

REPAIR, LIS
EXCESS AND
RESTART: NEW
METAPHORS FOR
PRECARIOUS
SITUATIONS

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TAMING UNCERTAINTY WITH IMAGINED SIMILES

Language tames uncertainties through metaphor, which replace abstract, strange, or uncharted elements of experience with what is familiar and already known. Although this supplement, of one term with another, is essential for thinking about abstract concepts and facilitating new insights, metaphors are problematic tools that may also lead reasoning on the wrong track. Metaphor draws an ontological similarity between concepts and undertakes to help understand one concept better in the image of another, even though two related notions may only share an imagined likeness. For this reason, philosophy has always been sceptical and scrutinising about metaphors; they might convince the mind to “follow [...] up a blind alley”; as Frantz Fanon warns in the concluding passage of *The Wretched of the Earth*,¹ and provide a mental framework, which is not arbitrary, but, carefully constructed by the ‘operations of power’ that seek to craft our perception of reality, as Judith Butler argues in *The Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*² Metaphor is mostly merely ornamental, and thereby both, aesthetic and obscuring; in many cases however, it is enlightening, in as much as it relates far-fetched ideas to one another, creatively expanding the understanding of one concept or experience in the image and from the perspective of another. This ambiguity flickers between two great powers; the first, the power to inform, the capacity to lead to deeper, richer understandings; versus the second, the power to persuade, tethered to the inherent dangers when suggestive commands become all too convincing.

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p.220.

2. Judith Butler, *The Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense*, in: *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, ed. D. Breazeale (New York: Humanities Press, 1979), pp.77-97, here p.84.

4. Hannes Böhlinger, *Bauen*, in: *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Metaphern*, ed. R. Konersmann (Darmstadt, WBG, 2014), p.43.

5. Jordi Cat, *Otto Neurath*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Spring 2023 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/neurath/>

When Nietzsche investigated the false simile created by metaphor, he argued that metaphor is everywhere, that we cannot make do without it, and that all language, poetic or scientific builds on it. We “possess nothing but metaphors for things”; metaphors, however, “correspond in no way to the original entities”.³ From Plato’s “cave” to Quines’ “web of belief” the philosophy of science and epistemology is also saturated with metaphor, enabling and structuring new ways of thinking. The web of relations created between imagined and real associations generates a conceptual horizon – a metaphorical background for imagination, language and experience. The metaphorical background of modernity provides the rationale behind why we imagine progress as a movement upwards, towards the ‘light of reason’. Consequently, everything must go up, must increase and must grow. This canonical pattern has become fixed in many ways of thinking around the globe (countercultures and counter-languages exist too, albeit in smaller numbers) and has also found its way to the natural sciences, where, in order to reach these new heights of reason, a suitable groundwork must first be prepared. The idea that scientific knowledge must rest on ‘foundations’ or axioms on which scientists erect the ‘building’ of scientific knowledge implies that science is a stable and well-connected structure in which every bit of information serves its purpose in the systematic architecture of knowledge. “Nothing is without ground, only ground is without ground,” as philosophers from Parmenides to Martin Heidegger contended.⁴ The metaphor of the ‘foundations of science’ is as fashionable today (cf. foundations of quantum mechanics) as it was in the 17th century, when scientists destroyed the old theological foundations and set out to lay new ones, on the basis of rational and empirical methods.

Yet, these are not the only metaphors for doing science, which provide a conceptual horizon about science and how it should be done. Challenging the approach of his colleagues in the Vienna Circle, who grounded science on the smallest falsifiable units of protocol sentences, Otto Neurath developed a theory of science that “was not logically fixed, securely founded on experience nor ... [the] purveyor of any system of knowledge”. In this new theory “uncertainty, decision, and cooperation were intrinsic”.⁵ To grasp this idea he coined the metaphor of science as a ship:

“We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction.”⁶

6. Otto Neurath, *Anti-Spengler*, in: *Empiricism and Sociology. Vienna Circle Collection. Vol. 1.*, ed. M. Neurath, R.S. Cohen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel., 1973), pp. 158–213, here p.199.

