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## “Philosophy Without Objects Or Concepts”

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### Introduction

I would first like to thank the organizers of this colloquium on “Concepts in Philosophy”, and especially Frédéric Cossutta, for inviting me to participate in it at the Sorbonne, within the framework of the Collège International de Philosophie. I was happy with the presence of Antonia Soulez, my Colleague at Paris 8 University, to whom I am grateful for having supported me a few years ago with the Delatour editions for the publication of *Sentiment d’injustice et chanson populaire* ([*Sense of Injustice and Popular Music*], 2017)<sup>1</sup> – a book of great philosophical ambition, since it addressed not only the “feeling of injustice”, but the very notions of “injustice” and “justice”, perhaps the oldest and the most prestigious “concepts” of philosophy. It was the outline of a gesture that I would like to amplify today.

I propose indeed to develop and argue a reflection that I have been leading for a long time on the very nature of philosophy and on the place that “concepts” take in it. The reading of *Concepts in philosophy – A discursive approach*<sup>2</sup> gave me a lot to think about, if only by the initial aporia posed by

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<sup>1</sup> Charles RAMOND et Jeanne PROUST, *Sentiment d’Injustice et Chanson Populaire*, Sampzon : Delatour France, 2017, 253 p.

<sup>2</sup> *Les concepts en philosophie – Une approche discursive*, Sous la Direction de Frédéric COSSUTTA, Limoges : Lambert-Lucas, 2020, 256 p.

Frédéric Cossutta on the notion of “concept of concept”, of which we should not think that we could easily get out; or again, with the notions of “operating schematism” and “thematization”, developed by Alain Lhomme. The texts that make up this volume, of very high quality, often exceed, by their references or their technicality, my own skills. My presentation will however be situated in the perspective of the “discursive approach” indicated by the subtitle, even if I am about to support theses quite different from those supported by the contributors as to the existence, or the possibility, or even the presence of “concepts” in philosophy, and as to the ordinary use of the verb “to think”, which will make my conclusion. I will only come closer, in a few points, to the theses supported by Antonia Soulez on the “ordinary” dimension of concepts in philosophy, without however entirely endorsing her thesis of a “descent” into the ordinary, since I will maintain that it there has never been a conceptual “ascent to the extraordinary” from which it would now be necessary to “descend”, but that the concepts, whatever one may have said (or hoped) about them, have always remained on the plane of the ordinary.

My presentation will therefore have a deconstructive dimension regarding the very notion of “concept”. Remaining Derridean in this, I will therefore present here, as in my recently published book<sup>3</sup>, a somewhat new synthesis between deconstruction and ordinary language, to achieve a satisfactory definition of philosophy. I have published *Dictionaries or Vocabularies* (on Spinoza, Derrida, Girard), and one could perhaps consider it contradictory to want to deconstruct the notion of “concept” in philosophy after having presented philosophers in the order alphabetically of their main notions or concepts. I hope my presentation will show that I have not fallen too heavily into such a contradiction, and that I have not, in writing vocabularies or dictionaries, endorsed or valued the idea (which I wish to combat here) that philosophy would be essentially a matter of “concepts”.

The search for a distinction between “concepts” and “non-concepts” (“opinions”, “beliefs”, “prejudices”, “general ideas”, “fantasies”, “dreams”...) is at the heart of the image that philosophy has framed of itself since its origin. That could even be its definition. We all are convinced (it is a belief or a massive and so to speak ineradicable prejudice) that philosophy consists, for the most part, in distinguishing concepts from non-concepts, this distinction being the basis of the double definition of philosophy as knowledge and as liberation. In

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<sup>3</sup> Charles RAMOND, *Vingt-quatre études de philosophie du langage ordinaire* [Twenty-Four Studies in the Philosophy of Ordinary Language], Limoges : Lambert-Lucas, 2022, 472 p. See [here](#).

Platonic allegory, going from non-concept to concept consists in leaving the cave, leaving the world of illusions, rejoining reality, thus reaching liberation, freedom, and wisdom. I take up here Plato's own self-explanation of this allegory, as it is generally received throughout the history of philosophy, even if one may have a different reading of this scene<sup>4</sup>, but which is not our subject today.

Just like the young Socrates in the *Apology*, we search for concepts as in a treasure hunt: we are ready to doubt everything except the very existence of the treasure. I have been in this situation. In my thesis on Spinoza, I believed (encouraged by Gueroult's Commentary and many others) that Spinoza had discovered this Grail of philosophy, that he had given us the means to discover the famous treasure of concepts, and the means not to confuse them with the non-concepts (imaginings, imaginary or "forged ideas", "beings of reason", "fictions", "general ideas", etc.).

However, as I progressed in my understanding of Spinoza, I realized that Spinoza, for whom I had (and still have) the greatest intellectual love, had not discovered the treasure of concepts, nor the distinction between concepts and non-concepts. On the contrary, this distinction had revealed to him, throughout his brief career, a persistent and insoluble theoretical difficulty. I devoted part of my thesis to this question. I can only refer to it<sup>5</sup>. I will recall here only a few elements, to illustrate and launch the point that I wish to make here: namely, that the distinction between concept and opinions, or between concepts and prejudices, which is at the heart of all the philosophical fantasy or of the very definition that philosophy has given of itself since its origin, has never been able to be found, nor practiced; that the whole history of philosophy offers no convincing example of such a distinction; that no philosopher, however great, has been able to provide a touchstone that would distinguish a concept from a non-concept, even though he put the search for such a distinction at the heart of his endeavour; that nowhere have I been able to find or obtain a list of "concepts" and a list of "non-concepts"; that consequently it is up to us to take note of such a massive fact, of such a patent divorce between the global philosophical project and its realization, and to conclude from it that philosophy,

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<sup>4</sup> See Charles RAMOND, "Mimetic Theory And Philosophy – A Tribute to René Girard", in French, in *Diacrítica, Revista do Centro de Estudos Humanísticos da Universidade do Minho* (Portugal), 30/2, 2016 (*Cosmopolitan Challenges, 500 Anos de Utopia, Homenagem a René Girard*, João RIBEIRO MENDES ed.), 30/2, 2016, p. 135-158, especially p. 155-156. [Full text of this issue [here](#)].

