

36

Concepts in Theoretical Thought: an Introductory Essay

Lajos L. Brons

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Letters, Keio University

The idea that our language somehow influences our thought can be found in philosophical and scientific traditions of different continents and with different roots and objectives. Yet, beyond the mere theoretical, explorations of the idea are relatively scarce, and are mostly limited to relations between very concrete conceptual categories and subjective experiencing and remembering — to some kind of ‘psychologies of folk-ontology’. Thought as process, reasoning or ‘thinking’, and the role of more complex or abstract concepts in (such) thought tend to be mostly ignored in psychology and philosophy. Conceptual and intellectual history, on the other hand, cannot be accused of such neglect, but the common lack of a comparative perspective in those fields precludes any generalized inference.

Furthermore, while a comparative study on the role of complex or abstract concepts in thought as process and its products (the aggregate ‘thought’ of schools, ages, and regions) could result in a considerable enrichment of our understanding of the relationships between language and thought, it would not necessarily be recognized as such because of a fundamental difference in the nature of the concepts involved, affecting the boundary of ‘language’ in the pair ‘language and thought’. More concretely, while the concepts of the ‘psychologies of folk-ontology’ are rather concrete categories of ‘things’ or aspects of experienced reality (hence, ‘folk-ontology’), the abstract concepts of (comparative) conceptual history, such as ‘society’ or ‘reason’, are *categories of ideas*. Consequently, conceptual history is inseparably tied to the history of ideas, and there is no strict boundary line between concepts, theories, ideas, and aggregate thought in general. It could, therefore, be argued that a comparative conceptual history would be a study of the influence of ideas on thought, rather than of language on thought. That argument, however, would either void language of content, or make the dubious claim that folk-ontology is a fundamentally different type of content than theoretical content. The

‘psychologies of folk-ontology’ study the influence of *folk-ontological categories on folk-ontological thought* (experiencing and remembering), and a comparative conceptual history would study the influence of *theoretical categories* (or conceptualized ideas) *on theoretical thought* (thinking, reasoning, etc.), and there does not seem to be a good reason to exclude either type of categories from ‘language’. Perhaps it should be argued instead that the ambiguous term ‘language’ in the pair ‘language and thought’ would better be replaced with ‘concepts’ or ‘categories’.

A comparative study of theoretical concepts in theoretical thought needs to be embedded in the broader context of the intellectual histories of the ages and traditions compared. Each age and each intellectual tradition may have its own relevant particularities, but there are commonalities as well. There seems to be a universal human tendency, for example, to think in pairs of more or less opposing concepts, and many abstract and/or theoretical concepts take at least part of their meaning (and/or theoretical role) from such oppositions. Most explanations of this phenomenon, often labeled ‘concept dichotomization’ or ‘dialectical thought’, suggest an ultimate source in the male-female dichotomy, which would explain its apparent universality. What is not universal, however, is the nature of the opposition and the pairing of (specific) concepts.

Conceptual ‘opposition’ is perhaps not the most appropriate term since the relationship is not always one of strict opposition. Despite the Marxist appropriation, ‘dialectic’ may be a better, more neutral term. There are several forms such dialectics can take, and most of these forms can be found around the world. The famous *yin-yang* circle (*taijitu*: ☯) is a surprisingly good graphical representation of one of these forms — yin and yang are entangled, in perpetual flux, and contain each other’s ‘seeds’. In a relation of *strict opposition* or *dichotomy*, on the other hand, the two concepts involved are mutually exclusive and contradicting/contrasting by definition — the black and white would be two completely separate circles. In some variants, closer inspection *may* reveal a different kind of relationship hiding behind the strict opposition — they may overlap or even coincide (as in the Medieval Christian *coincidentia contradictorum*), they may both be illusory (as in Nāgārjuna’s or Sextus Empiricus’s skeptical dialectics), or there may be some kind of interrelatedness and/or flux (as in Heraclitus and/or some aspects of Hegelian dialectics).

Cultural differences, especially East-West differences, are often phrased in absolute terms, but generally the ‘absolutes’ are mere tendencies, or modal forms of thought. All forms of dialectical relationships can be found in both ‘East’ and ‘West’. However, while strict oppositional variants are more common in the West (and perhaps in Indian thought as well), the yin-yang model is more common in East-Asian thought. Nevertheless, Heraclitus, Hegel, and a few others occa-

sionally seemed to get close to the yin-yang model, and Confucius strictly opposed 'righteousness' 義 (Ch. *yi*; Jp. *gi*) to 'profit/gain' 利 (Ch. *li*; Jp. *ri*) (*Analects* IV.16). Aside from this difference in modal thought patterns, there are important differences between 'East' and 'West' in the pairings themselves as well. The *reason-passion dialectic*, for example, while being foundational for much of Western thought, does not have a clear equivalent in Chinese or Japanese thought. And conversely, there is no Western equivalent for the Neo-Confucian dialectic of 'reason/principle' 理 (Ch. *li*; Jp. *ri*) and 'vital force' 氣 (Ch. *qi*; Jp. *ki*) (note that these translations are mere approximations).

