

# THE ART OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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# The Nature of Philosophy

The emergence of new pedagogical practices in the field of philosophy; the desire to philosophize which has been expressed among the general public in recent years; the success noted in bookstores of works with various philosophical claims: this leads us to reflect upon the nature of philosophizing, even to answer those who question the legitimacy of this recent vulgarization of the philosophical desire. Does philosophizing refer to an erudition, a general reflection on the world and on life, a type of behavior, “talk for the sake of talking”, a critical analysis? Is it done in complete freedom or under some constraints? So many meanings and possibilities that we encounter both here and there and which will lead us to make a decision particularly – prejudicially or partially – and subjectively about the problems raised by the principle of such a practice. More than one theorist will embark unscrupulously on this hazardous path which consists in determining its essence, its meaning and its value, univocally and rigidly, and to condemn and vilify various other approaches within which they will think that they see some ideological poison or virus nestling, signifying the absence, yes even the imminent or distant death of philosophy. Of course, if it is hardly forbidden to take sides in philosophical activity – after all, the radicalism of an a priori theorizing is scarcely foreign to it – let us all the same ask ourselves if the infamous act of problematizing, which philosophy teachers notoriously demand from their students, could not just as well be required of the qualified teachers and theorists.

What makes it possible to assert that a discourse, since it is mainly a question of discourse, is of a philosophical nature? Is it when thinking becomes an object for itself? Is it through the use of abstraction, which makes it possible to go from the narrative to the explicative, from myth to rationality? An opposition which in fact presupposes that rationality is not itself of a mythical order, and that a myth is not rational. Is it through analysis or conceptualisation? Is it the passage from experiencing to reflecting? Is it a discourse which is already reflected upon, the content of which is already explained, or is it a discourse which encourages reflection, bearing an implicit thought? Although we will admit, as in all of these oppositions, that one of the two terms does not necessarily exclude the other. Is it to be aware of our own existence, an awareness which would imply being articulated in words? Is it the emergence of a foundational metaphysics, an ontology, or of critical thinking? Is it the recurrence of a thought or the development of a system? Is it the object of reflection or the way of reflecting which determines? Is it the appearance of an eth-

ical discourse or should an epistemology be extracted from it? Does rhetoric sum up the art of philosophy, if it is about arguing and articulation? Is not all religious doctrine by definition the vector of philosophizing? Does not every specific culture articulate a philosophical doctrine? Is philosophy the eternal exegesis of consecrated authorities? Is philosophy a historically dated and geographically defined activity or does it essentially belong to human beings despite its polymorphism? Should we speak of the Greek miracle of philosophizing, the model par excellence, or of the Greek exception of philosophizing, a mere historical and cultural idiosyncrasy? Is philosophy inherent in human nature? Is the concept then its culmination or its corruption? Should we distinguish between a vulgar and a noble philosophy, an empirical and a scientific philosophy, a natural and an artificial philosophy? So many questions which in themselves border on the philosophical activity, at the risk of spilling over it.

If philosophy does not already contain such an attempt in itself, perhaps we should contribute to the genesis of a meta-philosophy, the matrix of philosophizing, the synthesis of the conditions of the possibility of philosophical exercise. Taking into account on the one hand the classical supporters of the historical dignity of the philosopher, sages and scholars, learned men for whom philosophy represents the institutionalization of humanities, the teaching of the history of ideas, the production of a speculative literature full of abstruse concepts. On the other hand the “liquidators” of philosophy who swear only by scientific certainty, by precision of language, by logic and facts; or the followers of a practice without theory, even though they brag about philosophy. This “beyond” would mean thinking about philosophy as a vast toolbox, a wide range of ideas, of problems, procedures: philosophy as a means to another end, whatever that might be. A vision which is certainly a bit technical, but which would help us no longer fall into the trap of a thetic or a dogmatic thought. After all, this is what some great system philosophers have been trying to accomplish by claiming to ignore authorities or dogmas and to rely solely upon reason. Here, undoubtedly, lies also the spirit of a philosophical practice.

The challenge of this work is to try once again, among countless and eternal attempts, to clarify the meaning of philosophizing. And like any other author we are not likely to be immune to our own bias, at the risk of choking on it. As far as possible we will admit that our main area of interest is that of philosophy as a practice. What does it mean and what does it imply as a human activity? And if it does not seem possible for us to claim, from some cosmical standpoint, from a kind of absolute perspective, to determine the unique or primary meaning of a term which conveys a whole history, we can at least try to shed some light on the issues nested inside of it.