Scientific method, Neurath suggested, should strive to build a functional, floating ship. Arguing against the foundationalist metaphor of science he proposed to understand scientists as sailors on a ship that is under constant revision, replacement and repair. Neurath's ship metaphor for doing science relates to the all too human practice of putting immense effort in reversing the seemingly irreversible by reflecting (contemplatively going back to a thought or experience) and repairing (correcting and renewing what was broken) the otherwise irreversible process of decay, erosion and oblivion. In that sense the anti-foundationalist approach to science resembles everyday experiences of reversibility such as: cleaning up mess and putting things in order; recovering from a sickness; or making peace after a fight. Reversibility is such a common phenomenon of human experience that irreversibility appears to be an exception. The death of somebody who has reawakened a thousand times after they fell asleep is so unusual that the ideas of rebirth and afterlife appear to be more comprehensible and logical than the idea of an irreversible end-of-life. Irreversibility runs contrary to the experience that many things can be repaired, remembered, or reawakened, which is why losing, wasting, or forgetting something irreversibly can be both embarrassing and painful. For this reason, humanity has invented strategies of coping with this pain and embarrassment. Religious beliefs in life after death suppose that the irreversibility of death is not irreversible in the end, because we will resurrect anyway – pharaohs had the pyramids built to ensure their afterlife to be pleasant. Nowadays too, the hope that we will discover a cure for a deadly disease or even a new planet with a life-supporting atmosphere motivates the most outlandish of behaviours.

68 In contrast to the dream of eternity, dreamt by the royal and powerful, the three philosophical strategies of coping with irreversibility, which will be discussed in the following sections, are meant to be exercised by anyone and without any prerequisites. First, the Jewish principle of *Tiqqun olam*, meaning 'the repair of the world', metaphorically compares the correction of social problems or discord with the repair of a broken vessel. The metaphor suggests that ethical actions can undo a primordial separation and make whole what has become incomplete. George Bataille's opposition to this principle and its underlying assumption that reversal to wholeness is possible will be discussed in the second section. Bataille proposed to grasp "the generative principle of life" with the metaphor of 'excess', comparable to the eruptive exhaustion of the sun's energy. The third section proposes to reformulate Hannah Arendt's concept of natality within a mechanical context to demonstrate why the correction of social, economic, and ecological regression requires a restart.

In the Jewish tradition *Tiqqun olam* refers to legal enactments to preserve social order, to the eradication of idolatry and in its mystical meaning to the repair of the broken vessels that shattered during the creation of the world, catastrophically spilling the divine light, opening room for disharmony and freedom. Collective rituals and laws as well as individual acts of kindness are exercises of *Tiqqun olam*. The smallest ethical act is thus identified with the reparation and rectification of the whole world including the physical, cosmological, ecological, and social. *Tiqqun olam* demands persistence, detail, and the calm hands necessary for gluing a broken clay pot back together. The direction of ethical, aesthetic, or scientific endeavour is thereby not directed upwards, towards the improvement and growth, reaching the ultimate point of optimisation, but rather its trajectory points to the return to an original state of harmony and wholesomeness. *Tiqqun olam* attempts the impossible reversal of the irreversible shattering of the first universe, contained in the broken vessel, to undo the fragmentation of the shards of light that made up the first universe. *Tiqqun olam* suggests that fighting for social justice will undo political mistakes, the mismanagements of public funds, corruption on all levels that destroy democracy, cause harm and hinder the betterment of humanity.

