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RHETORIC AND CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

> *And therefore in reasoning, a man must take heed of words; which besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker; such as are the names of Vertues, and Vices; For one man calleth Wisdome, what another calleth feare; and one cruelty, what another justice; one prodigality, what another magnanimity; and one gravity, what another stupidity, &c. And therefore such names can never be true grounds of any ratiocination.*
>
> THOMAS HOBBES[1]

Kari Palonen begins his comments (in this volume) by declaring that, when we address ourselves to the problem of conceptual change, we are (or ought to be) 'only concerned with the political aspects of concepts'. He adds by way of explanation that 'for me the words "political" and "interesting" are more or less synonymous'. I admire his epigram, but I faintly dissent from his narrowness of focus. For me the interest of studying the history of concepts arises from the moral and social as well as the political changes that we find reflected in – and to some extent engendered by – the groundswell of conceptual change itself.

This is a mere quibble, however, for I warmly endorse Palonen's contention that, if we are to treat the study of changing concepts as a distinct form of historical enquiry, we shall do well to concentrate

on the concepts we employ to describe and appraise our moral and political world. This in turn means that we shall need to focus on the various terms – the entire normative vocabulary – in which such concepts are habitually expressed. These terms, the paradigms of which are perhaps the names of the virtues and vices, are those which perform evaluative as well as descriptive functions in natural languages. They are basically used to describe actions and the motives for which they are performed. But if the criteria for applying one or other of these terms can plausibly be claimed to be reflected in some given action or state of affairs, then the application of the term will not only serve to describe but at the same time to evaluate it. The special characteristic of the terms I am singling out is thus that (to invoke J. L. Austin's jargon) they have a standard application to perform one of two contrasting ranges of speech-acts.[2] They are available, that is, to perform such acts as commending (and expressing and soliciting approval) or else of condemning (and expressing and soliciting disapproval) of any action or state of affairs they are used to describe.

As Palonen correctly notes, I began to make such terms a subject of my historical research in the early 1970s. One reason for doing so was my wish to dispute the view – then prevalent in Anglophone philosophy – that it is appropriate to conceive of a distinctive grid of concepts marking off moral, political and other such domains. It was widely assumed that we can speak (as T.D Weldon had done in the title of a classic text) of the vocabulary of politics[3] and that we can likewise speak (as R.M. Hare had done in an even more influential book) of *the* language of morals.[4] This assumption seemed to me well worth disputing in the name of a more historically-minded acknowedgment that different societies may conceptualise these domains in different and possibly even incommensurable ways.

I had a second and yet more basic motivation for wishing to study the changing use of concepts. I wanted to question the assumption influentially propagated by Arthur Lovejoy and his school about the proper task of the historian of ideas. Lovejoy had argued that, beneath the surface of ideological debate, there will always be a range of perennial and unchanging 'unit ideas' which it becomes the task of the intellectual historian to uncover and trace.[5] Against this contention I tried once more to speak up for a more radical contingency

in the history of thought. Drawing on a suggestion of Wittgenstein's, I argued that there cannot be a history of unit ideas as such, but only a history of the various uses to which they have been put by different agents at different times. There is nothing, I ventured to suggest, lying beneath or behind such uses; their history is the only history of ideas to be written.

One way of expressing my underlying commitment would thus be to say that I wanted to treat the understanding of concepts as always, in part, a matter of understanding what can be done with them in argument. As Palonen points out, in announcing this belief I declared my allegiance to one particular tradition of twentieth-century social thought. The tradition may perhaps be said to stem from Nietzsche, although I originally encountered it in the social philosophy of Max Weber. It is characterised by the belief that our concepts not only alter over time, but are incapable of providing us with anything more than a series of changing perspectives on the world in which we live and have our being. Our concepts form part of what we bring to the world in our efforts to understand it. The shifting conceptualisations to which this process gives rise constitute the very stuff of ideological debate, so that it makes no more sense to regret than to deny that such conceptual changes continually take place. This commitment in turn gave rise in my own case – as in the case of Koselleck – to a particular view about what kind of history needs to be written if this general truth is to be illuminated. Koselleck and I both assume that we need to treat our normative concepts less as statements about the world than as tools and weapons of debate.