<sup>5</sup> Charles RAMOND, *Quality and Quantity in the Philosophy of Spinoza*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995, 332 p. See Part 2 ("Quality and quantity in singular things"), Section 2 ("Variations and leaps in the power of acting"), chp. 1 ("Qualitative prerequisites of the theory of knowledge"), §1 ("General ideas and common notions"), p. 253-269.

such as it has been actually practiced throughout its history, has been constructed and developed “without objects or concepts”, even if it has never ceased to proclaim and (perhaps) convince itself that it was at first a matter of objects and concepts.

### 1. “General Ideas” and “Common Notions” – Untraceable Distinctions.

Spinoza’s *Ethics* presents itself as a path from servitude to deliverance through knowledge. This is indeed the meaning of the title of the fifth and last part of the work: “On the Power of the Intellect, or on Human Freedom<sup>6</sup> <*De potentiâ intellectûs, seu de libertate humanâ*>”. From this point of view, the distinction between “adequate” and “inadequate” ideas is superimposed on the ethical alternative, which defines servitude as submission to the imagination, and freedom as submission to reason. Deliverance will “only” require (but we will see that this “only”, this first condition, this first stage of the ascent, will unfortunately remain inaccessible) that one separates the “general ideas” from the “common notions”, and the illusory qualities (born of the imagination) from the real qualities (the basis of reason). Spinoza’s whole enterprise is strained towards such a separation. And the fact that, despite the extraordinary conceptual power deployed in the *Ethics*, Spinoza did not manage to produce this distinction, seems to me a very striking indication of the impossibility of producing it. I will therefore take Spinoza here as an example of both an acute awareness of the crucial importance of the distinction between “general ideas” and “common notions” (which is only another way of distinguishing between “non-concepts” and “concepts”), and of the simultaneous impossibility of producing this distinction. I will give some arguments to explain why this distinction proves to be unattainable, and why we should renounce it (without any regret), to produce a correct conception or definition of philosophy. As Kant showed in his *Transcendental Dialectic*, there are impasses specific not to this or that philosopher, to this or that context, to this or that human capacity or inability to resolve questions, but proper to reason itself.

Spinoza constantly seeks, in his first works, to distinguish between the productions of the imagination and of the intellect. He devotes to the search for this distinction more than half of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. How to tear oneself away from the regime of fiction? Certain fictions, in fact, are plausible. Spinoza then affirms, famously, that “there is in ideas <*in ideis*> something real <*aliquid reale*> by which true ones are distinguished from false

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<sup>6</sup> *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume 1, Edited and Translated by Edwin Curley, Princeton (New-Jersey) : Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 594. I quote Curley’s translation by default.

ones”<sup>7</sup>. But what is this “thing” which is “in the ideas”, this thing, therefore, intrinsic to the ideas, and which allows such a “distinction”? Spinoza’s paradoxical answer (this is the whole meaning of the adequacy/inadequacy theory, which he tries to substitute for the true/false alternative) is that what “intrinsically” distinguishes false ideas from true ideas is their ability to bind together without interruption to produce correct reasonings, whereas wrong ideas cannot bind to each other indefinitely to produce such reasonings. To put it in the Spinozist way, even if he himself does not express himself exactly in these terms: adequate ideas are distinguished from inadequate ones in that they allow the production of reasonings which can “persevere in their being”<sup>8</sup> indefinitely, whereas inadequate ideas do not allow such “perseverance in being” of reasonings and demonstrations. And so (this is the profound paradox of the theory of adequacy), the “intrinsic” character which distinguishes adequate ideas from inadequate ideas is their aptitude for extrinsic connections: adequate ideas are intrinsically extrinsic. This “intrinsic” character cannot therefore be set up as a touchstone: to know if we are faced with a “concept” or a “non-concept”, we cannot content ourselves with scrutinizing the nature of such and such an idea. The difference between a concept and a non-concept is not visible in itself. It is only visible once put into practice, in a reasoning, that is to say in an argumentative discourse.

Spinoza, however, made several attempts to distinguish concepts from non-concepts “intrinsically”, and the failures of these attempts are very significant from the point of view that I now hold. He first tried to distinguish imagination from reason as knowledge of the singular from knowledge of the general. In the texts collected in the volume that brings us together today, several authors rightly insist on the fact that a concept is defined “intrinsically” as a production of generality, or an increase in generality. But Spinoza encountered the annoying fact that imagination is just as much a source of generality as reason. This is the famous “induction” of the traveller or tourist: “English people are phlegmatic, French sarcastic, Germans serious”, etc. These are the “bad generalizations” of the imagination, the whole philosophical enterprise consisting in replacing them by the “good generalizations” of reason, that is to say by concepts. But this program will never be realized. The promise of moving from bad generality to good generality will never be kept... The problem that Spinoza encounters, and that in fact encounters every philosopher, is that the imagination cannot be totally excluded from the process of

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<sup>7</sup> Spinoza, *TEI* (= *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*), §70: “From this it follows that there is something real in ideas, through which the true are distinguished from the false.”

