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CONCEPTS BETWEEN WORDS AND MEANINGS

Iain Hampsher-Monk, Karin Tilmans and Frank van Vree (eds.) (1998): History of Concepts. Comparative Perspectives. Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam Press. 293 pages.

In publishing a variety of articles on conceptual history in the same language within one book, the Dutch researchers of conceptual history have created a valuable work. The book presents a conceptual orientation for history, for texts and also for images. One of its main points is to highlight various ways of approaching historical texts in their own right, as opposed to reading on the conditions of the present and from the perspective of the interpreter. However, there are some major problems connected to this approach to history in its own right, which I will return to later in this review.

Iain Hampsher-Monk writes in his article that in the conceptual historical style of analysis, texts are not read in order to provide reasons for previously existing claims, theories or ways of writing history, but rather to create an interpretation of the past as represented in textual material and in relation to its own historical context. The aim is to attempt to detect intended meanings, or at least various meanings given to concepts in the context in which they were used, by taking into account both what was possible and what was impos-

sible to thematise during that particular time. This contextualisation differs from the unhistorical philosophical treatment of concepts. One of the main differences is the opposition to anachronism inherent in the orientation of conceptual history when it is described as Hampsher-Monk does do it.

Terence Ball formulates this a bit differently: “One of the tasks of the conceptual historian is to address this sense of strangeness, of difference, not to make it less strange or different, but to make it more comprehensible, to shed light on past practices and beliefs, and in so doing to stretch the linguistic limits of presentday political discourse...conceptual change gives us something to wonder about...” (p. 75) In other words, Ball appreciates the role of strangeness in difference. He stresses the importance of not attempting to rationalise the differences between human beings into any kind of standardised normalcy.

Nor does conceptual history style of reading aim at describing history as such, or articulating “what really happened”. Rather, it focuses on the problematic relationship between events and history in the form of a tale being told about them. On a meta-level, the conceptual history approach takes seriously both the relationship between language and events and the analysis of existing debates.

In a way, this book makes conceptual history more easily accessible, in that until now major publications in the field have remained more or less scattered, or at least continental and Anglo-American variants of the tradition have been separate from one another. This book is a first attempt to compare these traditions and to try to provide a general overview of the field.

The book presents a summary of existing thought on conceptual history in a manner that is well suited to the subject matter itself. In the presentation of conceptual history by several authors and from various viewpoints, one acquires an understanding of it not as a unitary method, but rather as a collection of inter-related ways of approaching historical texts. These approaches may be understood more or less differently by different analysts, and they may also contradict each other.

The combination of theoretical perspectives and various concrete examples is well chosen in the book. According to this choice, the book is divided into three sections, which together provide a com-

prehensive view of the aspects of conceptual history. The first section is a theoretical introduction to the orientation of conceptual history. It provides a common fixed point about the subject matter for both the authors and readers. This is a good point of departure especially for those readers not yet familiar with the subject. It helps their becoming acquainted with the kinds of themes dealt with in conceptual history, as well as the various perspectives on these topics that are available. This provides a theoretical background for further studies; it is a metaphorical giant upon whose shoulders one can climb in order to see further, or in some cases also nearer.

For a more experienced researcher of conceptual history, the disposition of the book is also interesting. The articles contain details worth noticing, many well grounded and clever interpretations of the publications of “the great names” in the field, especially of the so-called Anglo-American variant of conceptual history. A number of quotations from original texts are analysed and allowed to speak on their own behalf. The theoretical section of the book also includes an article by Reinhart Koselleck (published in German in 1986). It is valuable in that it complements the book’s otherwise overwhelmingly interpretative hold by providing a conceptualisation of how one of the “founding fathers” of the tradition himself understands conceptual history’s points, aims and attitudes towards concepts, texts, history or events, the world and human beings. The republication of this article is a concrete example of the way in which the book leaves room for the texts themselves and for the readers’ interpretation of them.