One reason why it is perhaps worth identifying my original targets in this way is that several commentators have supposed that what I was aiming to discredit was the very project of Koselleck's that Palonen seeks, very illuminatingly, to relate to my own research. It is no doubt deplorable, but it is nevertheless a fact, that when I wrote my polemical essays in the late 1960s and early 1970s I had no knowledge of Koselleck's research-programme. I did not come to appreciate the distinctiveness and magnitude of his achievement until Melvin Richter made his work available to Anglophone readers in his articles of the 1980s[6] and later in his important study, *The History of Social and Political Concepts*, published as recently as 1995.[7]

It is perhaps worth adding that I have not only been innocent of

any desire to question Koselleck's methodological assumptions, but that I have even attempted to write some conceptual histories myself. I have written about the acquisition of the concept of the State as the name of a moral person distinct from both rulers and ruled.[8] And I have tried to sketch the rise and fall within Anglophone political theory of a particular view about social freedom, a view according to which our freedom needs to be seen not merely as a predicate of our actions but as an existential condition in contrast to that of the slave.[9] I do not consider these studies to be in tension with anything I have said about the need to understand what can be done with concepts as an element in the process of recovering their meaning and significance. On the contrary, part of my aim was to indicate why the concepts in question first came into prominence at particular historical periods by way of indicating what could be done with them that could not have been done in their absence.

As these remarks already make clear, I strongly endorse Palonen's insistence that we must be ready as historians of philosophy not merely to admit the fact of conceptual change but to make it central to our research. Not only is our moral and social world held in place by the manner in which we choose to apply our inherited normative vocabularies, but one of the ways in which we are capable of reappraising and changing our world is by changing the ways in which these vocabularies are applied. There is in consequence a genealogy of all our evaluative concepts to be traced, and in tracing their changing applications we shall find ourselves looking not merely at the reflections but at one of the engines of social change.

The only point at which I demur at Palonen's way of laying out these issues is that I am less happy than he is to talk about conceptual change *tout court*. It is true that he begins by asking 'what, then, does actually change when concepts change?' But his answer is simply that the transformations in question can be related both to language and to time. I have no quarrel with this formulation, but it seems worth trying to say something rather more detailed about it.

I have already gestured at what I take to be the most fundamental point we need to grasp if we are to study the phenomenon of conceptual change. My almost paradoxical contention is that the transformations we can hope to chart will not strictly speaking be changes in concepts at all. They will be changes in the use of the terms by

which our concepts are expressed. These transformations will in turn be of various kinds. Palonen rightly notes that in my own work I have chiefly focused on what he describes as a rhetorical perspective. I have been interested, that is, in the kinds of debate that take place when we ask whether a given action or state of affairs does or does not license us to apply some particular evaluative term as an apt description of it. While this has been my principal interest, however, I should not want it to be thought that I take this to be the sole or even the most significant way in which the process of conceptual change may be initiated. Before turning to consider the rhetorical case in more detail, I should like to mention two other ways in which the phenomenon of conceptual change can be historically mapped.

We can hope in the first place to trace the changing extent or degree to which a particular normative vocabulary is employed over time. There are obviously two contrasting possibilities here. The rise within a given society of new forms of social behaviour will generally be reflected in the development of a corresponding vocabulary in which the behaviour in question will be described and appraised. As an example, consider the emergence in the English language for the first time in the early seventeenth century of a range of terms that came to be widely used to describe and at the same time to commend the behaviour of those who were *frugal, punctual* and *conscientious*. The alternative possibility is that a given society may gradually lose its sense that some particular style of behaviour needs to be singled out and evaluated. This will generally be registered in the atrophying of the corresponding normative vocabulary. An instructive example is offered by the disappearance in contemporary English of a complex vocabulary widely used in earlier generations to describe and commend an ideal of gentlemanly conduct, and at the same time to stigmatise any behaviour liable to undermine it. Such terms as cad and *bounder* – together with the contrasting concept of *gentlemanliness* – can still be found in historical dictionaries of the English language, but they are virtually obsolete as terms of appraisal now that the patterns of conduct they were used to evaluate have lost their social significance.

