Towards a Philosophy of the History of Thought?*

Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen
University of Leiden
j.kuukkanen@phil.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract

There are a large number of disciplines that are interested in the theoretical aspects of the history of thought. Their perspectives and subjects may vary, but fundamentally they have a common research interest: the history of human thinking and its products. Despite this, they are studied in relative isolation. I argue that having different subjects as specific objects of research, such as political or scientific thinking, is not a valid justification for the separation. I propose the formation of a new integrated field of study, the *philosophy of the history of thought.* Its most fundamental questions can be taken to be: 1) What is the basic theoretical unit in the history of thought? 2) How does change take place and how can it be described? 3) What kind of reasons are there for change? Why is there a change in a particular case? The existing confusions around the commitments and basic vocabulary used in contemporary historiography makes the establishment of this field important. Recognizing that there is such a discipline is necessary in order to enable concentration on the fundamental theoretical issues. It is likely that progress on theoretical questions and better awareness of the implicit commitments would have a positive impact on historical practice.

Keywords

the history of thought, the history of ideas, intellectual history, Begriffsgeschichte, interdisciplinarity, philosophy

Introduction

Some seventy years ago Arthur Lovejoy called for a new interdisciplinary study of history, the history of ideas. He noted that ideas and their role in human affairs are studied in relative isolation in at least twelve different fields. Lovejoy emphasized the urgency and indispensability of a closer and wider liaison between different disciplines.[1] In parallel to Lovejoy, I suggest that there is a need for a new discipline that would foster closer cooperation between several fields which fundamentally address the same issues. This discipline may be called the *philosophy of the history of thought*.

My point is not that philosophical considerations on the history of thought do not exist. On the contrary, those kinds of ruminations can be found in several disciplines, and moreover, it is obvious that the underlying questions are the same although specific emphases or perspectives may vary. But just as Lovejoy stressed the need for a unifying approach, I argue that the existing discussion is not interdisciplinary enough, which has hindered a development of a clearer understanding of the history of thought and a formulation of an appropriate methodology for it.

I should note that the purpose of this paper is to open and motivate discussion. It offers an argument in favour of establishing the *philosophy of the history of thought* as a discipline and makes some preliminary suggestions as to the kinds of problems it might address. However, this paper does not try to give any specific answers to any of the fundamental issues in the proposed field. There are three aspects to take into account, with which I deal in turn. Firstly, it is clear that there are a number of traditions that address the similar questions, but are conducted in relative separation from one another only because they focus on the history of different subjects. Secondly, the coexistence of a large number of different perspectives has resulted in confusion around the basic terminology and scholarly commitments, which is bound to merely create greater problems for attempts to understand the works produced by scholars in different areas. This gives an incentive to draft a set of the *most fundamental* questions in the history of thought. Finally, any greater and more conscious focus on the fundamentals is in any case bound to improve understanding of the whole field and sharpen historical practice as well.

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[1] A. Lovejoy, "The Historiography of Ideas" in A. Lovejoy (ed.), *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1948), 1–13.

1. Lack of Interdisciplinarity

It is possible to quickly find many traditions of history writing that might be placed under the heading 'history of thought'. A non-exhaustive list includes the history of ideas stemming from Lovejoy, Cambridge intellectual history focused around Skinner's and Pocock's theories, German *Begriffsgeschichte* with its many national variations, the traditional history of philosophy, part of the history of science, the meaning-change debate initiated by Kuhn and Feyerabend in the philosophy of science, the cognitive history and philosophy of science (cognitive HPS), part of Swedish *Idé- och lärdomshistoria* and the Peacocke-Diez program for the individuation of scientific concepts. In addition, there is much theoretical and philosophical discussion of concepts in philosophy and cognitive science that may be relevant to historical inquiry, as Diez's application of Peacocke's theories and cognitive HPS have attempted to show. These traditions provide the main materials for our discussion. But this is not, of course, to say that there might not be other relevant schools.

There appear to be clear dividing lines across which discussion and co-operation seems minimal. Perhaps it is fair to say that Lovejoy's history of ideas is nearly universally known and also often discussed by the representatives of these disciplines. It is not uncommon that Lovejoy's project provides a starting point from which many of them proceed. After this, awareness of other approaches and communication between different alternatives seems much sparser. Firstly, Melvin Richter's articles in the 1980s and early 1990s, and his book *The History of Political and Social Concepts* can be credited with bringing *Begriffsgeschichte* and Cambridge intellectual history into a dialogue.[2] Prior to this there was, according to Skinner, little discussion between them. In a recent collection of his methodological articles, Skinner corrected the record because some observers had understood that his early articles were aimed at discrediting Reinhart Koselleck's project of *Begriffsgeschichte*. Skinner writes, "It is no doubt deplorable, but it is nevertheless a fact that when in the late 1960s and 1970s I wrote the essays

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[2] M. Richter, "Begriffsgeschichte and the History of Ideas", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), 247–263; M. Richter, "Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner, and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*", *History and Theory*, 29 (1990), 38–70; M. Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, *1995*).

of which I have been speaking, I had no knowledge of Koselleck's research program".[3]

However, neither of these traditions seems to show interest in what has been done in philosophy in the last decade or two. This is surprising, because *Begriffsgeschichte* takes concepts as its main theoretical tool, just as is done in many approaches in philosophy. For example, Nancy Nersessian, a representative of cognitive HPS, has criticized the traditional attempts to define concepts in philosophy. She argues that a concept defined by necessary and sufficient conditions is not able to give an account of concepts in the context of history writing, because successive concepts cannot be perceived as cumulative such that they all would satisfy the same description. She argues that a concept defined by necessary and sufficient conditions has to be replaced by the family resemblance concept.[4]

In addition, Christopher Peacocke has formulated a theory of concepts in his *A Study of Concepts*[5] which has gained much prominence in philosophy. Jose A. Diez has recently developed a theory for the individuation of scientific concepts which relies on Peacocke's idea of possession conditions.[6] Furthermore, some historians of philosophy have attempted to improve our understanding of theoretical notions in the history of the thought. Simo Knuuttila has argued that Skinner's maxim not to use language or categories alien to people of the past is deeply problematic advice and may actually lead to absurd results. Knuuttila wonders how we could study Plato's concept of justice without having any idea of what justice might be. He suggests that studies of justice are usually initiated by a preliminary conception of justice, which is used to identify the texts in which Plato addresses questions related to what might be called justice.[7]

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[3] Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, Vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 177.

[4] See N. Nersessian, "Faraday's Field Concept" in D. Gooding and F. A. J. L. James (eds.), *Faraday Rediscovered: Essays on the Life and Work of Michael Faraday*, 1791–1867 (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1985), 174–188; N. Nersessian, "How Do Scientists Think?" in R. N. Giere (ed.), *Capturing the Dynamics of Conceptual Change* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 3–45; N. Nersessian, "Conceptual Change" in W. Bechtel and G. Graham (eds.), *A Companion to Cognitive* Science (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 155–166.