2 THE REPAIR OF THE WORLD

However, *Tiqqun olam* is not only a theological concept and prayer, but also the name of the French activist author's collective *Tiqqun*, which has published books arguing for a new radical politics from the left. The authors of books such as *Introduction to Civil War*⁷ or *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*⁸ propose to repair society by building a new community that does not repeat the essentialist and exclusive structures of outdated forms of community, such as the family or the state. In their radical attitude, the authors' collective reiterates the Jewish principle and gives it a secular tone to emancipate the metaphor from its religious context and reuse it for serving the general need of providing a conceptual framework for emancipatory struggles. In that sense 'repairing the world' appears as a slogan in discourses about ecology, where authors who favour ideas of degrowth and DIY culture formulate demands and best-practices for addressing the climate crisis. Examples range from free-shops to hacker-labs and repair cafés but also to agriculture, industrial and manufacturing collectives, as well as tourism, managed according to principles aimed at repairing the world. This struggle against social and ecological crises can also be understood within the metaphorical background of Neurath's boat. The repair of the ship of society is a continuous endeavour of replacing broken planks, since the ship is not able to return to safe harbour, where the vessel could be refitted in a dry dock. Like the constantly corrected and connected scientific theories that make up Neurath's boat, non-foundationalist coherence oriented scientific theory, 'repairing the ship of society' must be done coherently and with consideration for the overall functionality of the ship, which is to stay afloat.

7. *Tiqqun, Introduction to Civil War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

8. *Tiqqun, The Cybernetic Hypothesis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Random House, 1973), p.180 (§124).

10. *Ibid.*

11. Max Horkheimer/Theodor Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

This secularisation of the metaphor 'repairing the world' by its supplement with the metaphor of 'repairing the ship', contextualises human endeavours within a metaphysical horizon, one without gods or superhumans. A horizon that opens the sky and the heavens to human conquest, but at the same time that eradicates the orientation provided by the religious framework for doing science or politics. In his *Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche evokes a departure from the metaphysical foundations that guaranteed the place of the human in the world: "We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure. It does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness."⁹ This language speaks about the possibility of liberation, about its necessity and tragedy: "But hours will come when you will realise that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. [...] Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more freedom-and there is no longer any 'land'!"¹⁰

Considering the condition of irreversibility, this embarkation to the future is one without return. We have left the theological worldviews that determined life and thinking for thousands of years, and we have criticised the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*¹¹ and the monstrous capacities of industry and progress, such as the invention of the atomic bomb or the industrial slaughterhouses of the concentration camps. Captured by an irreversible moment forward our ship appears to be bound for shipwreck: facing war, hunger, economic depression and ecological catastrophe. Caught in a growth paradigm the vessel has only become larger, but its mouldy beams have not been replaced. But why is growth problematic? Why is the collection and amassment of energy, resources, wealth, knowledge, biodiversity or data not beneficial for everyone? Here, George Bataille offers an unconventional theory for understanding the ambiguities of processes of irreversible augmentation.

3

ACCEPTING IRREVERSIBILITY

Against the imperative to be productive, efficient, useful, or valuable to society, Bataille emphasises that most of the activities that distinguish us from other animals are in fact unproductive: making art for art's sake; doing science out of curiosity; playing just for fun; engaging in unproductive sexuality; and even the liberating expression of laughter are all purely luxurious activities. Bataille writes:

"it is not necessity but its contrary, 'luxury,' that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems."¹² This philosophy of excess calls for a counterculture to the utilitarian spirit of Bataille's contemporaries. Today, cognitive capitalism has also successfully colonised the sphere of excess, luxury, and leisure. Despite the counter-culture of the avantgarde movements of the Situationist or the Hedonist International, the revolutionary potential of unproductivity has been spent in the expansion of capitalist accumulation to the sphere of leisure, tourism, and extravagance. Economic growth and overproduction, as well as economic crisis and depression, waste and destroy wealth, energy, and resources. In short, Bataille argues, the general economy is defined not by scarcity but by abundance. Contrary to theorists who concentrate on the role of production in economies, Bataille stresses that the irreversible "expenditure"; "consumption" and "excess" of wealth is "the primary object" in any economy.¹³

12. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I Consumption* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p.12.

13. *Ibid.*, p.9.

In support of his argument, Bataille maintains that “the generative principle of life” is per se directed towards exhaustion. “The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g. an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.”¹⁴ Published in 1949, Bataille’s book *The Accursed Share* (Vol. I Consumption, Vol. II The History of Eroticism, and Vol. III Sovereignty) describes this excessive and destructive consumption present in modern capitalism as similar to any other form of economy that produces a non-recuperable part, which Bataille calls the ‘accursed share’.