Such examples arguably provide the best evidence in favour of the claim that concepts have a history – or rather, that the terms we use to express our concepts have a history. I confess, however, that

this kind of long-term shift in the fortunes of concepts is not one of my primary interests, as Palonen correctly points out. Here my approach differs from that of Koselleck, who as Palonen notes is chiefly preoccupied with the slower march of time and much less concerned with the pointillist study of sudden conceptual shifts. Palonen ends by asking why I am so much less interested in such broader chronologies. One reason is that, in the examples I have given, the shifting vocabularies are little more than indexes or reflections of deeper transformations in social life. This in turn means that, if a history of these conceptual changes were to have any explanatory value, the explanations would have to be given at the level of social life itself. But I have no general theory about the mechanisms of social transformation, and I am somewhat suspicious of those who have. Certainly I am deeply suspicious of all theories in which Time itself appears as an agent of change. As Palonen justly remarks, such metaphors have a nasty habit of reappearing as objectifications, thereby encouraging a discredited form of intellectual history in which Tradition is always doing battle with Progress, Superstition with Enlightenment, and so forth.[10]

I turn to consider a second form of conceptual change, or rather a second way in which the vocabularies we use to describe and appraise our social world continually wrinkle and slide. This process also occurs when the capacity of a normative vocabulary to perform and encourage particular acts of appraisal either alters in direction or else in intensity. Alterations of this kind will usually reflect an underlying attempt to modify existing social perceptions and beliefs, and these efforts will in turn be mirrored in the language of evaluation in one of two principal ways. A term generally used to commend an action or state of affairs may be used instead to express and solicit disapproval, or a condemnatory term may be used to suggest that, contrary to received assumptions, what is being described is also deserving of praise.

What is being suggested in these cases is that a society should reconsider and perhaps transvalue some of its moral values. Sometime we can even pinpoint such suggestions within individual texts. For example, we can arguably see this process at work in Machiavelli's *Il Principe*, in Chapter XVI of which he appears to suggest that parsimony is not necessarily the name of a vice. Perhaps, he implies, a

number of actions generally condemned by the courtly societies of Renaissance Europe as miserly and parsimonious actually deserve to be praised.[11] An even clearer example is provided by Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, first published in 1561. Faced with the term s*prezzatura*, which Castiglione had invented to commend an aristocratic style of nonchalance, Hoby chose to render it as *recklessness,* thereby confronting his puritan contemporaries with the astonishing thought that this might be the name of a virtue.[12]

When such suggestions are widely taken up, a whole society may eventually come to alter its attitude towards some fundamental value or practice and alter its normative vocabulary accordingly. Consider, for example, the fact that such terms as sh*rewd* and *shrewdness* were widely employed in the Renaissance to condemn whatever actions they were used to describe, but were later employed in such a way that similar actions came to be commended. Or consider, by contrast, the fact that such terms as o*bsequious* were commonly used in the Renaissance to commend the behaviour they described, but were later applied in such a way as to make it clear that the obsequious are deserving of nothing but contempt.

These are examples of conceptual change in perhaps its purest sense. As Palonen correctly notes, however, I have again paid little attention to the long-term social transformations that cause such appraisive terms to lose or alter the direction of their evaluative force. Palonen is also right to note that this lack of interest again contrasts with Koselleck's approach. The reason for my neglect is the same as before. I lack any talent for writing the kind of social history that would be required. I also plead guilty to the further charge that, as Palonen expresses it, I neglect (by comparison with Koselleck) 'the possibility of including time into the very meaning of a concept'. I do indeed neglect this possibility, but only because I cannot make sense of it.