<sup>8</sup> See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 3, prop. 6: “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being <*Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur*>.”

knowledge. We probably need to start with bad, imaginary generalizations to arrive, by successive rectifications, at good conceptual generalizations. Regrettable genealogical continuity... Even worse, the “knowledge of the third kind” or “intuitive science”, the highest degree of intellectual knowledge possible, will be very difficult to distinguish, in Spinoza himself, from the lowest degree of knowledge, i. e. the knowledge from mere perception. Intuitive knowledge, says Spinoza, is like a glance, like a visual perception, immediate, without stages, obvious. One of the most beautiful sentences of the *Ethics*, highlighted by Gueroult in his commentary, states that “the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things, are the demonstrations themselves”<sup>9</sup>. “The eyes of the mind” ... The eyes ... A simple gaze ... It is impossible here to distinguish between the lowest degree and the highest degree of knowledge: this is what Spinoza expressly says, at the very moment when he introduces hierarchical “kinds” of knowledge, ethical liberation implying that one passes from one “kind of knowledge” to another... This is, in my view, a very striking example of the contradiction or of the divorce, in the history of philosophy, between the project/program of distinguishing concept from non-concepts, and the reality of the constant superposition, in works actually written, of the two registers (even supposing that there are two of them, which my presentation today will tend to reject).

Spinoza also tried to distinguish adequate from inadequate ideas, or concepts from non-concepts, according to the criterion of activity and passivity. But there again he encountered the impossibility of such a distinction, like Descartes and like all the philosophers of the tradition. On the one hand, Spinoza tends to think that the mind is passive while imagining and active while reasoning<sup>10</sup>: an imagining mind therefore being only a partial cause of what it conceives<sup>11</sup>. This is the usual definition of prejudice: bad generalizations and insufficient activity of thinking. But in other passages Spinoza declares the passivity of knowledge itself<sup>12</sup>. This idea of a passivity of reason is fundamental

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<sup>9</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 5, Prop. 23, Sch.: “*Mentis enim oculi, quibus res videt, observatque, sunt ipsae demonstrationes.*”

<sup>10</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 3, Prop. 1, Cor.: “From this it follows that the Mind is more liable to passions the more it has inadequate ideas, and conversely, is more active the more it has adequate ideas. <*Hinc sequitur, mentem eo pluribus passionibus esse obnoxiam, quo plures ideas inadaequatas habet, et contra eo plura agere, quo plures habet adaequatas.*>”

<sup>11</sup> See *Ethics*, Part 3, Def. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Spinoza, *Short Treatise*, Part 2, Ch. 16, §[5], p. 124 : “This will be clear to anyone who only attends to what we have already said. For we have said that the intellect is wholly passive, i.e., a perception in the soul of the essence and existence of things. So, it is never we who affirm or deny something of the thing; it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us.”

and will always constitute an invincible obstacle for philosophers who have made it their program to distinguish imagination from reason. It happened to Descartes, for example, to characterize “intellection” as a “passion of the mind”<sup>13</sup> ; and in the *Fifth Meditation*, the narrator welcomes with total passivity the evidence of the existence of God; finely, Descartes will explain (in 1648, to the Marquis of Newcastle) that to conceive God properly is a question “not so much of seizing His perfections as of being seized by them <*illasque non tam capere quam ab ipsis capi*>”. So, with these authors, whom I take here as illustrious examples (despite them) of a thesis that I believe to be true in itself, the active/passive criterion cannot be the touchstone of good and bad generalization, hence of concept and non-concept.

The third way tried by Spinoza to distinguish concepts from non-concepts (without more success than in the first two) consisted in trying to posit degrees of generality. One could indeed imagine that concepts would present a high degree of generality, while ready-made ideas, or opinions, or prejudices, would present a lower degree of generality. This distinction underlies the criticism that we spontaneously make of induction: whoever has seen five Englishmen will find them phlegmatic, whoever has seen a thousand will have a more nuanced opinion.

However, Spinoza was no more able than other philosophers to grasp the hierarchy of degrees of generality. The imagination produces an intense generalization from a small number of cases. This is what we reproach to it when, for example, we denounce nowadays “amalgams” or “stigmatizations”. From this point of view, the reason would consist, on the contrary, in “not” generalizing, in “not” making amalgams. And so, the concept, well understood, should be something like a generality without generalization... The aporetic dimension of the attempt is obvious: how can I know if I am in front of the good generality of the “concept” (the “generality without generalization”) or in front of the bad generality of the imagination (which comes from a generalization or an amalgam)? How could I tell one from the other? This difficulty is in fact ethical: “generalization”, prejudice, ready-made ideas, in short, “non-concepts”, are “bad generalities”, coming from someone who does not think like me, whereas the “concept” would be the “good generality”, a generality without generalization nor amalgamation, perfectly adapted to its “object”. But since no one has ever known how to distinguish between this “good” and that “bad” generality, nor to produce a criterion which allows such a distinction, nor

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<sup>13</sup> Descartes, Letter to Regius, May 1641: “*Intellectio enim proprie mentis passio est, et volitio ejus actio*” (“Intellection is properly the passion of the mind, and the act of will its action”). See Jean-Luc MARION, *On the passive thought of Descartes*, Paris: PUF, 2013.

establish plausible lists of “concepts” and of “non-concepts”, the claim of a hierarchy between imaginary generalities and conceptual realities turns out to be nothing more than a rhetorical and disqualifying device.