There are two main sources for (common) dialectical pairs: (1) connotational origination from an already 'established' pairing, or (2) new invention by means of separation within (or split off from) a prior 'singular' concept. The first type is rooted strongly in a specific conceptual tradition, and can emerge relatively quickly because of the familiarity of that tradition to its participants. The second type is usually more dichotomous in nature, but matures in a very slow process that can take many centuries to complete, and is more easily transplanted from one conceptual tradition to another. The reason-passion dialectic is an example of the former, but it was elevated to a new level after a conceptual invention of the second type.

The male and female in the male-female dichotomy are connotatively related to order and spirit on the male side, and chaos and body on the female side. From these connotations, the reason-passion dialectic and the man-nature dialectic came forth. From Greek antiquity onwards, the former played a central role in ethical and psychological thought, and the latter in geographical and historiographical thought. In either dialectic, there is a strict opposition (they are mutually exclusive by definition), and a common preference for dominance of the male element (reason, man) over the female element (the passions, nature).

The aforementioned conceptual invention of the second type that elevated the reason-passion dialectic to a new level was the separation of 'society' from 'state'. The concept of 'the state' itself was a conceptual separation of much earlier date from the 'household' of the ruler, but that separation was not completed until the invention of 'society' around the turn of the 19th century. The word 'society', which was previously used to refer to (often small) institutional units with shared objectives only, was given a new meaning in opposition to (and separation of) 'state' — 'society' as some kind of abstract sphere of reality, as the aggregate or sum of (relations between) people in some spatio-temporally delimited region (or something similar) was invented. It was this conceptual innovation that finally broke the link between 'state' and 'household' (of the ruler), but it took much more time until the new separation itself was complete.

The separation of ‘society’ from ‘state’ enabled many other conceptual inventions. In German *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), this period of conceptual revolution is called the ‘*Sattelzeit*’ (saddle/pass time/age). The key characteristic of the *Sattelzeit*, which lasted roughly from 1750 to 1850, is often described as ‘democratization’, and the invention of ‘society’ may be the most important conceptual counterpart thereof. However, part of the conceptual revolution(s) associated with the *Sattelzeit* started a century earlier (with the advent of the Enlightenment), and the evolution of some concepts (into their current forms) took approximately another century to ‘complete’ (‘economy’, for example).

In the *Sattelzeit*, the reason-passion dialectic was transformed into a dialectic of ‘civilization’ and ‘culture’, and later of ‘economy’ and ‘culture’. ‘Reason’ was the foundation of the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment, and ‘civilization’ was its socialized form — the rationalistic and universalistic aspects of society. Romanticism, in its opposition to the Enlightenment, socialized the opposites of reason into ‘culture’ (the passionate and traditional aspects of society). Especially in German Romanticism (up till WWII) ‘civilization’ and ‘culture’ were strongly opposed, but in Anglo-Saxon thought the two words (but not ideas) became near identical. Because of the identification of the rationalistic aspects of society with economy and technology, in some forms of the dialectic ‘economy’ took the place of ‘civilization’, but other terms have been used as well. Disregarding such terminological differences, the *Sattelzeit* resulted in the elevation of the reason-passion dialectic as a dialectic of drives of individual behavior into a dialectic of social (forms and/or) forces — most commonly economy versus culture. And in the same way that the relationship between reason and the passions was differently conceived by different thinkers, although (in either dialectic) the strict opposition is near universal, so was the relationship between economy and culture — for example, Marx prioritized the former, and Weber the latter (of course, this is a horrible oversimplification induced by limitations of space). (For a much more extensive overview of the culture-economy dialectic, its predecessors, and dialectical thought in general, see Brons (2005).)

Despite the lack of a clear equivalent of the reason-passion dialectic in Japanese thought, the opposition between Neo-Confucianism (朱子学) and Kokugaku (国学) in the Edo period seems very similar to that between European Enlightenment and Romanticism, which was founded on that very dialectic. The similarity is superficial, however, although there are interesting parallels. Both Romanticism and Kokugaku originated in a rejection of the rationalism and universalism of their opponents, but there are important differences in the nature of that rationalism and universalism. Enlightenment rationalism was a ‘worship’ of reason as method, but was supplemented by an empiricist heritage from ‘natural

philosophy’, and a rejection of religious dogma. Neo-Confucianist rationalism, on the other hand, was pure theoretical reasoning based on given first principles (close to religious dogma). Furthermore, the foundational concepts ‘reason’ and 理 (*ri* — see above) themselves are far from identical. For example, while in Western thought self-interest gradually became part of (most interpretations of) reason in social/moral contexts, because of Confucius’s opposition between 義 (*gi* — righteousness, linked to 理) and 利 (*ri* — profit/gain, related to (material) self-interest), in Neo-Confucian thought reason and self-interest were opposed.