I turn finally to re-examine the form of conceptual change in which I have chiefly been interested, the form described by Palonen as rhetorical in character. Such changes originate when an action or state of affairs is described by means of an evaluative term that would not normally be used in the given circumstances. The aim is to persuade an audience that, in spite of appearances, the term can properly be

applied – in virtue of its ordinary meaning – to the case in hand. The effect of successfully persuading someone to accept such a judgment will be to prompt them to view the behaviour in question in a new moral light. An action they had previously regarded as commendable may come to seem worthy of condemnation, while an action they had previously condemned may seem worthy of praise.

As Palonen notes, when in the early 1970s I first discussed this technique of rhetorical redescription, I operated with the assumption that for every evaluative term there will at any one time be a standard meaning and use. As a result, I portrayed the innovating ideologist as someone essentially engaged in the act of manipulating a normative vocabulary by a series of sleights of hand. Since then, however, I have immersed myself in the writings of the ancient theorists of eloquence who originally spoke of rhetorical redescription, and have come to share their more contingent understanding of normative concepts and the fluid vocabularies in which they are generally expressed. As a result, I have found myself adopting their assumption that it makes little sense to speak of evaluative terms as having accepted denotations that can either be followed or, with varying degrees of disingenuousness, effectively manipulated. Rather, as the ancient rhetoricians put it, there will always be a sufficient degree of 'neighbourliness' between the forms of behaviour described by contrasting evaluative terms for those terms themselves to be susceptible of being applied in a variety of conflicting ways. It now seems to me, in short, that all attempts to legislate about the 'correct' use of normative vocabularies must be regarded as equally ideological in character. Whenever such terms are used, their application will always reflect a wish to impose a particular moral vision upon the workings of the social world.

To illustrate the technique of rhetorical redescription, it will be best to turn to the analysis originally offered by the ancient rhetoricians themselves. The fullest account is supplied by Quintilian, although he owes an obvious debt to Cicero and even more to Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric*. Quintilian's main discussion of the technique – to which he gave the name *paradiastole* – occurs in Book IV of his *Institutio Oratorio,* where he discusses it in the course of considering how best to present a narrative of facts. Suppose you find yourself in a court of law facing an advocate who has managed to describe an

act 'in such a way as to rouse up the judges and leave them full of anger against your side.'[13] Suppose too that you cannot hope to deny what happened. How are you to proceed? Quintilian's answer is that 'you should restate the facts, but not at all in the same way; you must assign different causes, a different state of mind and a different motive for what was done.'[14] Above all, 'you must try to elevate the action as much as possible by the words you use: for example, prodigality must be more leniently redescribed as liberality, avarice as carefulness, negligence as simplicity of mind.'[15]

Quintilian had already put forward this last and crucial suggestion in Book II, in which he had quoted (although without acknowledgment) three examples of the same technique offered by Aristotle in *The Art of Rhetoric*: 'slander can pass for frankness, recklessness for courage, extravagance for copiousness'.[16] Aristotle had added that the same technique can equally well be used not merely to extenuate the vices but also to depreciate the virtues, as when we denigrate the behaviour of a habitually cautious man by claiming that he is really a person of cold and designing temperament.[17]

As Quintilian emphasises, the essence of the technique may thus be said to consist of replacing a given evaluative description with a rival term that pictures the action no less plausibly, but serves at the same time to place it in a contrasting moral light. You seek to persuade your audience to accept your new description, and thereby to adopt a new attitude towards the action involved – either one of increased sympathy or of acquired moral outrage. As Quintilian explicitly adds, this means that strictly speaking we ought not to describe the technique as a case of substituting one word for another. 'For no one supposes that the words prodigality and liberality mean the same thing; the difference is rather that one person calls something prodigal which another thinks of as liberality.'[18] What we are really claiming is that the *res* – the actual behaviour – possesses a different moral character from that which our dialectical opponents may have assigned to it.