In Spinoza, this very particular difficulty of degrees of generality<sup>14</sup> is manifested by the fact that his program would be to distinguish the “general” and the “universal”, while in reality (that is, in his written work) he does not succeed in doing so, not through an incapacity of his own, but because he realizes (or rather because he obscurely stumbles over the fact) that it is impossible. Spinoza, to distinguish the ideas of the imagination from the adequate ideas of reason, forged the concept of “common notions” (or rather took it up in his own way from a long tradition). In *Ethics (Part 2 Prop. 38)*, he states that “what is common to all things <*omnibus communis*> and is found alike <*aeque*> in the part and in the whole can only be adequately conceived”. The problem is that such “common notions”, which Spinoza calls “universal”, being extremely general principles, are very poor in science, if not impossible to illustrate. For example, the “properties common to all bodies” are the “simplest properties”, and include only the laws of extension, of motion and rest, and of speed and slowness. This is why Spinoza immediately proposed, in *Proposition 39*, to reduce a little the extent of these “common notions”, by introducing the idea of “proper common notions”, not having a universal scope, but a scope restricted to a certain number of bodies (in this case the human bodies). Spinoza indeed had as his goal the salvation of man, which could not be attained, nor even described, by absolutely universal common notions, and therefore he was forced to reduce somewhat the generality of his common notions in order to put them into taken with its soteriological approach. But then it became impossible for him to rank the “common notions” (or concepts) and the “general ideas” (or imaginations) by their degree of generality, since neither of the two categories could reach the universality which would allow alone to distinguish them, if only one of the two entities possessed it.

Consider the terms “man” and “woman”. Are they “general ideas”, imaginative, inadequate, and illusory, or adequate and rational ideas, “concepts”? Spinoza provided various answers to this question without being

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<sup>14</sup> I have argued, in *Quality and Quantity in Spinoza's Philosophy* (Paris: PUF, 1995), that Spinoza's progressive abandonment of “degrees of reality” or “of perfection” was the sign of his refusal to superimpose quality (“to be or not to be”) and quantity (“to be more or less”). I have analyzed, in *Twenty-Four Studies in the Philosophy of Ordinary Language*, the questions of “degrees of vitality”, “degrees of animation”, and “degrees of suffering” (Study 7, §2); “degrees of freedom”, “constraint” and “validity” of contracts and promises (Study 12, §1); and “degrees of subjectivity” (Study 16, §2). The question addressed here of “degrees of generality”, and *infra* that of “degrees of operativity”, are linked with all these analyses.

able to settle on one of them. Martial Gueroult had to admit it, whatever his efforts to resolve the difficulties of the doctrine. And what is said here about the definition of “man”, a traditional question of philosophy since Plato, would be valid for any “concept” or alleged concept: we do not know if the term “man”, nor any of the nouns that we use most commonly (from “least scientific” to “most scientific”: “egg”, “chicken”, “man”, “woman”, “proletarian”, “bourgeois”, “liquid”, “solid”, “gaseous”, “even”, “odd”), are “concepts” or not, if they come from good or bad generalizations, legitimate or illegitimate<sup>15</sup>. No doubt “dog” or “cat” seem less general terms than “mammals” or “animals”; but the classifications of the natural sciences vary with the progress of science, and no one would say that, because all dogs are animals, the term “animal” is “more conceptual” than the term “dog”. These are the reason why I propose here to fully give up the search for such distinctions, and to consider that the distinction between “concept” and “non-concept” should be abandoned as the basis of a definition of philosophy, since its constant invocation, throughout history, has gone unanswered and unsuccessful.

## 2. “Concepts” or “Ordinary Language”? – Defining Philosophy.

It is therefore illusory to believe that philosophizing consists in creating and then using special terms that we would call “concepts”, and that a “philosophical discourse” can be recognised by the fact that it uses these “concepts”, whereas an ordinary discourse would use common notions and common nouns. Philosophy can certainly be distinguished from other types of discourse, as we shall see. My intention is not to deny its specificity (quite the contrary), but to show that this distinction cannot be based on the distinction between various categories of terms, some of which having the dignity of “concepts”, while others would not.

The more one thinks about it, the more the search for an intrinsic distinction between “conceptual” and “non-conceptual” turns out to be a chimera. Since Plato, the boundary between what deserves the name “idea” and what does not deserve it has proved impossible to determine. Everyone would be ready to accept that “the Beautiful” and “the Good” are “concepts” (they may correspond to “ideas” or to “forms”) – and would therefore like to write them with a capital letter; there would also be no doubt about “Justice”, “Courage”, “Virtue” and “Temperance”. But what about “anger”, “envy”, “jealousy”? What

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<sup>15</sup> I developed these analyses, and proposed a solution to the old chicken-and-egg problem, in “Chicken and Egg – Or How The Boundaries of Categories And Concepts Are Determined”, in *Eidôlon*, Archives of the LaPRIL (Laboratoire Pluridisciplinaire de Recherches sur l’Imaginaire appliquées à la Littérature / “Multidisciplinary Laboratory for Research on the Imaginary Applied to Literature”), n°67 (*Frontières et seuils [Borders and Thresholds]*, Joëlle DUCOS ed.), Bordeaux: Bordeaux UP, 2004, p. 19-27. Text (in French) [here](#).