[5] C. Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

[6] J. A. Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", *Synthese*, 130 (2002), 13–48.

[7] S. Knuuttila, "Hintikka's View of the History of Philosophy" in R. E. Auxer and L. E.

There is also a recent attempt to outline a philosophy for the history of ideas: Mark Bevir's *The Logic of the History of Ideas*. The topic of the book is 'reasoning', more specifically the forms of reasoning historians of ideas should use in order to "promote a particular way of doing the history of ideas".[8] This normative program, like that of Nersessian, has been influenced by the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. In Bevir's view, philosophers study the grammar of our concepts, which set the limit of what can be meaningfully said.[9] Bevir's book is many-sided in addressing such questions as what is the object of study, appropriate form of justification and explanation, and objectivity in the history of ideas. In some senses, its scope appears to be wider than the history of thought. According to Bevir, his "logic provides us … with the basis of a general logic of history covering not only ideas or beliefs, but also actions, institutions and the like".[10] Nevertheless, the book makes the interesting suggestion that the object of study in the history of ideas is *meaning* and that "to study the history of ideas is to study meaning … from a historical perspective".[11] However, to simply talk about 'meanings' as objects of study without any specifications would be highly ambiguous, rendering the statement problematically uninformative.[12] Bevir recognizes this and makes it clear that the meaning that concerns the historian of ideas is what he calls 'hermeneutic meaning'.[13] This would certainly be at the heart of the philosophy of the history of thought.

One might use Nersessian's concern as an indication of the state of affairs in the history of science. Nersessian is concerned about the situation in which there is no explicit guidance at the theoretical level about how to individuate and locate concepts in the history of science. What is missing, according to Nersessian, is an explicit metatheoretical notion of what

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Hahn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Jaakko Hintikka* (Chicago, Ill: Open Court, 2006), 96–97. See also J. Hintikka, "Reply to Simo Knuuttila" in R. E. Auxer and L. E. Hahn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Jaakko Hintikka* (Chicago, Ill: Open Court, 2006), 106–113.

[8] M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 318.

[9] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 19–20.

[10] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 316.

[11] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 1.

[12] See Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 32. For example, 'meaning' could be based on various theories of meaning in philosophy, or it could be understood as meaningfulness for someone, or general significance of something in a society, etc.

[13] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 27, 52–53.

constitutes the meaning of a scientific concept; she argues that this metatheoretical question is "at the core of the historical method".[14]

Finally, discussions on changes in meaning of terms in the history of science have often been ignored in debates on conceptual change. One reason is the 'metaphysical turn' in philosophy which has brought theories of reference and natural kinds in focus, after Saul Kripke's and Hilary Putnam's famous theories in the 1970s. As Diez aptly remarked, "[w]ithin post-Kuhnian philosophy of science much effort has been devoted to issues related to conceptual change, such as incommensurability, scientific progress and realism, but mostly in terms of reference, without a fine-grained theory of scientific concepts/senses".[15] However, some representatives of cognitive HPS have used the later Kuhn's ideas on meaning change for the development of a theory of conceptual change.[16]

In general, the most fundamental dividing line seems to be between those disciplines that study the history of humanities (including general intellectual culture) and those that study the history or philosophy of the natural sciences. As mentioned earlier, there is on the one hand much discussion between representatives of *Begriffsgeschichte* and Cambridge intellectual history. Often Lovejoy's history of ideas is in the background as a tradition that has laid the framework for much of the modern discussion on the theme. Bevir's project seems to criticise and then build on the theoretical work of these traditions (although it also takes ingredients from many recent debates in analytic philosophy). On the other hand, there is a parallel but separate discussion which takes an interest in the history of science, such as the meaning-change debate in the philosophy of science, cognitive HPS and the Peacocke-Diez program for the individuation of scientific concepts. One might think that these discourses are relevant to each other. The latter try to take the contextual features into account in determination of concepts and ideas, just as the critics of the history of

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[14] Nersessian, "How Do Scientists Think?", 37

[15] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 13.

[16] See H. Andersen, P. Barker and X. Chen, "Kuhn's Mature Philosophy of Science and Cognitive Psychology", *Philosophical Psychology*, 9 (1996), 347–363; H. Andersen and N. Nersessian, "Nomic Concepts, Frames, and Conceptual Change", *Philosophy of Science*, 67 (2000), 224–241; P. Barker, X. Chen and H. Andersen, "Kuhn on Concept and Categorisation" in T. Nickles (ed.), *Thomas Kuhn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 212–245; N. Nersessian, "Kuhn, Conceptual Change, and Cognitive Science" in T. Nickles (ed.), *Thomas Kuhn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 178–212.

ideas have wished for. And those primarily interested in the history of science would probably benefit from a better awareness of the rather different conclusions reached by the former group; that is, the emphasis on linguistic elements and particularism in history. Then, of course, there could be more interaction inside these groups as well. For example, cognitive HPS and the Peacocke-Diez program do not seem to interact much with each other either. One reason is likely to be the fact that cognitive HPS understands concepts as socio-psychological notions, which are abhorred by the latter.[17] Nevertheless, they both are interested in exactly the same question: how to define and individuate concepts in the history of science.

My argument is that different subject matters as objects of study in the alternative sub-disciplinary histories of thought is not a justification for the separation of theoretical discussions. Although their focus is on different subjects, it is reasonable to assume that all these schools share a common interest in the history of human *thought* and its products. In some formulations, Swedish *Ide- och lärdomshistoria* comes close to this conclusion. (Already the name of this discipline conveys the message that the gap between the studies of human and natural world is bridgeable; it could be translated as 'intellectual history and the history of science'.) According to Tore Frängsmyr, the central interest of this subject is the development of world-view. "The shared intellectual perspective implies that one is interested in the world-view at large, how human being has understood his situation in relation to God, Nature and Human being. Often this has been carried out through scientific theories, but as often – specifically in earlier periods – one has employed different religious or philosophical explanations".[18]

Although one does not have to accept specific theories of cognitive science or the philosophical underpinnings implied by Nersessian's theories, she has formulated the issue aptly. Nersessian says that seeing theorizing on what Faraday's 'field' concept was, or whether Galileo's thinking is in some conceptual relation to Newton's 'inertia' should be seen as "a part of the wider representational problem [which] opens a new avenue for their

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[17] See Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 3, 13; Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 23–24.

[18] T. Frängsmyr, "Vetenskap och idéer – ett ämne och dess förgreningar" in N. Andersson and H. Björk (eds.), *Vad är Idéhistoria? Perspektiv på ämnets identitet under sextio år* (Stockholm: Brutus Östling Bokförlag Symposium, 2000), 321–322.

resolution".[19] Further, Diez notes that to talk about 'meanings' is ambiguous. They can be references, which in turn may be understood as intensional properties or extensional sets. Both these are problematic for different reasons, if we try to individuate concepts in history. Sets do not help, because we need something intensional. And because the account has to be able to explicate the content of non-existing-properties, such as 'phlogiston' or 'caloric', properties are not useful. Diez is therefore looking for an intensional entity, "ways of thinking", whose existence is guaranteed whenever one thinks.[20] Also Bevir has reasonably suggested that we adopt a "unified analysis of thought", which includes all of the following: common sense, scientific thinking and metaphysical speculation. One is bound to agree with him when he writes that "[a]ll thinking aims at knowledge of the world as we experience it... Thinking is not a special skill exercised by special people, or on special topics, or in special conditions. It is something we all do whenever we reflect on anything, no matter how transitory our attention, and no matter how trivial the topic".[21] There thus is a common object of interest underlying all these orientations: human thinking and its products.