Quintilian also explains what makes the use of paradiastolic redescription a perennial possibility. Drawing once more on Aristotle, he reiterates that this is due to the fact that many of the vices are 'neighbours' of the virtues. Cicero had already put forward the same explanation in his *De Partitione Oratoria*. 'Cunning imitates prudence,

insensibility imitates temperance, pride in attaining honours and superciliousness in looking down on them both imitate magnanimity, extravagance imitates liberality and audacity imitates courage'.[19] So many of the vices, in short, stand in 'neighbourly relations' with the virtues that a clever orator will always be able to challenge the proferred evaluation of any action whatsoever with some show of plausibility.

One of the distinctive achievements of Renaissance culture was to revive and reassess the rhetorical philosophy of the ancient world. This in turn means that, if we wish to see the techniques perfected by the ancient rhetoricians put to work again, we need to turn to the moral philosophy of the Renaissance. Among Renaissance moralists, it was Machiavelli who arguably took the lessons of the ancient rhetoricians most profoundly to heart. Certainly he employs the technique of paradiastolic redescription with unparalleled audacity in challenging the political morality of his age. He first uses the device in Chapter XVI of *Il Principe* to question the so-called 'princely' virtue of liberality. Two contrasting rhetorical strategies are at work in this passage. As we have seen, one is the startling suggestion that liberality may not be the name of a virtue, nor parsimony of a vice. But Machiavelli's other strategy depends on assuming that liberality is unquestionably the name of a virtue. While conceding the point, however, he adds that much of the behaviour usually described and commended as liberal ought rather to be redescribed and condemned as *suntuosità*, mere ostentatiousness.[20] His next Chapter questions the princely virtue of clemency in exactly the same way. He begins by acknowledging that cruelty is of course a vice.[21] But he insists that many of the actions usually celebrated as instances of clemency ought rather to be redescribed in much less favourable terms. The avoidance of cruelty for which the Florentines congratulated themselves when they refused to punish the leaders of the uprising at Pistoia ought really to be recognised as an instance of *troppa pietà,* mere over-indulgence.[22] Likewise, the clemency for which Scipio Africanus came to be so widely admired was really an example of *sua natura facile*, his laxity of character.[23]

I have frequently referred to Machiavelli as a pioneer in recognising the power of paradiastolic redescription in moral debate. But perhaps the most emphatic tribute to the technique is owed to

Nietzsche, a deep student of Machiavelli and of the ancient theorists of rhetoric on whom he had relied. Nietzsche's main account of how, within European history, one set of moral evaluations was successfully displaced by another and incommensurable one can be found in hus opening essay in *The Genealogy of Morality.* The passage is a famous one, but Nietzsche's commentators appear not to have noticed that the technique he illustrates is precisely that of paradiastolic redescription. He begins by asking whether anyone would like 'to have a little look down into the secret of how *ideals are fabricated* on this earth':

> What's happening down there? Tell me what you see, you with your most dangerous curiosity – now *I* am the one who's listening. –
> –'I cannot see anything but I can hear all the better. There is a guarded, malicious little rumour-mongering and whispering from every nook and cranny. I think people are telling lies; a sugary mildness clings to every sound. Lies are turning weakness into an *accomplishment*, no doubt about it – it's just as you said.' –
> – Go on!
> – 'and impotence which doesn't retaliate is being turned into "goodness"; timid baseness is being turned into "humility"; submission to people one hates is being turned into "obedience" (actually towards someone who, they say, orders this submission – they call him God.) The inoffensivenes of the weakling, the very cowardice with which he is richly endowed, his standing-by-the-door, his inevitable position of having to wait, are all given good names such as "patience", which is also called *the* virtue; not-being-able-to-take-revenge is called not-wanting-to-take-revenge, it might even be forgiveness ("for *they* know not what they do – but we know what *they* are doing!"). They are also talking about "loving your enemy" – and sweating while they do it.'
> – Go on! ...
> 'But enough! enough! I can't bear it any longer. Bad air! Bad air! This workshop where *ideals are fabricated* – it seems to me just to stink of lies.'[24]

It is Nietzsche's contention, in short, that the slave morality of the Christians succeeded in overturning the moral world of antiquity by rhetorically redescribing a number of vices as their neighbouring virtues.

