists."[30] Ultimately, Koselleck's concept of *concept* takes over Dilthey's idea of institution, as reprocessed by Gadamer's linguistic turn ("Language," states Koselleck, "becomes the fundamental factor without which neither memory nor the scientific transposition of that memory are possible"[31]). However, Koselleck would part ways with Gadamer in an essential aspect.

As seen above, for Koselleck, there is a realm that lies beyond the linguistic instance and explains conceptual change. If conceptual history were a self-enclosed sphere, it would be able to institute itself as a system: temporality and contingency would become mere accidents, not dimensions intrinsic to historico-conceptual processes. His invocation of "social history" thus works as the invocation of "nature" by Dilthey. In other words, it serves as the designation of that which prevents the logical closure of every conceptual formation, thus opening it to temporality. Ultimately, Koselleck's criticism of Gadamer[32] parallels Dilthey's criticism of Husserl. However, as we saw, in the case of Dilthey, the idea that there is an unremovable residue of irrationality, even if it was necessary in the reflection concerning the temporality of historical processes, raised serious theoretical problems, since it demolished the distinction between two opposite kinds of knowledge (the respective modes of intellectual procedure of *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*) on which his entire philosophy rested. Thus, it would make the problem that had

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30. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 383.

31. Koselleck, "Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte," vol. 1, 97.

32. See Reinhart Koselleck, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik und Historik* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1987).

initiated his reflection resurface: "By putting life in its entirety—living experience, comprehension, the historical connection of life, the power of irrationality in it—in the place of Hegel's universal reason, there emerges the problem of how a science of history is possible."[33]

Dilthey's way of dealing with this aporia is by invoking, in a typically neo-Kantian vein, the idea of an unchangeable substratum of human nature that assures both the regularity of historical processes and the final coalescence of the diverse forms of comprehension of the world (the "fusion of horizons"[34] that Gadamer talks about). Finding that substratum involves passing from "special psychology" (which deals with cultural systems and organizational systems) to "general psychology," aimed at disclosing the innate human dispositions to the realization of which the diverse systems and institutions are headed. Their contents are always variable, but dispositions themselves are not; they do not change from one individual to another, from one epoch to another.

Unlike Dilthey's, Koselleck's entire historiographical project hinges on the premise that all historical knowledge is mediated through categories, and consequently is necessarily partial and precarious. Yet this, far from solving the problem of historical intelligibility, makes it more acute. The question that this inevitably raises again is, how to explain the fact that the subjective mental operations for the construction of objects may eventually correspond to the way in which the world is objectively organized, except by reintroducing the hypothesis of the presence of some kind of "preestablished harmony" between them (which would entail, in turn, a transcendent guarantor or superior intelligence presiding over the functioning of both).

Koselleck answers this question by postulating the existence of some formal structures of temporality that delimit a priori the range of different ways of experiencing history. He thus introduces into his theory what he calls the fundamental metacategories of historical knowledge: "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation."[35] They indicate the different possible forms in which past, present, and future can be articulated. These formal structures of temporality do not involve the substantiality of historical becoming, yet they have innate, biological foundations.

In a series of writings, Koselleck made this assumption more explicit. Following the neo-Kantian philosophical-anthropological tradition, in "Erfahrungswandel und Methodenswechsel: Eine historisch-anthropologische Skizze"

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33. Dilthey, *Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt,* 184.

34. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 273.

35. The term *horizon of expectation* was introduced by Hans Robert Jauss in *Untersuchungen zur mittelalterlichen Tierdichtung* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1959), with the goal of relating literary history and sociological research, but it can be already found in Karl Mannheim's *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1949 [1940]).

[Mutation of experience and change of method: A historical-anthropological outline"] (1988), he states that "what matters is finding the anthropological conditions for all possible experiences."[36] He discovers three fundamental historical methodologies, which are embodied respectively in the figures of Herodotus, Polybius, and Thucydides, and reappear in the most diverse historical and conceptual contexts. Each of them springs, in turn, from the diverse possible forms in which the structures of temporality can be related. Ultimately, they have their roots in conditions that lie within man's biological substratum, and indicate three basic human forms of acquisition (and loss) of knowledge. ("Our essay," he states, "is firmly attached to the shared, formal characteristics that are the foundations of all experiences and the enrichment of them, of all methods and their differential developments."[37]

This proposition finally allowed Koselleck to delineate a *Theorie der Geschichte* or *Historik,* trying to integrate the two instances that he says constitute it. He tried to do this by tracing the ties linking events through the ways they are represented and, conversely, explaining the forms of their representation on the basis of the actual links among events, the ultimate foundations of which lie in innate, anthropological determinations. The possibility of generalization in history does not entail, nor reveal, any normative content; rather it merely indicates the molds within which values, norms, and attitudes can eventually become articulated.

Ultimately, with this "anthropological turn" Koselleck brings Dilthey's enterprise of a critique of historical reason to a conclusion. He finally would have determined the transcendental conditions for the possibility of historical discourse as such, which involves, in turn, formal instances providing some kind of transhistorical stability that does not, however, exclude contingency, that is, that makes room for unpredictable events, without which there would be no history, properly speaking.

To conclude, I should say that rather than marking a rupture with the neo-Kantian tradition, *Begriffsgeschichte* would lead it to its end term, in the double sense of the expression: at the same time the culmination and the end of the former. Ultimately, it would tackle and overcome the aporias that *Ideengeschichte* succumbed to (namely, introducing a historical sense on the level of the forms of transcendental consciousness into the Kantian matrix). However, in order to do so it would have to introduce concepts and categories pointing beyond the discursive universe of that form of thinking. Tracing the diverse historico-philosophical paths these concepts and categories may lead to, however, lies beyond the scope of this article. Its specific goal

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36. Reinhart Koselleck, "Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel: Eine historisch-anthropologische Skizze," in *Zeitschichten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 33.

37. Koselleck, "Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel," 33.

was to unravel the intricate intellectual trajectory that converged in Koselleck's concept of the *concept,* and to reveal the simultaneously tight and conflicting ties that *Begriffsgeschichte* keeps with the neo-Kantian philosophical tradition that *Ideengeschichte* is rooted in. In short, I have tried to show that the notion that *Begriffsgeschichte* marked a sharp rupture with *Ideengeschichte* (that is, as the sudden emergence of an awareness of the temporality of conceptual formations vis-à-vis a tradition that had been intrinsically blind to any idea of change in intellectual history) is rather simplistic, and in reality ends up obscuring the crucial differences between the history of ideas and the history of concepts. Even though it is true that the latter does not make a break with the neo-Kantian philosophical substratum on which the former was erected, it indeed radicalizes the series of dilemmas and paradoxes that its philosophy raised. In this sense, *Begriffsgeschichte* should, and can only, be understood as a form of radicalized neo-Kantianism.