This issue is not affected even if the explanations of the emergence and change of these products are different. For example, depending on one's other philosophical commitments, one might want to refer to different factors in explaining the emergence of political and natural scientific ideas. They are some kinds of representations of human minds in any case. Naturally, some products of thinking may be better justified than others, but this is a separate issue and does not change the fact that they all are outcomes of human intellectual endeavours, whatever they specifically turn out to be. For these reasons, the relative isolation of theoretical discussions is a deplorable and contingent state of affairs without any deeper justification.

2. Current State of Affairs in the History of Thought

We may begin our characterization of alternative perspectives by employing a negative depiction, i.e. by saying what the *philosophy of the history of*

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[19] Nersessian, "How Do Scientists Think?", 37.

[20] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 20.

[21] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 251.

thought is *not* about. Nancy Nersessian emphasizes in her cognitive program for conceptual history that "'having' a concept does not require that we believe that representation to be true of anything".[22] Further, Kuhn contrasted philosophers and scientists to historians. In respect of their understandings of past science, the former are primarily concerned with what is right and wrong, and for this reason, tend to study historical texts in relation to what is known now, picking out the true and the false. According to Kuhn, the latter try simply to understand why a particular person or persons thought as they did.[23] In agreement with these characterizations, we may say that the primary aim in the history of thought is not to spell out what beliefs were true or what concepts, ideas etc. were correct representations of the world. Rather, it is to describe and explain intellectual historical processes themselves without concern with the veracity of the concepts, theories and beliefs that are being described.

More specifically, when we are concerned with the conceptual representations or beliefs that are associated with certain linguistic expressions, we are not preoccupied with the question whether those linguistic expressions refer anywhere in the world. In other words, our concern is not with theories of reference. This is worth pointing out, because the discussion on how to determine reference is a related but separate issue. The debate on meaning change in the philosophy of science, initiated by Kuhn and Feyerabend in the 1960s, proves that it has sometimes been difficult to make the distinction between these two interests. Although Kuhn can be taken to have described how the thinking of past scientists changed by his notions of 'meaning' and 'meaning change', often the significance of this debate has been solely reduced to a discussion on what the best theory to fix references of scientific terms is, so that meaning variance can be eliminated. All in all, our focus is primarily and pointedly on thinking and its products in history.

There are plenty of suggestions for what the main focus of investigation in the history of thought should be. We can find two main categories from this plurality: non-linguistic entities and linguistic entities. In the first group, there are such entities as Platonic ideas, Fregean concepts and propositions, concepts as mental, concepts as prototypes and concepts as

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[22] Nersessian, "Faraday's Field Concept", 177.
[23] T. Kuhn, *The Road since Structure*, ed. J. Conant and J. Haugeland (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 315.

sociological. There are also differences with regard to how the basic notion is identified. Is it an atomistic or a complex entity composed of several components? If it is complex, can it be recognized by necessary and sufficient conditions or by mutual family resemblances, for example? The other category may be said to include such notions as term (or word), sentence and text. Further, Bevir writes that all "contextualists", such as Foucault and J. G. A. Pocock, commit to a view that historical meanings derive from the linguistic structures in society.[24]

As already noted above, the troubling news is that there is no explicit guidance on what to choose in different situations. Worse yet, there appears to be some confusion about how certain notions are understood, and there are certainly different ways to employ the same notions. Let Skinner serve as our example here. Firstly, Skinner among many other practitioners in intellectual history rejects categorically Lovejoy's unchangeable unit-ideas. Notice Daniel Wilson's conclusion in his study of the discussion on Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being*, fifty years after its publication. Wilson states that "the notion of the unit-idea as an atomistic element capable of analysis analogous to that performed in chemistry has been almost uniformly rejected or substantially modified".[25] Nevertheless, Skinner argues that "if we wish to understand a given idea… we cannot simply concentrate, á la Lovejoy, on studying the forms of words involved. For the words denoting the idea may be used… with varying and quite incompatible intentions". Skinner concludes that "to write the history of an idea… is obviously to write, in effect, the history of a sentence".[26] Secondly, Skinner however appears to employ concepts as (non-linguistic) classifiers of thought products. For instance, Skinner contends, "I have already considered… the concept of *virtù* as employed by Machiavelli and his contemporaries".[27] Soon after this he writes, "Anglophone historians have taken the task of understanding the concept of *virtù*…" This conveys the thought that there is something like a concept (of *virtù*), which can be "employed" or understood in different ways; that there is something general shared by several

[24] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 35.

[25] D. Wilson, "Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* after Fifty Years", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), 204.

[26] Q. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 36–38.

[27] Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", 48.

people. The inevitable question is what this concept is: how can it be defined and what does it mean to apply it (the same concept?) differently? Further, how does Skinner understand 'concept' in general here? If 'concept' means here 'term' or 'word' (being faithful to his earlier methodological commitments), then all we can say is that his usage of 'concept' is unusual. Given that Skinner is aware of the difference between a linguistic entity (term or word) and a non-linguistic entity (concept or idea) the obscurity of these proclamations is all the more surprising.[28] Thirdly, later in his career, he seems to accept histories of concepts, but 'concept' is taken as a linguistic entity. It is necessary to note that in philosophy and cognitive science, a concept is typically understood as a non-linguistic entity – something which a term or word denotes. In fact, Skinner makes a surprising claim that the disappearance of such vocabulary in contemporary English as, *gentlemanly, cad, bounder and gentlemanliness*, "provide the best evidence in favour of the claim that concepts have a history". However, this appears to be entirely consistent with his earlier linguistic position, once one sees how the sentence continues, "or rather, that the terms we use to express our concepts have a history".[29]

Further, according to Melvin Richter, the choice of concepts as units of analysis in the history of thought distinguishes *Begriffsgeschichte* from alternative similar methods focusing on other topics. It makes a reasonable distinction between concepts and words. However, it is disappointing that it regards any more detailed definition of concepts as being unimportant and takes the notion to be useful exactly because of its ambiguity. It does not improve the situation that sometimes the notions of 'term' and 'concept' appear to be mixed in the usage. For example, Richter talks at times of the "meanings of concepts" without saying how they differ from the "meanings of terms", which might be taken to be concepts.[30] Further, in general discourse, it is quite common to mix or use freely such notions as 'term' and 'concept', which is only bound to cause problems and create ambiguities for the readers.

As mentioned above, Bevir claimed that 'hermeneutic meaning' is the meaning that concerns historians. He is careful to distinguish hermeneutic meaning from semantic meaning, which deals with truth conditions, and

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[28] See Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 159.