about a “sword”, a “belt”, a “pot”? What about, asks Plato not without concern in the *Parmenides* (130b-130e), “mud”, “hair” and “filth”? Nothing can be seen that would distinguish either of these terms as “concepts” by denying this quality to others. They are equal in generality and, if some of the objects they designate can be hierarchized according to their dignity, this moral hierarchy does not seem to have any relationship with a distinction between “conceptual” or “non-conceptual” terms. Otherwise, it would be necessary to say, for example, that “faithful” is a concept, while “unfaithful” is not, which would obviously be absurd. There is always something comical about questions of generalization and conceptualization, as in the famous “sorites” or chicken-and-egg problems. I would tend to take this as a warning that these questions are perhaps not to be tackled directly, but rather as traps set for beginners or inexperienced philosophers. *Caute...* As Spinoza points out to one of his correspondents, taking up the Second *Epistle to Timothy*, verse 20, some “vases” are for honour, others for dishonour. Thus, if being a concept came from the dignity of referent of a noun, it would be impossible to know whether the term “vase” can be considered a “concept” or not.

One and the same term can be a “concept” in one author, and not in another. The term “accompaniment”, for example, hardly seems “conceptual” in itself. And yet, Spinoza uses the verb “to accompany” (*concomitor*) very systematically throughout his theory of affects, so much so that one would be tempted to see in it an “operative” notion, at least with him. But one can reasonably doubt that there are “degrees of operability” in the terms used by a philosopher, or at least that this scale could be objective, precise, and reliable. For example, Spinoza uses the notion of “degrees of reality or perfection” (of great dignity and great philosophical antiquity), in the *Ethics*, from Part 1 Proposition 9, i.e., from the very beginning of the book. One could therefore think that it will be a particularly “operative” notion in the rest of the book (since, in a *more geometrico* written treatise, the propositions are based on each other from the first). However, even if the expression “degrees of reality” makes a few appearances in the rest of the book, *none* of the propositions of the *Ethics* is based on Proposition 9 of Part 1: as if the notion of “degrees of reality” had been abandoned by Spinoza, had remained a dead letter, without operational value, in his *Ethics*. If by concept we mean an “operative” notion – however vague this term may be – we would therefore have to say that, for Spinoza, the “degrees of reality” are not a “concept”, whereas they are one for Descartes. The “degrees of reality” are therefore not intrinsically concepts.

Certain terms may lose their operational value from one book to another, by the same author. For example, the notion of “contract”, very present in Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, disappears from the *Political Treatise*. Its

operational or conceptual value therefore varies from one work to another. Should we consider “multitude” as a “concept” in Spinoza? Many readers think so, some disagree. Do “power”-*potentia* and “power”-*potestas* designate in Spinoza two “concepts”, or only one? It’s debated. Do “natured nature” and “naturing nature” designate “concepts” in Spinoza? Spinoza himself declares, as if in passing, that he is only borrowing well-known terms (*Ethics* Part 1 Proposition 29 scholia). But posterity has made them markers, emblems, of Spinoza’s philosophy. In short, the conceptuality of a term varies from one author to another, from one reader to another, from one work to another, and can in no way be grasped or characterized objectively, so that ultimately any term used by a philosopher can be given (or suppressed) its conceptuality, by himself or by one of his readers, as we see in the subjects of PhD deposited in philosophy, which extend endlessly the list of “conceptual” terms in a philosopher to legitimize academic research. The terms “quality” and “quantity”, certainly ancient categories (dating back to Aristotle), are not frequent in Spinoza. And yet I tried to propose in my doctoral thesis (1995) a complete interpretation of Spinozism and its interpretations according to the “quality/quantity” duality, thus elevated by me to the highest operational value, despite the weakness of its objective support in Spinoza’s texts.

What is said here of the terms used by Spinoza could certainly be said of the terms used by any philosopher. We can therefore postulate without great risk of being mistaken the universal variability or undecidability of the status of “concept” in philosophy. Kant’s discussion of Aristotle’s list of Categories in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is significant in this regard: the list of categories or “concepts” is essentially disputed. It even happens that philosophers are not content to suffer from the impossibility of distinguishing “concepts” from “non-concepts” but favour it. For example, Derrida’s verbal creations, from “Achose” to “Zoo-auto-bio-biblio-graphy”, passing through “Differance” and “Deconstruction”, without forgetting “Pas”, “Between”, and “Glas”, wilfully challenge the very possibility of distinguishing between “concepts” and “non-concepts”<sup>16</sup>. I am not saying here that Derrida would be a non-rigorous philosopher, either straddling concepts and non-concepts, or writing somewhere between philosophy and literature, as we too often hear it said, to praise or to criticize him. On the contrary, I have always considered Derrida a classical and rigorous philosopher, whose writing is very clearly distinguished from that of literature, precisely (among other reasons) because he refuses to embark on the chimerical race to distinguish between “concepts” and “non-concepts” – because he understood that philosophical rigor came from elsewhere. We will see that the genres of philosophy most likely to be confused

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<sup>16</sup> See my *Derrida Dictionary* (*Dictionnaire Derrida*, Paris : Ellipses, 2016).

with literature are precisely those which attempt to distinguish themselves from it by characterizing philosophy as the creation or use of “concepts”, and as the production of an “picture of the world”.

If philosophy does not consist in creating, assembling, combining or working with “concepts”, it is first of all because it is impossible to define or delimit a part of ordinary language that would be that of “concepts”. But there are other reasons too.