The second part of the book mainly concentrates on the question of how to go about reading from a conceptual history perspective in relation to concrete research problems. The contributors illustrate the way in which some historical texts are analysed through paying attention to the inherent conceptual variation within them. One can see how through this means of analysis it is possible to gain an understanding of the context, the language used, the events taking place and the concept(s) themselves. In the third part of the book, the significance of language and concepts in conceptual history is slightly relativised through widening the horizon of studies in conceptual history. This is accomplished through the incorporation of images as sources of this kind of reading.

The Book as a Textbook

The book may be regarded as a basic textbook of conceptual history, but a textbook in the positive sense of the word. It aims neither at providing a definition of conceptual history nor a single standardised manner of performing this kind of research. Instead, it offers the reader different explications and examples on the basis of which one can construct a specific means of reading texts in the style of conceptual history. This material can be interpreted and applied in different ways. It provides information regarding conceptual history from slightly different perspectives, to which a reader may connect his or her own studies in a personal manner.

This book succeeds in the difficult task of remaining perspectivistic by simultaneously conserving the plurality of the research field – regardless whether this figuration is a conscious or haphazard solution. Contributing to this is the presentation of several articles which illuminate various well-selected sides of conceptual history by different authors and from different perspectives in a single volume. Such a figuration is suitable for becoming familiar with the point of conceptual history; it does not attempt to sustain the illusion of an objective truth regarding conceptual history itself.

Some contributors, however, seem to try desperately to transcend conceptual history's perspectivism. Why not instead be openly perspectivistic by attempting to explicate one's own viewpoint as thoroughly and in as much detail as possible, in order, for example, to increase its consciousness?

The actual nature of a textbook also poses a risk to the book. Namely, the risk of a reader's viewing conceptual history as a readily existing method or collection of methodological instruments to be applied as such to any material, without carefully considering how it could be useful in the specific context of one's own study. The risk is to do research without problematising conceptual history as a method. It is both a strength and a weakness of the book that it makes conceptual history in a sense so easily accessible. The danger of people wanting to get off too easily is always lurking. However, this is not a shortcoming of the book itself, but rather is dependent on the attitude readers take towards the book, and how they read and apply it.

In fact, more or less for the same reasons that the book is a textbook, it is also something else. Namely, it is perhaps too laden to be a textbook. It contains such a broad range of details and more general views that it is impossible to absorb in a quick reading, as is typically the case with textbooks. However, perhaps this kind of figuration could become a new variant within the genre of textbooks. At least anthologies of this kind do not succeed in watering down most of the interesting details and aspects by telling overly abbreviated and generalised stories, which run the risk of saying nothing at all – or at least nothing new or interesting. As a wide ranging collection of multiple details and ideas, the book is not a textbook to be imitated, rather it is intended to be applied following one's own thinking and according to one's own research problems. If regarded as an effort in reforming the tradition of writing textbooks, the book is unconditionally valuable regardless of what the results of a future reformation might be. In a sense, the publication of this book can be seen as a catalyst of such a reformation.

Connected to the role of the book as a kind of a textbook, it is not surprising that its title is exceedingly flat and “realistic”. It describes the theme of the book on a general level, although it fails to say anything special. There is no brilliant perception in it. In a way, however, the title is also well chosen for this particular book. The book itself is a bit flat, although it reveals quite a lot about conceptual history. However, the book primarily includes ideas that have already been presented elsewhere. It attempts to present conceptual history in a way which is overly un-anachronistic as such, and fails to think its problematics through in a personal manner. For example, it takes too seriously the thesis of opposing anachronism, which it propagates. On the level of substance, it fails to contribute much of anything new to conceptual history, although it does include plenty of material through which a sensitive reader can detect somewhat strange interpretations, or which is possible to use as a foundation for elaborating something personal.