14. Ibid., p.21.

15. Ibid., p.20.

16. Ibid., p.25.

Be it development-aid, monuments, or wars, they all consume, exhaust, expend, and waste abundant energy and thereby fulfil the “necessity of losing the excess energy that cannot be used for a system’s growth.”¹⁵ Bataille argues the non-recuperable part that an economy produces must be spent consciously, e.g. on art and science. Otherwise, this accursed share produces excess unconsciously in catastrophic and violent manners, such as war, human sacrifice, industrial genocide or ecological catastrophes. In that sense, pulling all the stops and excessively partying as if there is no tomorrow appear to be deliberate modes of excess, while the smoke and pollution of carbon powered machines are ‘embarrassing’ involuntary.

“We can express the hope of avoiding a war that already threatens. But in order to do so we must divert the surplus production, either into the rational extension of a difficult industrial growth, or into unproductive works that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case.”¹⁶

Bataille’s paradigm is far-reaching and finds example throughout history, from the bloody wars and sacrifices of the Aztecs, to the Marshall Plan that exhausted the economic power of the United States to rebuild Western-Europe. While the Aztecs sacrificed their prisoners of war and thereby destroyed a valuable source of labour, the Marshall plan dumped US American overproduction on Europe and thereby consciously discarded their excess, gaining immeasurable influence over the culture and economy of Europe.

Another example that highlights the political and social consequences of consciously spending overproduction is the ‘potlatch’, a ritual of the Kwakiutl and other First Nations of British Columbia, that is performed at major festivities. At the event the tribe leaders gather and amass their wealth, blankets, ancestral items, and other valuables to demonstrate their political power; the valuables are then given away to other clan leaders to demonstrate their ranks in the social hierarchy of kinships and clans. The potlatch is a perfect example of the problematic extent of overproduction that serves to assert a social, economic, cultural and political hegemony. Even though geographer and anthropologist Franz Boas emphasised that the destruction of wealth “hinders the single families from accumulating wealth” and thereby serves the egalitarian function of redistributing a concentrated wealth,¹⁷ the government of Canada still prohibited the practice, deeming it an unnecessary waste of value. Bataille questions Boas’s and the Canadian government’s assertions and stresses that the release of overproduction and excess is not necessarily an exchange. When the chief destroys their valuables at the potlatch, there is no guarantee for exchange; nevertheless, the potlatch is a channel through which wealth can circulate. In some of the most spectacular potlatches, the gifting chieftain would demonstrate their power by cutting the throats of slaves and shattering highly valuable imprinted copper-bars. The destruction of wealth is compensated by an acquisition of rank: “the wealth that is actualised in the potlatch, *in consumption for others*, has no real existence except insofar as the other is changed by the consumption.”¹⁸ The excess of energy transformed in the potlatch therefore serves a social and political function, a display of luxury, which survives in modern societies, where class conscious individuals put huge efforts into distinguishing themselves from one another in the display of expensive cars or extravagant luxurious lifestyles. For Bataille these modern manifestations of the luxurious consumption of overproduction are, however, meagre modes of excess-consumption when compared to an absolute and joyful embrace of exhaustion viewed in the image of the sun’s excessive overflow of energy: “Solar energy is the source of life’s exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy – wealth – without any return.”¹⁹ Instead of clinging on to the promise of return, that anything that is expended or given away may return in some form or another, Bataille demands we accept and even celebrate irreversibility as the principle of life. Life does not pay back credits or returns favours but continues exhausting its energy until it ends.

17. Franz Boas, *The Indians of British Columbia*, in: *The Popular Science Monthly*, March 1888 (vol. 32), p.636.

18. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, pp.69f.