[29] Skinner, *Visions of Politics,* 180.

[30] Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts*, 4, 9, 21.

from linguistic meaning, which deals with conventional usages. Bevir writes that "the hermeneutic meaning of an *utterance* derives from the intentions of the author making it".[31] His hermeneutical intentionalism examines the ideas conveyed by a particular utterance and boils downs to the following kinds of questions: "What did an author mean when he said such and such?"[32]

Bevir is probably correct that the reliance on semantic or linguistic meaning would be very problematic in history. What is nevertheless striking here is that hermeneutic meaning and its closest alternatives are all meanings of linguistic items. In other words, Bevir singles out a linguistic object, an utterance, as the most fundamental object of study without much considering other possibilities (but see below). Although Bevir differs in many respects from Skinner and Pocock, he shares their preoccupation with linguistic objects.

Bevir is adamant that the focus on specific utterances is the only reasonable option in the history of ideas. He writes that "[a]ny theory that reduces hermeneutic meanings to a type of meaning beyond particular utterances confronts insurmountable difficulties in accounting for linguistic and conceptual change. A meaning lying outside of a particular utterance must be a hypostatization merely by virtue of its abstract nature". Bevir further claims that such an abstract meaning must be some kind of ideal type which must be static and "remain forever the same". The strongest claim comes after this explanation: "any theory reducing hermeneutic meanings to some other type of meaning cannot account for change".[33]

Perhaps Bevir is right about hermeneutic meanings. Perhaps they cannot be reduced to other kinds of meanings without rendering them useless in the context of the history of ideas. Also his idea that the history of ideas has to be able to make sense of change strikes one as being reasonable. But his claim that abstractness itself makes it impossible to account for a change in the history of ideas seems too categorical. Peacocke's notion of concept can (even in his own words) be said to be "abstract",[34] and a central claim of his theory is that a static conceptual core is actually needed for an account of conceptual change. He writes that "[d]escribing a case as one

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[31] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 27 (my emphasis); cf. 53, 57.

[32] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 37–38.

[33] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 48, 54–55.

[34] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 99.

of change, rather than as one of replacement, is correct only if there is something that persists through the change, and it is the concept in my sense that so persists".[35] Further, it has been argued that to make sense of conceptual change in history one has to postulate conventional (and abstract) concepts, which share the same conceptual core.[36] Whatever the final verdict will be on this, the debate at the moment is very much open.

Although Bevir may have shifted the burden of proof to his rivals in some questions, his philosophical singularism is not well-justified. It is not the case that "only hermeneutic meaning concern historians" or a commitment to any other meaning "requires one to deny that the relevant form of meaning has a historical existence".[37] The problem is that Bevir transforms his well-argued methodological preference to an ontological preference and takes it for granted. Linguistic items should certainly be objects of study in the history of thought. Maybe he is right that fundamentally only meanings of linguistic entities have a historical existence, but whether this is or is not the case clearly is a subject for ontological debate in the philosophy of the history of thought. For example, Diez has taken a view that there can be two different kind of intensional meanings. There is "meaning-as-sense" which is change-sensitive. For example, the meaning of 'mass' understood this way changed from Newton to Laplace. According to Diez, there is another "meaning-as-sense" which did not change in this case. Diez is concerned with this meaning and calls it 'concept'. "What matters is that we want to talk about the constituents of the kind of content shared by Newton and Laplace when both believed that mass is conservative, or shared by Stahl and Lavoisier when the former believed, and the latter denied, that combustible substances have phlogiston".[38]

It just may be the case that Platonic ideas exist. And if that is so, as an unfashionable and high-spirited Lovejoyian might argue, then they *have historical existence.* I am in agreement with Bevir that the old-fashioned Lovejoyian history of ideas results in a curious form of the history of thought. Bevir correctly demands that advocates of Platonic forms "must explain how a Platonic form can exist for some time and then wither. How can a

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[35] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 3.

[36] J. Kuukkanen, "Making Sense of Conceptual Change", *History and Theory*, 47 (2008), 351–372.

[37] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 52–53.

[38] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 20.

Platonic form be subject to historical process such as those of growth and decay".[39] But this is a sceptical methodological argument, which doubts whether a Platonic history of ideas is able make sense of change in intellectual history. In any case, theoretical difficulties do not prove non-existence. The crucial question is what kind of history we want to write and how justified the end result can be taken to be.

There does not seem to be anything wrong as such to base a history of thought on (non-linguistic) concepts. Gad Prudovsky asks suggestively in the title of his paper: "Can We Ascribe to Past Thinkers Concepts They Had No Linguistic Means to Express?"[40] Peacocke proposes, and is inclined to accept, the possibility that the nature of concepts and contents built up from them can be elucidated without reference to language.[41] A study focused on a history of concepts surely has to be conducted at least partially in practice via the linguistic forms corresponding to concepts. But even if one's primary focus is the linguistic objects, one hardly can make sense of the past without referring to (non-linguistic) concepts. As a matter of fact, also Bevir appears to grant a possibility of the history of ideas (literally), remarking that "when people make an utterance, they express ideas or beliefs, *and it is these ideas or beliefs that constitute the objects studied by historians of ideas*".[42] It may thus not be utterances, but ideas that fundamentally concern a historian. Further he identifies Lovejoy's unit ideas as traditions and says that historians might "choose to concentrate on a tradition."[43] And at the end of *The Logic of the History of Ideas* he says most revealingly that "historians of ideas . . . concern themselves exclusively with ideas. . . . They use relics from the past to devise narratives that relate various historical objects to one another".[44] One might be forgiven to think that historians of ideas may compose narratives of *ideas*, not only those of hermeneutical meanings.

Bevir somewhat surprisingly adds that it is an obvious but an uninteresting thing to say that historians concentrate on ideas. He nevertheless

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[39] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 61.

[40] G. Prudovsky, "Can we Ascribe to Past Thinkers Concepts They Had No Linguistic Means to Express?", *History and Theory*, 36 (1997), 15–31.

[41] See Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 118–119.

[42] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 142 (my emphasis).

[43] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 200.

[44] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 309.

reasonably demands that we need to know what we mean by an idea and how we should distinguish ideas from things such as actions and events. Bevir argues that to express an idea is to perform an action, and therefore, historians of ideas might study actions as expressions of ideas.[45] This is certainly a possibility and a fruitful perspective, but it should be pointed out that to concentrate on ideas is something other than to focus on their expressions. Any reasonable historian interested in ideas has to also study their expressions, but as a theoretical notion the former still is conceptually more fundamental; without ideas, there cannot be expressions of ideas, but without expressions of ideas, there still may be ideas. (Unless, of course, expressions of ideas are equated with ideas, which however requires a separate argument).