First, a “concept” is always expressed by a single term or by a brief association of terms: for example “nature”, “life”, “democracy”, “degrees of reality”... Kant, in the *Discipline of Pure Reason in the Dogmatic Use of the Transcendental Theory of the Method of the Critique of Pure Reason*, distinguishes philosophy as rational knowledge “by concepts” <*Vernunftkenntnis aus Begriffen*> from mathematics as rational knowledge “by construction of concepts” <*aus der Konstruktion der Begriffe*>. He then characterizes “gold” as an “empirical concept” <*empirischer Begriff*>, “triangle” as a “mathematical concept” <*mathematischer Begriff*>, and “reality”, “substance” and “force” as “transcendental concepts” <*transzendente Begriffe*>. Thus, in all cases, as in the Kantian list of “categories”, we can see that “concepts” are single common nouns, or an association of two words – without this association producing a sentence.

A single term, however, does not produce meaning. Meaning begins at the level of the sentence, or of the discourse, and therefore a “concept” in itself, that is to say an isolated word or an association of a few words, can in no way give us a meaning. For example, the words “animal” or “table”, pronounced outside of a sentence, outside of a discourse, have no meaning and do not produce or allow the construction of any meaning. In itself a “concept”, even if it could be distinguished from a “general idea” or from a “prejudice”, would remain inert. This is one of the reasons why the *Course in General Linguistics* is often less rigorous and satisfying than one might have hoped. How could Saussure have believed that “meaning” could come from a “signified” or from a “concept”? I have always asked myself this question with surprise, without ever being able to answer it. Saussure knew very well that meaning only exists at the level of the sentence, and not of the word. His whole “second theory” on language in the *Course*, namely the theory of “linguistic value” and the production of meaning by “differences” within a set of discourses, is in fact opposed to his “first theory” according to which there would be production of “meaning” at the level of the isolated “sign” (or of the “signified”), where we see Saussure remaining prisoner of the belief in the existence of “concepts”. But as soon as it is not seared by a discourse, a concept no longer grasps anything.

If the production of meaning does not depend on the nature of the terms of the discourse, but on the discourse itself, no element of the discourse has superiority over another in the process of production of meaning. The ordinary production of signification, of reasoning, of argumentation, is thus done with the most ordinary terms of ordinary language. Ordinary language is the place of the equality of generalities. We can make impeccable reasoning with everyday words, as well as with specialized words, with neologisms, or with portmanteau words. There is therefore no need, in order to reason, to seek the truth, to demonstrate, in a word, to practice philosophy, to have recourse to particular or special terms, which would be “concepts”. This is not only impossible, because such a class of “conceptual” terms does not exist and cannot be defined or described; but it is useless, since only a discourse taken as a whole, and not one or another of its elements, can produce meaning, argument, refutation, philosophy. Such considerations make it possible to understand the millennial alliance, in philosophy, of logic and rhetoric. Logic indeed presents impeccable reasoning in which the nature of the elements of the reasoning matters little. When, performing a Barbara, you declare “All G is H, and all F is G, therefore all F is H”, it doesn’t matter what terms you could put in place of F, G and H. Any term would do. As such, “concepts” would have no superiority over the terms of ordinary or natural language. One can make a perfectly conclusive syllogism by speaking of “trades”, “vegetables”, “animals”, as well as “feelings” or any other general term.

The same equalizing reasoning applies to rhetoric. If I can reason correctly with the most ordinary terms, then I can reason correctly by ringing out all the dimensions of ordinary language: double meanings, connotations, antiphrases, poetry, innuendo, metaphors, irony, etc. There is no reason to amputate the ordinary language of this or that of its dimensions (besides that it’s impossible). Rhetorical purity or neutrality can never be achieved because any noun, any word of ordinary language, inevitably brings connotations, stories, sounds, which give a rhetorical and sensitive depth to each of its uses in discourse. Plato, Pascal, Hume, Nietzsche, Austin, Bergson, Derrida, would be so many examples of this marvellous alliance of logic and rhetoric in the writing and constitution of philosophy.

Philosophy is therefore the resolution of theoretical problems by the means of ordinary language. This definition makes it possible to distinguish philosophy from disciplines that are close to it, but which have quite different objectives and achievements.

If philosophy, at first, is a “solving of theoretical problems”, it can be distinguished from two types of disciplines: on the one hand, disciplines which

do not have the objective of “solving problems”; and on the other hand, the disciplines which propose to solve practical or technical problems. Art, for example, does not have the function of “solving problems”, theoretical or not. Literature and painting present visions or images of the world, as complex as the world itself, and in this sense emit no more theses about the world than a mirror would. Molière’s or Shakespeare’s plays, Virginia Woolf’s or Marcel Proust’s novels do not emit theses that could be summarised. The same could be said of the paintings which represent the highest aesthetic achievements of our societies, since they are given the most sumptuous monuments as settings, since crowds flock to admire them, and since their economic value is almost incalculable. So any philosophy which sets itself the objective of proposing an image of the world, a “*Weltanschauung*”, or which would be accomplished in “descriptions” (of affects, of experiences, of existentials, of periods of time, of situations, of social or human relations), rather than defending argued theses, will actually come close to painting or literature, to the point where it will sometimes be difficult to distinguish (except perhaps by their success) treatises on phenomenology, for example, and novels.