There is a certain sense of “Dutchness” which is inwritten in the book. In the Introduction, the importance of the specific Dutch perspective of this kind of collective work on conceptual history is emphasised. The Dutch are said to have been able to participate in different European modes of thought as a result of the Netherlands'

location in the heart of Europe, directly in the cross-fire of the interaction between various ideas. This special opportunity that has been available to the Dutch is explained as their strength, it has made it possible for them to participate in and understand different modes of thought. In other words, they have been “natural” experts of conceptual history.

However, much the same could also be said about Finland, for example, or about any given country on its own special terms. Because of its being partly separated from but also near continental Europe, which is in a sense one of the centres of western culture, it is possible for Finns to see longer than others by utilising their specific position as both outsiders and insiders in a particular manner. In fact, an attempt at legitimising the special role of the Dutch in publishing such an anthology of conceptual history would be rather insignificant. Namely, the risk of overly self-contented naturalisation lurks near. As such, the book is valuable regardless of such things as the authors’ national context and whether or not the context provides any specific or quasi-natural motivation for creating such a book.

Shortcomings and New Possibilities

The book leaves untouched a number of main problems that are currently connected to the conceptual history style of reading, such as the problem of anachronism, but also, for example, the relationship between concepts and events. This becomes especially problematic when related to the ways how main questions for studies of conceptual history are posed in this book. For example, Hans Erich Bödeker expresses the need of clarifying the relationship between a concept and its meaning and a word and a concept. According to Bödeker, “As long as the relationship between concept and meaning is not clarified, the historiographic *Begriffsgeschichte* – in the sense of a history of consciousness – is constantly in danger of remaining merely a history of ideas. Are concepts, as meanings of expressions, language-immanent phenomena? In other words, does a word refer to something extra-linguistic by the mere fact that it expresses a concept, or not until it becomes the term (*Bezeichnung*) for manifesta-

tions included within the concept? Do we assume concrete or abstract entities behind the meanings of an expression?...The methodology of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* leaves the concept of meaning generally undefined.” (p. 57) Bodeker concludes his article by stressing this worry: “A more detailed analysis of these relations, however, still needs to be conducted.” (p. 64)

In a sense this relationship is problematic for conceptual history as long as conceptual historians regard it as such. But if the researchers could somehow bury the problem and give up on emphasising it, as opposed to further intensifying it by referring to these aspects as such central questions, the solution to which could somehow potentially solve the problems of the studies of conceptual history, these aspects might regain more realistic proportions and be simplified into a question of adopting a conceptual historian’s attitude in relation to these matters as well.

In fact I do not understand why some conceptual historians so desperately want to solve these kinds of questions. Could it not simply be that there is no single relationship between a concept and its meaning or a concept and a word, but the two are intertwined so that they effect each other and are in this sense inseparable? The relationship may be different within different contexts and for different speakers – just as concepts themselves are ambiguous and change in the sense of being understood differently in different times, contexts and by different speakers. The relationship between concepts and meanings or words is not a unitary one that can be solved once and for all. Instead, it varies according to different situations. In fact, I regard these to a large extent rather as un-problems than problems.

A word is not always something unchangeable, something that has no history, but what a word is may also change from one context to another within certain, also changing limits. A word is not so different from and not only different from a concept, although it is still useful to have different concepts for a word and for a concept, and to make some distinctions between them. This helps to specify and situate some of their differences and similarities. However, what is important is the attitude of conceptual historians towards this classification or categorisation between words and concepts. If it is regarded as a ‘black-and-white’ one, so that things can be divided according to it exhaustibly and without exception, then it is a danger-

ous category. But if it is taken more as an instrument whose relationship to “reality” is relative and a bit indefinite, and with the help of which one is able to articulate something about something, then it is a useful tool which helps people to more consciously understand similarities and differences. If it is taken as a readily existing model or a grid, whose suitability to a given situation is not problematised, then it is unjust to the lively and changing character of reality that is to the very basic starting point of conceptual history. For these reasons, the attempt to clarify the relationship between a concept and a word should not be the task of a conceptual historian – at least not to any great degree. The danger of closed definitions is always lurking.