In other words, one can have purely propositional interest of knowledge in the history of thought, which may be said to be the main concern of both Peacocke's and Diez's projects. Grasping the content of Peacocke's concepts means knowing the condition for it to be true of false.[46] Diez's propositions refer to the content that constitute concepts, which "are the object of epistemic evaluation, which is the part of scientific activity we have in focus". His concepts are different if and only if they make some cognitive difference.[47] In other words, one may wish to know what was believed by a person X or in community C at the time t, not what X or C meant by an utterance U. One may thus be interested to know what was believed, or what was the propositional content of believed, no matter whether it was expressed by this or that utterance. Sentences and texts are an invaluable source to find out about the propositional content, but they do not have to be the ultimate object of study. Further, a historian may also want to study institutional context, other past beliefs, artifacts and so on, in order to find out what the propositional content was. It is conceivable, as Prudovsky alludes in the title of his article, that some concepts do not even have linguistic expressions.

Nancy Nersessian is one of those who have focused on the problem of how to define variable (non-linguistic) concepts in history. She has attempted to find an answer to the question, "When did Faraday have his field concept?" Nersessian notes that such a question is customarily seen as

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[45] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 139–140.

[46] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts,* 15–16, 51.

[47] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 20–21.

a historical issue, but a satisfactory answer requires philosophical consideration as well. That is, before we can answer the question of *when*, we must determine *what* Faraday's field concept was. According to Nersessian, this is something to which both historians and philosophers of science have given too little thought in their analyses of the formation and development of scientific concepts.

Nersessian argues that in order to say what a certain concept is, we need to be able to state the general criteria on which it is determined. She points out the difficult problems that arise if we do not have a clear answer to this question. Many historians attribute a field concept to both Faraday and Einstein even though their thinking and theories were very different. Did they then really "say" or "mean" the same thing by their field concepts?[48]

It turns out that it is actually problematic to choose *any* definition of the concept 'field'. If we adopt a modern field concept, then perhaps nobody before Einstein had a field concept, which does not seem to be historically fair. One of Nersessian's main requirements is "to do justice" to the historical data.[49] We may, on the other hand, allow that many scientists had a field concept, but then end up with the view that there actually are several field concepts. It is not clear why they all are called field concepts, and how they are related to one another. Nersessian also writes that it is possible to trace a pattern of descent for the concept 'field' from Faraday to Einstein. Yet Einstein's views are so different from the views of all his predecessors – Faraday, Maxwell, and Lorentz – that his cannot be an extension of any of theirs.[50] This seems to be a typical case in the history of science: we can find descendants for concepts without being able to show conceptual cumulation. According to Nersessian, this shows that we need an account of change in individual concepts that can accommodate continuous but uncumulative change.[51] While the traditional philosophical approach, writes Nersessian, has viewed conceptual change as static and ahistorical, we need a dynamic and historical analysis of it.[52] Her main argument is that a concept defined

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[48] Nersessian, "Faraday's Field Concept", 175; Nersessian, "How Do Scientists Think?", 8.

[49] N. Nersessian, "The Method to 'Meaning': A Reply to Leplin", *Philosophy of Science*, 58 (1991), 680.

[50] See Nersessian, "Conceptual Change", 160; N. Nersessian, *Faraday to Einstein: Constructing Meaning in Scientific Theories* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1984).

[51] Nersessian, "Conceptual Change", 161.

[52] Nersessian, "How Do Scientists Think?", 8.

by sufficient and necessary conditions, which thus have to apply to all cases, is not a viable view of 'concept' in historical research.

As mentioned earlier, Nersessian, as a representative of cognitive HPS, sees the problem of individuating concepts as part of the wider problem of representation. This problem has been extensively studied in cognitive psychology and cognitive HPS relies on its findings.[53] In particular, cognitive HPS adopts the prototype or probabilistic view of concepts, the general claim of which is that the representation of a concept is some sort of measure of the "central tendency" of the properties of its instances. This view implies that "the overlapping set of 'similarities' or 'resemblances' makes a concept into a unit, entitles us to call it *the* 'Y', and enables us to write its history".[54] It is, in other words, a family-resemblance account of concepts.

Nersessian claims that this suggestion fits well with analyses of the historical or "dynamic" dimension of meaning in scientific theories since "[i]t can allow for development, change and continuity in a way the 'classical' conception cannot". One consequence is that we can say that "there are a number of different concepts of electrical and magnetic action, each of which is a 'field' concept".[55] The idea that different instantiations of a historical concept are constantly transformed, and yet remain in a relation of similarity, brings the analogy of a changing and growing organism to mind.

The family-resemblance model thus says that no set of features has to be shared by all members of a conceptual category. While this principle can be used to accommodate the variable nature of historical concepts, it may result in a strange form of a history of *concept.* This is because the theory states that all successive concepts that resemble both the ones that immediately precede and the ones that immediately succeed them can be understood as instances of the same concept. The question is why we would call two distinct concepts the same if their conceptual contents share nothing in common? Why would we not count them as different concepts? Is the fact that entities may have the same name, be called by the same name, enough for conceptual sameness? Furthermore, we might trace connections between concepts for hundreds of years, perhaps by drafting a consecutive line of people who have pondered and modified the concepts of

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[53] Nersessian, "How Do Scientists Think?", 37.

[54] Nersessian, "Faraday's Field Concept", 181 (original emphasis).

[55] Nersessian, "Faraday's Field Concept", 180–181.

their predecessors.[56] But if the original concept has changed (has been replaced?) beyond recognition, would we feel inclined to call it and the last in line 'the same'?

One view is that conceptual classification actually requires that members of a master concept share at least part of their conceptual contents in common.[57] By contrast, Nersessian's suggestion may be said to be based on a genealogical or an evolutionary understanding of conceptual membership; it is not the content of the concept that determines categorization of concepts, but their common origin. According to this view, if concepts belong to the same developmental line, then they can be counted as the same even if they share nothing in their contents.

It also is worth remarking that it is not necessary to understand beliefs or concepts as psychological and that the dispute of the nature of beliefs or concepts is not necessary a question in philosophical psychology.[58] A good example of such a non-psychological attitude is Peacocke's theory of concepts. He wants to explicitly dissociate himself from all notions which are anthropocentric or psychological (such as concept as mental representation, central inessential beliefs or prototypes). Peacocke's disciple Diez is even more explicit about this. Even if his theory, by his own admission, has to take into account empirical results from historians and "psychologists of science", it is not "guilty of 'dangerous' socio-psychologism" or "suspicious of socio-psychologism, at least not in any bad sense".[59] Peacocke's "philosophical account of concept" is Fregean in spirit: "The concepts that concern us are at one level of Frege's senses, since they are individuated by considerations of cognitive significance".[60] Sometimes Peacocke describes his position as "Platonism without tears".[61]

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[56] This is suggested by Nersessian and earlier by Dudley Shapere, who talk about 'chains of reasoning' connecting consecutive ideas or concepts. See Nersessian, "The Method to 'Meaning': A Reply to Leplin"; Nersessian, *Faraday to Einstein: Constructing Meaning in Scientific Theories*; D. Shapere, "Reason, Reference and the Quest for Knowledge", *Philosophy of Science*, 49 (1982), 1–23; D. Shapere, "Reasons, Radical Change and Incommensurability in Science" in H. Sankey and P. Hoyningen-Huene (eds.), *Incommensurability and Related Matters* (Boston: Kluwer, 2001), 181–206.