The problems that philosophy sets out to solve are then “theoretical” problems. There are problems to be solved in every field: how to distribute wealth, how to construct a building, how to cure a disease, and so on. These problems always have a theoretical dimension, but they are not exclusively theoretical. To obtain an answer to the question posed by a poll, material resources need to be mobilised, and the results interpreted according to certain protocols. Philosophy differs from all these searches in that it is concerned, if not exclusively then at least as a matter of high priority, with solving theoretical problems: for example, “How to explain the structure of the universe with a single element?” (Aristotle’s question at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*), “How can an in-extended thought move an extended body?” (Descartes’ question), “How can ignorant people attain bliss?” (Spinoza’s question), “How can the contradictory nature of man be explained?” (Pascal’s question), “How are *a priori* synthetic judgments possible?” (Kant’s question), “How can men be in chains everywhere, when man is born free?” (Rousseau’s question), “How can space claim to represent time?” (Bergson’s question), “Why is writing in the ordinary sense despised by philosophers and men of religion, when they admire the metaphorical writing that they believe is inscribed in nature or in consciousness?” (Derrida’s question)... Or again, “Can being be said in several senses?”, “Are there degrees of reality?”, “Should we make room for modalities in ontology?”, “Where is ontology?” (Badiou’s question)... To answer such questions, to solve such problems, no “field” survey will suffice, or even be necessary, no “crucial experience”, no tool or instrument. All we need to do is

think, reason, analyse, argue and demonstrate. This is where philosophy differs from the human sciences.

Finally, the fact that philosophy is the resolution of theoretical problems “by the means of ordinary language” makes it possible to distinguish philosophy from its oldest sisters and rivals, namely mathematical logic and more generally the sciences of matter. Many philosophers, from Leibniz to Carnap, have tried to bring philosophy closer to logical or mathematical formalisms. These attempts have always failed, for fundamental and in no way contingent reasons. There is indeed a difference in nature between ordinary language and logical or mathematical formalisms. Attribution or predication, which is the essence of ordinary discourse (“The snow is white”), have no equivalent in logic or mathematics, because the relations of equivalence or equality which structure them do not have nothing to do, by their completeness, with the structural incompleteness or imprecision of the attribution. “S is P” differs *toto caelo* from “S=P”. Much of what makes ordinary language so charming and effective (the art of rhetoric, of saying one thing while implying the opposite, of making fun, of stressing certain syllables rather than others, and thus to cause complex halos of meaning) is entirely useless in logic and mathematics, from which it is by the way absent. Very significantly for the position I am defending here, mathematics never uses the word “true” because mathematics has nothing to do with truth. We will never say of a mathematical theorem that it is “true”, but that it is “demonstrated”: *quod erat demonstrandum*, “what had to be demonstrated”. And the terms “true” and “false” in logic books never characterize the theorems themselves, any more than in mathematics books. Similarly, a physical law is never said to be “true”, but “not yet disproved”. Philosophy, on the contrary, seeks the truth, the true, to which, paradoxically, only ordinary language can give access, by the very fact of its capacity to err and its structural inaccuracies. No doubt the truth has been a question disputed from the beginning. The fact remains that ordinary language clearly distinguishes spheres of discourse where the term “true” is never pronounced (mathematics, exact sciences) from spheres of discourse where it is constantly present (testimonials, history, philosophy).

Philosophy is therefore not recognized by its “objects” and its “concepts”, but by its “problems” and “reasoning”. Philosophy “without objects nor concepts” defends theoretical theses in argued discourses, using the rigor of logic and the music of ordinary language (which knows no hierarchy of terms). In this respect, it differs from literature (because it does not propose an image of the world, but theses on the world as argued resolutions to clearly posed problems), from the human sciences (because it seeks to resolve theoretical problems that are inaccessible to field investigations), and from the sciences of

matter (because it uses the means of ordinary language, including all those of rhetoric, to seek that truth that logical formalisms ignore).

## Conclusion

Philosophy differs from formal games (such as chess or mathematical axiomatics, for example) in that it never loses sight of the preoccupation with existence, or with reality. Whether at the end of an ascent, as in the Platonic allegory of the cave, or at the end of a descent, as in the Cartesian *Meditations*, the philosopher encounters reality in the course of his initiatory journey, and tries never to let go of it. It is not surprising, then, that much of philosophy has described itself as a description or representation of the world or of reality. For Plato, and subsequently for much of Western philosophy, philosophy was the art of cutting up reality “according to its natural articulations” (*Phaedrus*, 265e). And the oldest, simplest, and most resilient definition of truth has always been “*adaequatio rei et intellectus*”, i.e. the “adequacy (or agreement) of mind and thing”.

Hence came the idea that philosophy would fundamentally relate to “objects” which would have to be “described” as precisely as possible to obtain the most perfect adjustment between an “object” and its “idea”. In this very old and very established conception, objects are conceived as “*ideata*”, that is to say things “of which there is an idea”, and conversely ideas are always conceived as “ideas of” some object, or of some other idea<sup>17</sup>. In this structural connection between “objects” and “concepts” (or ideas), every object is the object of an idea, and every idea is the idea of an object. And philosophy is conceived either as a description of the world, or as an image of the world.