For example, both in his article here and in his other publications, Koselleck provides slightly different interpretations of concepts and words, such as concepts being words with specific historical meanings and also some others. This lack of a single definition is a wise strategy for approaching the “problem”, in that it pushes it aside in order to be able to do substantive research.

Similarly, a concept and a meaning can simultaneously be separated and not separated. Neither of them is unambiguous – and this is exactly the subject matter of conceptual history research. For this reason, I do not understand the worry expressed, for example, by Bödeker about the clarification of the relationship between a concept and its meaning. Such a clarification could potentially destroy research in the conceptual history tradition as we know it. And as a tradition concentrating on the changing character of human reality, it still has a lot to give although it is unclear to which extent it is meaningful to aim at articulating what was intended by someone within a particular context. A better solution is to tell what is possible to interpret from a text in relation to its contextual background, what was possible to thematize in a specific situation, and in what sense that what was said can be regarded meaningful.

In fact, stories about peoples actions in relation to other people and events, and about their speaking in different contexts may be told indefinitely. People are quite good at connecting things and finding links between things which at a first glance may look incomprehensible in relation to one another. If a person succeeds in finding an explicatory factor which makes things that initially appeared im-

possible to unite coincide with one another, it is a typically human way of thinking to begin to believe that these things really belong together. And after making this one linkage, people easily begin to explain all or at least many events they encounter according to this great theoretical invention of theirs, however strange it may look to explain a single event according to this theory – and in fact in many cases, the more enthusiastic the explanation, the odder the linkage may seem.

Concepts and Events

A third “problem” of conceptual history, namely the relationship between concepts and events, is in many respects reminiscent of the two others. There may be no single relationship between concepts and events to be caught by a given clarification. Rather, they too are intertwined.

For example, some years ago people in Finland quite commonly referred to a banking crisis. However, in a metaphysical sense, a banking crisis did not exist as such. Instead, the concept of a banking crisis and the words chosen to characterise the events already shaped the understanding of the events that were taking place. To refer to these events as a crisis assigned a different tone to them than, for example, referring to the reorganisation of banks would have. Of course, major changes occurred within the Finnish banking system, some banks were forced to close, some merged with one another, and a number of people were fired from their jobs. However, the choice of crisis related terminology gave an alarming tone to these events. For example, the events were not regarded as presenting an opportunity for something new, or a promise of a better or at least different future, but rather as something to be feared and fiercely opposed. In fact, even the connection between these events was also to a certain degree produced by the terminology used, names given and so forth. The discourse about the crisis partially produced the understanding of the situation as a crisis, and other concepts would have provided different interpretations of the events, which in turn would have altered people’s reactions to the events as well as the events themselves. Concepts and events are intertwined, as are con-

cepts, words and meanings; they are all entangled. Yet there are still points in making these distinctions, as long as one understands and keeps in mind their relative nature.

To a certain degree, conceptual historians admit and try to take seriously the thing that words and events intertwine inseparably. In conceptual history, stories about events as well as language or the terminology used have an effect on what human beings think about events, and furthermore, what these events “are” for them. In turn, these events affect the language used. When done insightfully, the conceptual history style of reading has succeeded in opening this mesh a bit. However, in the future this admission could be made more consciously among conceptual historians by abandoning the aim of over-clarifying this relationship.

It is difficult to comprehend why many conceptual historians go to such great lengths to try to solve the problematic relationship between these basic figures of conceptual history, or at least do not cease to stress the importance of this problem for conceptual history. A better solution would be to concentrate on doing specific studies in order to tell detailed stories about past events and their different significance for different people, and about conflicts that result from people’s different understandings, and ways of evaluating and seeing things in relation to specific contexts. More “fundamental” questions could be left in peace more than nowadays. A much broader range of results could be acquired through this strategy than by obstinately attempting to solve something inherently unsolvable. Fighting against windmills is quite hopeless.