[57] See Kuukkanen, "Making Sense of Conceptual Change". See also Peacocke's theory below.

[58] Cf. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 142, 182.

[59] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 23–24, 43 note 2.

[60] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 3–4, 9, 13–14.

[61] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 4, 101.

The central idea in Peacocke's theory of concepts is that concepts can be individuated by possession conditions. He maintains that "[t]here can be nothing more to the nature of a concept than is determined by a correct account of the capacity of a thinker who has mastered the concept to have propositional attitude to contents containing that concept (a correct account of 'grasping the concept')".[62] This means that a person who possesses a certain concept must find certain inferences "primitively compelling", which are thus inferences that do not require any further justification or explanation. For example, if a person possesses the concept of 'conjunction' (C), s/he has to find the transitions that are instances of the following forms primitively compelling:[63]

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p
q              p C q         p C q
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p C q          p             q
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It is interesting that Peacocke's theory is unashamedly Platonic, and yet its author insists that it can be used in description of the empirical world. Peacocke's "concepts are abstract", they have "no spatiotemporal locations" and they "do not participate in causal interactions". Nevertheless, these abstract objects "play a significant part in the description of the empirical mental states of thinkers".[64] It relies on Frege's basic intuition that the grasping the thought cannot be completely understood from a purely psychological standpoint. Peacocke's endorses a "simple account", according to which the explication of possession conditions is a concern for philosophers, but psychology is needed to explain why a thinker meets the concept possession condition. Furthermore, he calls his theory a "pure theory of concepts", which can be characterised by two features. "It does not attribute any particular concepts or attitudes involving them to any particular thinker. It is also pure in that it has a relatively a priori status".[65]

A scholar interested in the history of thought is bound to wonder at this point whether Peacocke's theory just is too pure to be applicable in the historical context. The idea of using possession conditions to identify

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[62] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 5.

[63] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 6, 107–108, 135.

[64] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 99.

[65] Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, 100, 177.

concepts is interesting, but it certainly is true that Peacock's *A Study of Concepts* focuses on locating his theory of concepts within the internal debates in the philosophy of language and mind, which are not *directly* relevant in the history of thought. The situation is not improved by the fact that the book illustrates the functioning of possession conditions by such concepts as 'conjunction', 'red', 'plus' and natural numbers, and considers, for example, what problems the extension of the theory to 'indexicals' and 'perceptual demonstratives' poses. It is not easy to see how to apply Peacocke's idea of possession conditions to such concepts as 'atom', 'democracy', or 'science', for example. What inferences should one take as compelling and how to individuate them in practice? Further, aside of the interesting basic intuition that the description of conceptual change requires the postulation of static conceptual cores, one does not find any further development of how to describe conceptual change. All in all, Peacocke's theory may have ingredients for an interesting theory of concept in the historical context but a relevant application is needed before we can see potential benefits.

Diez has taken steps towards such a program in his "A Programme for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts". He notes that there is a large body of work on concepts within the philosophy of language and mind, but the application to scientific concepts "has been very tentative".[66] His slightly exaggerated conviction is that "[n]owadays, it is broadly accepted that to individuate a concept is to give its possession conditions".[67] In addition of adopting Peacocke's idea of possession conditions he uses model-theoretic or structuralist tools. The idea is that scientific concepts are part of scientific theories, which form model-theoretic 'theory nets', within which not all laws are on the same level. Some are more important or central than others.[68]

Diez argues that the content of a given theoretical concept of a theory has five different components: lawful-formal, applicative, observational, operational and folk-ancestral. The role of possession condition is to integrate these different components in order to see how they constitute the content of the concept. It is not entirely clear why exactly it is these components that matter or how Diez has come to this conclusion. He reasonably stresses that this schematization offers a first approximation and that it is only programmatic at this stage.[69]

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[66] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 13.

[67] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 21.

[68] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 16.

[69] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 18–19, 23.

Diez maintains that his theory retains its a priori character even if has to rely on the results of empirical investigation. According to Diez, the determination of what specific concept the users are employing requires information of their intensional beliefs, provided by empirical studies of science, but the identity of possession conditions does nevertheless not depend on the users. He admits that this kind of reasoning might lead to a Platonic view of concepts, which says that concepts are eternal and not created by minds.[70]

The identification of conceptual content turns out to be problematic for Diez's theory. He notes that not every law in every branch of a theory net matters for the content of the concept. If they did, then every change, no matter how small, would change the content.[71] This is a familiar point put forward by the critics of holistic theories of meaning or content.[72] Diez considers whether a change in "the distance-exponential of the gravitational law" (2.1 instead of 2) would matter for the identity of the concept and the answer is not entirely clear. This part is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, Diez does not give strong reasons for accepting that it is exactly his five components that constitute the conceptual content. In fact, it is obvious that not all do in all cases, as he himself points out.[73] Secondly, he is not able to tell how to explicitly determine the constituting content of these components. I doubt whether "(meta)empirical" investigations are able to settle the matter by themselves.[74] Thirdly, he makes a difference between concept-using and concept-possession conditions, of which the latter is used for individuating concepts. "This amounts to a possibility that scientists that belong to the beginning of a theory… do not (fully) possess some… concepts".[75] This would require some further commenting. It sounds odd to say that someone possess a concept without possessing all the possession conditions of the concept. One wonders, what exactly is needed after all, and what not, in order to possess a concept.

Diez tries get over these problems by saying that there is no sharp line of what goes in the (formal) content of concepts and that the concept-identity

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[70] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 24, 45 note 16.

[71] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 26, 31.

[72] See E. LePore and J. Fodor, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2004); N. Block, "Holism, Mental and Semantic" in E. Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. IV (London: Routledge, 1998), 488–493.

[73] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 29–37.

[74] Cf. Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 30.

[75] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 24.

is vague. This vagueness can then be dealt with "some kind of fuzzy tools", which is an invitation to technical considerations in logic. However, this may not be quite enough in our context of history writing, where the questions of inclusion and exclusion of concepts under a master concept are concrete and recurring. A reference to vagueness and fuzzy tools does not amount to much methodologically. Kuukkanen argues that given that it may not be possible to find naturally existing categories for all historical concepts, this kind of vagueness can be overcome by conventional postulations. Without (conventionally postulated) sharpness in a study of history, we are bound to create more confusion than clarity.[76]

It seems that Diez uses a genealogical identity criterion, which says that entities are categorized as the same (kind) if they are part of the same genealogical or historical line of development. Compare the following: "As an enduring entity, during its history, theory is identified with sequences of different but connected, theory-nets so that posterior nets come from changes in anterior ones".[77] Or, the "net is what matters for the formal component of concept-content, and it takes into account, not only (part) of the content of (some) laws but also how they are related, i.e. their 'position' in the net. It is what possessors of the concept believe that applies, *through some of its branch extensions*".[78]

Diez's program is an ambitious attempt to formulate an entirely new way to identify concepts in history (of science). But given that his theory is rather complex, it still needs more specification and empirical application to really show what it can contribute. In particular, further specifications for the questions of what constitutes the content of the concept, how the programme can be carried out in practice, and how to talk about conceptual change, sameness and difference are still needed.