This concern for the real explains the philosophical devaluation of the imagination, and the constantly renewed ambition to identify a class of terms (the “concepts”) which would correspond, or stick, to reality, while the common nouns, imprecise and contingent, would be the product of our imagination. There is indeed something frustrating, and perhaps even infuriating, in accepting the idea that all the general terms, all the nouns that we use in ordinary language, are equally imaginary and arbitrary. And yet, it is the truth: all our categories correspond to variable interests, changing according to time and place, and in no way according to “reality”. There are, in “reality”, neither “chicken” nor “eggs”, but distinctions and discontinuities imposed by ordinary language on the continuity of matter according to our interests – here, the

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<sup>17</sup> See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 1, Ax 6 : “*Idea vera debet cum suo ideato convenire*” / “A true idea must agree with its object”.

interests of our stomach much more than those of a disinterested speculation. Ordinary language superimposes rigid categories on fluid reality, that is to say discontinuities that are imaginary by definition, since their function is to code, to frame, to regulate, to remove from us the continuous flow of the reality whose presence we could not sustain without going mad. As Deleuze so movingly exclaimed at the end of his last book *What is Philosophy?*, “We only ask for a little order to protect us from chaos”... None of our categories is thus “more real” or “less imaginary” than another: for their function, like the Freudian censorship of dreams or the Deleuzian umbrella, is to protect us from unbearable reality. This is why there is no discernible class of “concepts” within ordinary language, and this is why philosophy does not maintain a privileged relationship with “concepts”, if one understands by them general terms that would be “closer” than others, or more “adequate to”, or more “in touch with”, “reality”.

Ordinary language thus settles us not at all in “reality” (because we can never settle in reality), but in the imaginary, without exception, of categories. But just because the categories are imaginary doesn’t mean they aren’t necessary. Discussions, agreements, reasonings, disputes and reconciliations are all possible on the basis of them and through them alone. Our categories are all imaginary, but we do not and cannot live in any world other than theirs. This imaginary or arbitrary dimension of all the categories (without exception) therefore in no way leads to who knows what relativism or scepticism or impossibility of reasoning. As we have seen above, it is quite possible to produce the most rigorous syllogisms with the most banal or uncertain notions, for example the different names which designate the variety of human habitations: “hut”, “cabin”, “crib”, “apartment”, “house”, “hovel”, “izba”, “dacha”, “igloo”, “tent”, “manor”, “presbytery”, “farm”, “villa”, “pavilion”, “castle”, “palace”, “skyscraper”... The indecisive and uncertain nature of these terms in no way prevents us from talking about them or producing conclusive reasoning about them. There is no “concept of the dog” or “idea of the dog”, but there are plenty of “discourses on the dog” or “theses on the dog”, which can be argued, fought, proven true or false. The relation of philosophy to the world is not term by term, from “concept” to “object”, but global, from “discourse on” to “discourse on”. Philosophies never relate directly to the world, but always indirectly, through the discussions they have with other philosophies.

The “ordinary language” method finally brings a remarkable argument in favour of the theses supported here, in the form of the intransitivity of the verb “to think”.

The transitive construction of the verb “to think” (“I think X”) does not in fact belong to ordinary language, even though it is encountered in certain

academic discourses. The verb “to think” is always used intransitively in ordinary language: “I think *that* X”, with a complete sentence in place of X (for example “I think that VAT is an unfair tax, because it is not proportional”) is the ordinary construction of the verb “to think”, the one we use every day without even “thinking about it” (another ordinary and intransitive construction of the verb “to think”). The construction of the verb “to think” matters to philosophy. A transitive construction of the verb “to think” means us acknowledging that “thought” has “objects”, just like the verb “to think” has “object complements”. In this conception, thought is conceived as a kind of perception, more precisely as a kind of “vision” – a conception very present in the whole history of philosophy from Plato to Foucault. The fact that ordinary language, on the contrary, does not make room for the transitive construction of the verb “to think” is, from my point of view, highly significant. The intransitive ordinary construction of “to think” envelops the unconscious idea that thought is not a perception, but as articulated speech. Ordinary language here seems to me a very penetrating philosopher... Thought does not encounter “objects” (“thinking” is without “object complement”), but “problems” or “questions” (formulated as sentences or complete questions) that it tries to solve. Thought not being perceived as a vision, the task of philosophy must therefore not be conceived as the “description” of an “image of the world” (the task of art rather than of philosophy), but settles in the element of demonstration, of argument, proof, and refutation. Philosophers have sometimes hesitated between these two conceptions of thought: this was the case, for example, with Spinoza who, on the one hand, considered (like Descartes) that thought had objects (that every idea had an “*ideatum*”, and was therefore “the idea of something”); but who, on the other hand, believed that ideas should be conceived as “affirmations”, that is, as propositions (as discourses and not as visions or “mute images”) moving in the “prolix” (i.e. discursive) element of “definitions”, “postulates”, “axioms”, “propositions”, “demonstrations”, “scholia”, “corollaries”, “appendixes” – through which his *Ethics*, by its very form, put into practice a conception of thought that was the antithesis of the transitivity it sometimes defended. The very fact that, for Spinoza, “thought” is an “attribute” (i.e., a plane of reality) that develops on its own, in parallel with the attribute “extension”, but without ever joining it, and without in any way being its “image”, contributed powerfully to this intransitive conception of thought that ordinary language selects by making no room for transitive constructions of the verb “to think”.

## Summary

Philosophy sees itself, more often than not, as a “conceptual” activity, essentially concerned with the world, i.e. reality or “objects”. The aim of “concepts” is to deliver people through knowledge, to bring them out the reign of imagination and into the reign of reason. However, this undertaking, declared crucial everywhere, is never crowned with success. No philosopher has a list of “concepts”, or a touchstone for distinguishing “concepts” from other generalities expressed in ordinary language. We try to show that the attempt to distinguish “concepts” from other “general ideas” cannot succeed, and that philosophy does not deal with “objects” or “concepts”, but with “problems” and “discourses”.