For a contrasting example of how a virtue can come to seem a

vice, consider a case recently discussed by Ian Hacking: the fact that what may appear as wholesome discipline in the rearing of children in one generation may appear as child abuse in the next. Nothing in the conduct of adults towards children need in the intervening period have changed. What will have changed, if the new evaluation is accepted, is the sensibility of a community. A number of practices previously taken for granted will come to seem morally intolerable. This is not of course to say that the process is one of coming to see things as they really are. As before, it is merely a matter of substituting one social philosophy for another, both of which may have been rationally defensible at different times.

It might appear, however, that in talking in this way about rhetorical redescription we are precisely *not* talking about conceptual change. I certainly agree that a number of philosophers have been somewhat too ready to say that such disputes arise because each party 'has a different concept' of (say) what constitutes child abuse. But if the disputants are genuinely arguing, they must have the same concept of what constitutes child abuse.[25] The difference between them will not be about the meaning of the relevant evaluative term, but merely about the range of circumstances in which they think it can appropriately be applied.

This caution strikes me as correct and important, but the fact remains that the outcome of such debates will nevertheless be a form of conceptual change. The more we succeed in persuading people that a given evaluative term applies in circumstances in which they may never have thought of applying it, the more broadly and inclusively we shall persuade them to employ the term in the appraisal of social and political life. The change that will eventually result is that the underlying concept will come to acquire a new prominence and a new salience in the moral arguments of the society concerned.

It is true that, as Palonen remarks, I have again been less interested in these long-term changes than in the kind of epiphanic moments dramatised by Nietzsche. But I acknowledge, of course, that if we are interested in mapping the rise and fall of particular normative vocabularies, we shall have to devote ourselves to examining the *longue durée*. So I am not unhappy with Palonen's concluding proposal that my own research-programme might even be regarded as an aspect of the vastly more ambitious one pursued by Koselleck.

Koselleck is interested in nothing less than the entire process of conceptual change; I am chiefly interested in one of the means by which it takes place. But the two programmes do not strike me as necessarily incompatible, and I hope that both of them will continue to flourish as they deserve.

Notes

[1] Hobbes 1996, p. 31.
[2] Austin 1962.
[3] Weldon 1953.
[4] Hare 1952.
[5] Lovejoy 1960, esp. pp. 3-4, 15-17.
[6] See esp. Richter 1987.
[7] Richter 1995.
[8] See Skinner 1989 and Skinner 1999.
[9] Skinner 1998.
[10] On this point see Dunn 1980, esp. p. 13.
[11] Machiavelli 1960, pp. 66-8.
[12] Castiglione 1561, Sig. E., ii$^{r.}$
[13] Quintilian 1920-22, IV.II.75, vol. II, p. 90. Here and below, translations from classical texts are my own.
[14] Quintilian 1920-22, IV.II.76-7, vol. II, p. 90.
[15] Quintilian 1920-22, IV.II.77, vol. II, pp. 90-2.
[16] Aristotle 1926, I.IX.28-9, pp. 96-98; cf. Quintilian 1920-22, II.XII.4, vol. I, p. 284.
[17] Aristotle 1926, I.IX.28, p. 96.
[18] Quintilian 1920-22, VIII.VI.36, vol. III, p. 322.
[19] Cicero 1942, II.XXIII.81, p. 370.
[20] Machiavelli 1960, p. 66.
[21] Machiavelli 1960, p. 68.
[22] Machiavelli 1960, p. 69.
[23] Machiavelli 1960, p. 71.
[24] Nietzsche 1994, pp. 30-31.
[25] On this point see Skinner 1988, esp. pp. 125-8.

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