3. The Fundamental Questions

After the brief examination of some recent traditions in the history of thought above, we are ready to consider what might be the fundamental questions in the philosophy of history of thought. Perhaps the most fun-

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[76] See Kuukkanen, "Making Sense of Conceptual Change".
[77] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 17.
[78] Diez, "A Program for the Individuation of Scientific Concepts", 27 (original emphasis).

damental problem can be taken to be the question: What is the main theoretical unit in the history of thought? Is it something linguistic or non-linguistic? If the latter, is it mental, socio-psychological, sociological or Platonic, for example? Secondly, we have to take a stand on the question of continuity and discontinuity and develop an appropriate vocabulary for description. Should the history of thought be perceived as consisting of mainly continuities and cumulative change, or discontinuity and revolutionary change? When should we talk of the 'stability', 'change', and 'replacement' of our basic theoretical units? What are criteria for choosing between these or other similar locutions? One way to approach the issue is to ask when we should count two distinct historical exemplifications of our preferred theoretical unit as 'the same'. Thirdly, after giving an answer to some or all the questions above, we need to understand how our choices shape historical narratives, and whether and how different commitments would have resulted in different historical narratives. It is important to ask whether there can be several alternative adequate histories of thought or whether one is to be prioritized over the others – and how this prioritization is to be decided. This also includes the question of whether our description of the history of thought is meant be provided from an actor's or an analyst's perspective. More specifically, did the historical agents possess the suggested theoretical unit, or is it imposed by the historian for descriptive and explanatory purposes? Fourthly, we may also take an interest in the question of what has caused the emergence of and changes in our basic theoretical units. Are they caused by some social processes or are they results of stimuli from external world, for example? Does human thought have a different origin and require variable explanations in different disciplines, such as in the history of natural sciences and the history of political thought?

My suggestion is therefore that the most fundamental question in the *philosophy of history of thought* might be the following simple question:

1) What is the main theoretical unit in the history of thought?

In a more general framework, this question is analogous to the one posed by Boas many years ago: "The first problem which a historian of ideas has to face is, Just what I am writing the history of?"[79]

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[79] G. Boas, "Some Problems of Intellectual History" in G. Boas et al. (eds.), *Studies in Intellectual History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1953), 3.

Given that we are talking about historical research, explaining change has to be one of the most fundamental tasks. Therefore, it is reasonable to see the following as the second most fundamental question:

2) How does change take place? How can change be described?

Any description is clearly dependent on our choice of the basic theoretical notion. For example, a focus on terms is bound to result in a different historical narrative from research that concentrates on concepts. The former may draft a long consecutive line of changes of meanings, while the latter, it may be argued, involves more continuity due to a commitment to conceptual content. However, a suggestion that a concept can be understood as a family resemblance may be said to account better for discontinuity. And yet, whether it is in tune with our intuition of conceptual categorizations is another question: it is not clear why we would call the first and last instantiation the 'same' in a long line of concepts that stand in a relation of family resemblance if they do not share anything in common except their historical links.

I suggest, then, that the third most fundamental question in the history of thought deals with the reasons for change (or the framework within which they are placed). The third question is:

3) What kind of reasons are there for change? Why does change occur in any given particular case?

'Reason' here is understood widely to include all kinds of rational reasons and mechanical causal factors. In answering this question, a central concerns deals with the balance between social and non-social factors, which may be further divided, for example, to institutional, political, cultural, economic, conceptual, natural and observational factors. The basic model in explaining scientific change provides an example which may be applied in many other fields as well. With simplification, we can say that there are two main models of explanation of changes in the belief systems of science: the *realist* and the *sociological* model. The former account might be characterized as follows: beliefs in science are shaped, if not determined, by really existing entities, properties and regularities. Certain stimuli caused by the encounters with nature result in beliefs that tend to be relatively invariable,

even if social circumstances are variable. By contrast, some representatives of the sociology of scientific knowledge believe that the natural world has a small or non-existent role in the construction of scientific knowledge.[80] In this view, it is thus not nature or reality that shapes our beliefs but the surrounding social circumstances. It is worth emphasizing that these models provide two ideal explanatory types, but that it may be necessary to apply both of them simultaneously in explanations.[81]

Bevir has recently suggested that causal explanation cannot be applied in the history of ideas because he thinks that they imply that the outcome was determined in a law-like manner. According to Bevir, we should rather refer to reasons when explaining why someone believed what s/he did, which implies that the person might have reasoned differently. More precisely, we ought to see an outcome as a result of choices and decisions. Specifically, Bevir explains changes in beliefs by reference to dilemmas, i.e. that a belief was modified because some experience put the existing web of beliefs in question and prompted a change in the web of beliefs.

We can see that Bevir's model of explanation is rationalistic because it implies that changes are results from conscious and deliberate resolution of a dilemma where one exercises her/his reason.[82] He says that "the form of explanation appropriate to a change of belief begins… with the task or providing a rational reconstruction of the reasons the people concerned had for changing their beliefs in the way they did".[83] His model reminds us of Nersessian's application of "chains of reasoning" in explanations of

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[80] See H. Collins, "Stages in the Empirical Program of Relativism", *Social Studies of Science*, 11 (1981), 3–10.

[81] Furthermore, some realists and sociologists of scientific knowledge accept that both social and non-social factors play a role in belief formation. E.g., B. Barnes and D. Bloor, "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge" in M. Hollis and S. Lukes (eds.), R*ationality and Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell. 1982), 33; D. Bloor, "Anti-Latour", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 30 (1999), 88, 90, 93, 102; D. Bloor, "Idealism and the Sociology of Knowledge", *Social Studies of Science*, 26 (1996), 84; D. Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 166; I. Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 259; P. Kitcher, *Advancement of Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 164; see also 166–167.

[82] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 185, 222, 238.

[83] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 225, 238

conceptual change, an idea that derives from Dudley Shapere.[84] The thought is that reason connects a successor's idea or concept to its predecessor. Scientists are related by a reasoning that leads them to improve, change and modify their predecessors' representations.