19. Ibid., p.28.

4 RESTARTING SOCIETY

The third strategy for coping with irreversibility circulates around the notion of 'natality'. The moment of birth marks a tipping-point: the irreversible end of the process of pregnancy and the irreversible beginning of a new life. For Hannah Arendt 'natality' is political, in as much as it is the essence of action and, in that sense, it is something particularly human. In the essay *Understanding and Politics* she asserts that humans are "beings whose essence is beginning"²⁰ and in that sense opposed to the "belief in causality" that is "of denying human freedom".²¹ Arendt's conception of 'the political' is, therefore, in its core directed against deterministic understandings of history and civilisation. 'The political' is in that sense clearly understood as an anti-deterministic and anti-materialist dimension that interrupts the chain of events and the sequence of prospected happenings. It opposes the idea of social, economic, or administrative necessity and emphasises that human beings can always stop continuing going down a certain (maybe doomed) route and start anew. "The so-called chain of happenings – a chain of events is, strictly speaking, a contradiction in terms – is interrupted every minute by the birth of a new human being bringing a new beginning into the world".²² One of Arendt's examples for such a new beginning is the act of forgiving. Forgiving undoes a received wrong. This idea challenges the notion of irreversibility: repairing a seemingly irreversible and harmful shattering of trust.

*"Forgiving (certainly one of the greatest human capacities and perhaps the boldest of human actions insofar as it tries the seemingly impossible, to undo what has been done, and succeeds in making a new beginning where everything seemed to have come to an end) is a single action and culminates in a single act."*²³

20. Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930 – 1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), p.321.

21. *Ibid.*, p.325.

22. *Ibid.*, p.326.

23. *Ibid.*, p.308.

24. *Ibid.*, p.215.

25. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

In that sense the act of forgiving is a real new beginning, an initiative and an intervention into a prospected course of events. The action of beginning is rare and exceptional and contrasts with unconscious behaviour, which follows a prescribed pattern. In Arendt's view, the alienated and polarised individuals of modernity are not sailing on a common ship anymore: they are the survivors of a flood or shipwreck, each and every one clinging on to their own little rafts, each becoming a "Noah" on their own "Arc".²⁴ Arendt's language is saturated with theological connotations; the evocation of a new beginning mirrors the language of the New Testament and the new covenant in the Christian faith. The reference to natality conjures up images that circle around notions of family, domesticity and procreation. Did Arendt use the metaphor without considering the problematic facets of such a framework? Or is it possible to secularise the democratic spirit of Arendt's notion of natality by stripping it from its connotations to messianic religion and the nuclear family?

Writing about the end of universal narratives and the alleged impossibility to believe (and surrender one's doubts) in the orientational concepts of modernity, revolution and progress, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that we have reached a point of no return comparable only to the extinguishing of a candle.²⁵ Here, the irreversible process of exhaustion described by Bataille finds an immediate end; the burning of the candle (symbol of the divine and comparable to the sun) stops and the light provided by the burning of the candle ceases. This metaphorical horizon implies that the end of the irreversible process of burning is caused by the exhaustion of the energy provided.

5 CONCLUSION

On the contrary, 'pressing reset' to restart a system is an interruption, not a cessation. Once a restart is initiated, the system is destined to recalibrate and start anew. Rescuing Arendt's notion of natality from its theological connotations, the metaphor 'restart' might adequately translate the idea of a sovereign and deliberate action of initiating a new beginning to the materialist language of the 21st century. Coming to terms with irreversibility requires a constant revaluation, adaptation, and invention of the language employed in speaking about and coping with it. The creation of new metaphors for irreversibility and reversibility saves us from using theological concepts for comprehending a world devoid of transcendental forces. Neurath's coherence-oriented understanding of knowledge demands one to constantly revise and repair also the 'ship' of the language of irreversibility. Replacing the mouldy plank of 'natality' with terms borrowed from the mechanical universe of physical engines, 'restart' and 'reset', might keep the ship afloat during which time an even more appropriate terminology (adapted to new scientific discoveries, technological environments or political requirements) may be created. Accepting the irreversible end of processes and the fact that everything that has been broken or spent will not fully return or be exchanged equivalently, repairing becomes the art of creating something new – overcoming rather than reproducing – what is broken, while restarting initiates the opportunity to learn from the mistakes already made.