Instead of finishing telling stories about the past or different people, some elements in the orientation of conceptual history could be made more conscious and thus turned more as strengths than as weaknesses. Namely, conceptual history’s orientation makes sensitive to different assumptions, tones, appreciations, condemnations and the like, which are typical of human language (p. 7). The conceptual history style of reading helps us to see a given situation from the viewpoint of differences. Thus, it helps us to thematise a most human way of being: that of personally interpreting whatever situation, whatever symbols. One never knows what another person is actually referring to when using a particular word, concept or other symbol.

What I have said points to an understanding of linguistic categories more as relative instruments than as a basis or foundation on which one can build, for example, values or a world view. Most things cannot be categorised as inherently true or false. Rather, what particular features are emphasised and the way in which these features are interpreted is dependent upon the viewer, viewpoint and context. Most things may be both true and false, because they have different sides, which people understand and stress differently. Thus, the categorisation of true and false may rather be used as an instrument, than as an Ockhamian razor which determines which things belong to what group. The groups are not all that separate from one another, although the division into parties may still be useful and interesting. It is not something that should be completely done away with, but is something which should be relativised from its currently over-emphasised position. The “model” sketched here is of course more an antimodel, than a model in the sense of a systematic world-explanation. Its aim is not to be taken too literally.

Rather than agreeing with the thesis that conceptual history would remain too close to the history of ideas as long as the relationship between a concept and its meanings were not somehow clarified, I claim quite the opposite: if the relationship were to be solved, in a sense conceptual history would begin to fall into the same category as, for example, the history of ideas. In any case, it would lose its particularity. This clarification would eliminate the tension of variation that is typical of conceptual history, that is somehow part of its originality. As long as conceptual history also in this respect succeeds in taking seriously its own thesis of not searching for clear-cut definitions or clarifications in order to highlight alterations, it may sustain itself as a perspectivistic research tradition that is concerned with the dimension of change in the human condition. If it were to fall into the trap of clarification, it may be lost or at least changed into something else.

The book does contain possibilities for slightly renewing current forms of conceptual history. This revision could occur by making conceptual history’s operations and attitudes towards itself and its main questions more explicit. However, all in all, the book fails to do this. It does not take the opportunity that it opens, it does not utilise the resources at hand by regarding them from a slightly differ-

ent viewpoint than has been done so far. This problem becomes clear especially in the epilogue written by Martin van Gelderen. Van Gelderen speaks about “a labyrinth of questions about the relationship between language and material reality” (p. 228) and “about the interrelationship between concept and political language” (p. 228). He refers to these problematics as “at times verging on the chicken-egg banality”(p. 228), but then he continues by stating that this is “a recurrent theme”(p. 228) in conceptual history. The importance of these problematics currently holds true, although its problematic nature is derivative of precisely this kind of over-emphasis of problematics. Neither van Gelderen nor any of the other authors explicitly formulate the matter in a way in which, although the relationship is possibly quite simple, on a more detailed level these questions would be impossible to solve because of their multiple labyrinth like nature. The clue of this labyrinth could be that there is no clue.

After all, the book is a courageous attempt to present a wide research tradition by providing examples of it from an openly chosen and conscious perspective. This lively characteristic of the book is both its strength and its weakness. Its weakness in the sense that it also includes some shortcomings, and strength in the sense that it is a unique publication worth being noted and used by any scholar interested in history, political science, linguistics and other related fields. The illustration of conceptual history drawn in this book is a work of art in the sense that it includes edges that are not too rounded off. As such, the book offers a unique kaleidoscope, which has significant aesthetic value. It is beautiful as a piece of art, in spite of and because of its shortcomings, although not in the sense of faultless perfection. It leaves the field of conceptual history open to be analysed by others with and without the help of what has been said in this book and also by exceeding, passing or falling short of it.