Bevir identifies himself as a semantic holist, which in opposition to foundationalism does not assume that there are self-justified foundational beliefs but says that their justification comes through the connections to other beliefs in a web of beliefs. Semantic holism is linked with the model of rational change of belief. "Semantic holism suggests . . . that people modify their beliefs in response to dilemmas."[85] Sometimes a new experience gives birth to a new view old theories, sometimes a new theory promotes a new interpretation of old theories. Bevir's idea of semantic holism makes sense although I do not think that it is necessarily the best name for that theory.[86] He is obviously concerned with how beliefs are justified and connected to each other, and why they are modified; as such, a better name might be 'coherentism' or 'confirmation holism'. Semantic holism generally means only that meanings are not punctuated or atomistic but arise through connections with other meanings. That is, a meaning of a term is dependent on meanings of other terms it is connected with, without which a term simply does not have any meaning. In order to arrive to Bevir's view, we need to connect meaning with beliefs in general (which may be questioned) and with epistemic concerns. For example, we could understand meaning as some kind of verification or confirmation and in this way link semantic holism with theories of justification and preoccupation with how our webs of beliefs are transformed. However, this would take us back to a type of meaning theory held by logical empiricism added with holism, such as the one offered by Quine.

Bevir thinks that explanation of why people came to hold certain beliefs has to always be reduced to the individual level. "The human capacity for

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[84] Nersessian, *Faraday to Einstein: Constructing Meaning in Scientific Theories*; Shapere, "Reason, Reference and the Quest for Knowledge", 22; Shapere, "Reasons, Radical Change and Incommensurability in Science".

[85] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 226, cf. 226–230, 190–192.

[86] His scepticism towards a theory of concepts seems to be motivated by semantic holism in its more traditional sense. He wonders whether any history of concepts that envisions isolated individual concepts can take sufficiently into account "the holistic nature of meaning". See Bevir, "*Begriffsgeschichte*", *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), 279–280.

agency implies that change originates in decisions made by individuals, not in the inner logic of various traditions".[87] Undoubtedly, explanations which refer to individuals are indispensable in the history of thought, but it doesn't mean that all scholars have to explicitly focus on individuals in their explanations. Why would not a purely sociological perspective, for example, be possible? Bevir says that "conceptual change does not occur as a series of random fluctuations totally unrelated to human agency".[88] This is undoubtedly true, but one may be interested in why a community changed their concept. Although the explanations may also refer to individuals, the concentration can well be on the communal changes.

Finally, Bevir argues that historical explanations should use conditional forms and not employ deterministic physical law-like explanations.[89] This is a worthwhile suggestion, but does not nevertheless make the concept of cause inapplicable in the context of the history of thought (even if it may not appropriate in all cases). For example, the counterfactual analysis of causation may accommodate the possibility of alternative unrealized histories. If we see the emergence of a given belief as a result of multiple causes, social and non-social alike, we may be able to distinguish those causes that are necessary from those that are not for the given outcome, and this way improve our understanding of historical causality. The implication is that a change in the *set of causal factors* could have turned history to a different path. The possibility of alternatives histories has earlier been discussed in general history[90] and there is currently an active discussion of what role contingentism and counterfactual considerations should play in the history of science.[91]

4. To Name it is to Make it

We have now characterised the most fundamental problems in the *philosophy of the history of thought* and tried to also outline the type of discussion

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[87] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 223.

[88] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 225.

[89] Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 185, 252–262.

[90] E.g., N. Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Picador, 1997).

[91] See a collection of essays under the heading "The Contingentism versus Inevitabilism Issue" in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 39 (2008), 220–264; the Focus section "Counterfactuals and the Historian of Science" in *ISIS*, 99 (2008), 547–585.

that falls under these questions. Now it is time to consider what benefits the establishment of the new discipline might bring.

Ian Hacking writes that the idea and classification of 'woman refugee', in opposition to individual women refugees, can be taken as socially constructed. He says that classification as a woman refugee matters, because it determines how a person is treated at airports, detention centres and courthouses, and what kind of status she is, in general, granted in a country.[92] In this sense, naming it is really making it. This analogy can be used to highlight the benefits of establishing a *philosophy of the history of thought*. As much as women refugees as physical beings exist before naming and category making, there also exists a discussion on the foundations of the history of thought. But we need to name a field and bring the existing debate and corresponding category into focus in order to see practical consequences and gains.

There are several earlier suggestions for names of fields in close resemblance. Kelley regards Lovejoy's program as a descendant of "the philosophy of the history of philosophy".[93] Another suggestion is "philosophy of the history of ideas".[94] Also Bevir tends to write about the history of ideas as an object of his philosophical book on logical forms and reasoning. Kenneth Minogue has talked about "philosophy of intellectual history".[95] The *philosophy of the history of thought* has an advantage over these in not tying the study to any one field or school, but instead to cover all the traditions that are concerned with the history of human thinking and its products. The main problem in the *philosophy of the history of thought* is simply that of how to describe history of thought.

What about the prospects of this field? Can we expect to find answers to the fundamental questions above? There certainly is room for pessimism about this possibility. We already saw how Richter took the ambiguity of

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[92] I. Hacking, *Social Construction of What* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 10–11.

[93] D. Kelley, "What is Happening to the History of Ideas?", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 51 (1990), 6, 12.

[94] D. Kelley, "Horizons of Intellectual History: Retrospect, Circumspect, Prospect", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), 169.

[95] K. Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History: Quentin Skinner's *Foundations*" in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 189.

the notion of concept as a virtue. Further, Kelley writes, "[o]ver two and a half millennia there has never been agreement among philosophers about what ideas are; and it hardly seems likely that intellectual historians can resolve the problem by coming up with a better definition". Further, he says that the aims, values and questions of intellectual history "cannot ultimately be honored and pursued on the level of theory".[96]

The bottom line is that good theoretical work informed by philosophical reflection should sharpen our understanding of history writing and lead to the improvement of its practice. Of course, we should not expect any self-evident answers or a consensus on the fundamental questions, but greater focus on these issues is bound to result in greater clarity and awareness of the problems that practitioners are faced with. To ignore the problems and the existing discussion would be a retrograde step. Philosophical and theoretical considerations would be left as unimportant amateurish hobbies of some historians even though the fundamental issues merit as much attention as any philosophical questions. Naturally, it is not being demanded that every historian devotes plenty of their time for these types of considerations; however the establishment of a distinct discipline would enable some to specialize with the intended result of benefiting historical practice as well. This would most likely result in better theoretical tools and perhaps make the history of thought (including all its subfields) more robust as a disciple. Finally, I think it is clear that many disciplines would benefit from a dialogue with and understanding of the theoretical commitments of alternative traditions. There may be common questions, but the answers given certainly are different.

In conclusion, my suggestion is that we should recognize that there is a sub-field in the philosophy of history, namely the *philosophy of the history of thought*. I have not taken here any sides between different potential perspectives or schools. My attempt to develop some relevant theoretical vocabulary from a specific perspective can be found elsewhere.[97] As remarked in the introduction, the purpose of this paper is to motivate and call for more discussion and analysis about the possibilities of this proposed discipline. This task was carried out by identifying and discussing some of the directions that there exist at the moment and by outlining some of the

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[96] Kelley, "What is Happening to the History of Ideas?", 4, 24–25.
[97] See Kuukkanen, "Making Sense of Conceptual History".

basic problems and questions of this discipline. Hopefully, there will be an active discussion on these and other related questions in the future. Above all, it is hoped that the analysis offered here makes a small contribution in a process which eventually leads to an improvement in our understanding of what the history of thought is about.