The Japanese equivalent of the *Sattelzeit*, the ‘*tōge no jidai*’ (峠の時代) started with the Meiji restoration or a few years before that, and lasted until approximately 1950, although the greatest conceptual developments took place in the first half of that period. Contrary to the European *Sattelzeit*, the *tōge no jidai* was not primarily an autonomous development, but an integration of imported concepts. As mentioned above, the ease and speed of such integration depends partly on the origin of dialectical pairs. The lack of a prior reason-passion dialectic probably considerably hampered and/or delayed the integration of the various economy-culture dialectics, but for wholly different reasons the integration of the state-society dichotomy was slow as well.

Both Marxian historical materialism and Weber’s theories on the influence of religious ethics on economic behavior were embedded in European thought about culture and economy and related concepts, hence, in the economy-culture and older reason-passion dialectics. Marx and Weber’s theories were foundational for Japanese social science, but, lacking similar dialectics in Japanese thought, were de-embedded from their historical-conceptual contexts. Historical materialism was understood by Japanese Marxists as a rather mechanistic stage theory. In Hoston’s (1986) detailed history of Japanese Marxism, for example, there is no trace of its underlying economy-culture dialectic. Much more than the early Marxists, many of the early Weberians were well versed in European languages (German mostly) and (intellectual) history. Sawazaki Kenzō’s sophisticated critique of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* may be testimony to that (*e.g.* Schwentker 1998). Nevertheless, the early Weberians did not read Weber in the wider context of the economy-culture dialectics either, and it took until the last decades of the 20th century before some aspects of those took root in Japanese thought. Specifically, the simplistic and schematic version of Weberianism that became popular in Western thought from the 1970s onwards, in which culture (or cultural values) co-determines entrepreneurship and/or economic growth (see Brons 2005), had an equivalent in Japan in parts of the *ni-honjinron* literature. It is an amusing twist that this literature, which was intended to stress Japanese uniqueness, was therefore, much more Western than its writers and readers realized.

Because Japan’s *tōge no jidai* took place a century later than the European

Sattelzeit, Japanese social scientist were trying to make sense of European post-*Sattelzeit* thought while experiencing their own *Sattelzeit* at the same time. Many of the necessary new terms, including a translation of ‘society’ (社会) were coined by Nishi Amane and Fukuzawa Yukichi during the first decades of the Meiji era (e.g. Yanabu 1982), but it took many more decades until the new concepts took root in social thought (including that of Nishi and Fukuzawa themselves). The key process of separation of ‘state’ and ‘society’ itself was not completed until after WWII. This process was probably slowed down considerably by the strong conceptual links between ‘state’ (国家) and ‘ie’ (家 — extended family/household) reinforced by the religious-nationalistic *kokutai* (国体) ideology. Especially prewar Marxism was strongly affected by the lack of separation of ‘state’ and ‘society’, and the consequent lack of an independent notion of ‘society’, but the lack thereof also made sociology (社会学) itself suspect, because it shared a (not well understood) root (社会 — society) with socialism (社会主義).

Abstract/theoretical concepts cannot be meaningfully isolated from their conceptual/intellectual histories and from the dialectics they are part of. For many of these concepts, such as ‘culture’, ‘society’, or ‘nature’, meaning and the role they (can) play in theories is largely determined by what they are ‘opposed’ to, to what they are (definitively) not. Despite the lack of detail, the examples in this brief and introductory essay support the idea that theoretical concepts (including their conceptual-historical embedding) play an important role in theoretical thought, but obviously those examples need and deserve a much more extensive treatment with proper referencing. (And several of the terms introduced in passing, including ‘theoretical/abstract concept’ itself, need further elucidation as well.)

What the examples also illustrate, is the aforementioned difficulty in demarcating language from thought, or concepts from ideas. To a large extent, language (or concepts at least) is (are) conceptually embedded prior thought, and that realization negates or blurs the boundary between the two. ‘Language’ and ‘thought’ function as a dialectical pair themselves, but the nature of the ‘poles’ and of the dialectical relationship between them is anything but clear.

References

- Brons, L.L. (2005), *Rethinking the Culture - Economy Dialectic*, The Hague.
- Holston, G.A. (1986), *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Schwentker, W. (1998), *Max Weber in Japan: eine Untersuchung zur Wirkungsgeschichte 1905–1995*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Yanabu, Akira (柳父章) (1982), 『翻訳語成立事情』, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.