# The Ambiguity of Philosophy

From its ancient Greek origins, “philosophy” as a consecrated term rests on an ambiguity, or at least on what appears to us today an ambiguity and a paradox. Let us start with the ambiguity. The term “sophia”, for which the philosopher theoretically feels love, desire, and sympathy, which is suggested by the root “philo”, signifies both wisdom and knowledge. The coherence of this coupling of terms is quite understandable. Indeed, from someone who seeks to know we can expect that he will behave in a certain way: he will be thoughtful and composed; he will know how to listen and analyze; and he will not get carried away by the slightest trifle, which implies a certain distance towards people and events. It is the behavior expected of a good student, the one who learns and knows how to learn. Therefore, this wisdom implies a specific subjectivity, a way of being. And by connecting it to the other meaning of “sophia”, this wisdom is inseparable from knowing, from understanding, and consequently from a certain objectivity. If this conciliatory attitude remains entirely understandable it can also be considered a utopian aim, a kind of ideal and unsurpassable horizon which our modern age, bearer of doubt and suspicion, cannot accept as a factual reality. A lot of excesses of personality strains the act of knowing without invalidating the truthfulness of this knowledge, therefore prohibiting the retainment of a specific way of being and a capacity for thinking in the same term, seized in a relation of mutual necessity. Rightly or wrongly, someone can for example be considered both the “worst” of people and a brilliant scientist. An appetite for power, megalomania, egocentrism, pride represent as many flawed character traits which, however unpleasant, will not prevent the learned man from being learned. And to bluntly contradict the ancients, we could even say that the possession of knowledge, just like money or power, promotes irrationality rather than wisdom. Again, rationality and wisdom contain a potential for problematization more obvious than it seems at first sight. If the ancients, such as the Stoics, relied on a vision where the reality of the world and the city more than anything rested on coherence and harmony, other schools, such as the Cynics or Heraclitus, thought that conflict reigns and constitutes the primary reality. Even the Christian view, which advocates universal love, has a good dose of agonistic principles in its view of knowledge. It condemns those who transgress the prohibition of “vain” knowledge as well as its desire, the prime source of original sin. Without “charity” knowledge is less than nothing. In this, suspicious modernity has never done more than engulf a breach which, to varying degrees, was always present in the exercise of thinking.

# The Paradox of Philosophy

Now for our paradox. According to tradition the philosopher differs from the sophist, for if the former wishes to know the latter is already in possession of knowledge. Those who like Pythagoras or Plato insisted on the term philosopher, who forged it and gave it its glory, wanted to show us that in order to know we must desire to know – and for that purpose it is better to know that we know nothing, or almost nothing. This act of faith expresses a kind of humility which is the foundation and the generation of knowledge, in stark opposition to a claim of knowledge which no longer seeks to know, which no longer questions itself, since it already knows. Plato's fierce criticism of the sophists shows us a people who hold knowledge as power; it is a state of mind which very naturally leads them to try to convince their audience of the potency and the validity of their knowledge rather than to seek that which they do not yet know. Here we find the link between wisdom and knowledge since a particular subjectivity, taken as a psychological ideal, is the foundation of this knowledge. However, the paradox contained by this particular alternative lies in the fact that eventually the philosopher will boast about his humility: it is thanks to this that he will have a privileged access to the truth. So we will oppose the limiting thinking of the sophist to the open-mindedness and the potency of thinking of the philosopher. From now on the dice are loaded: who will pride himself on being a sophist; who will not boast about being, in this sense, a philosopher?

By this reversal or transvaluation the philosopher becomes the one who knows and the sophist the one who ignores, but they both have a clear conscience, fully justified in their own eyes. So who knows who is the sophist and who is the philosopher? Unless you search the reins and hearts, which, as everyone knows, is an arduous task. Is the modern philosopher really the sophist of yesteryear? Moreover, would it suffice to declare oneself ignorant in order to be learned? Is a proud and stubborn scientist less learned than a brave man, ignorant and without pretensions? Plato tries to solve the problem by suggesting the hypothesis that wisdom is the knowledge of what we know and what we do not know. The attempt is interesting. It takes into account at the same time our knowledge and our ignorance. But this unique perspective poses a problem: knowledge is above all manifested by an ability to grasp and to transform the world, which is indicated by science, whereas awareness of our ignorance, even of our doubt, is not a matter of efficiency. It is even contrary to it.

From the "philosophical" perspective, it is first and foremost a matter of working on the relationship to knowledge. But the scientist might very well consider that knowledge has a real value in itself while this relationship to knowledge is



nothing but psychology or philosophy, an activity that belongs to an altogether different domain. Some physicists criticize their colleagues who have become epistemologists, no longer being physicists, no doubt out of fatigue or a lack of rigor or by succumbing to some recent trend. If our era has become aware of the human dimension of its activity, undoubtedly because of its history and its many experiences, it is by the introduction of ethics as a regulatory function that the problem reappeared, rather than through the psychological dimension, as was the case with our predecessors. We do not ask ourselves if our doctor is leading a healthy life before consulting him. We mainly check his technical skills but also the honesty of his actions. Unwittingly, and rightly or wrongly, we make a radical break between knowledge and epistemology, as well as between epistemology and psychology. Although here again, the modern craze for psychology, and more recently for philosophy as well as for ethics, indisputably indicates a return to the thinking of the reflecting subject as being the constitutive entity of knowledge.

Let us now try to problematize the term “philosophy” through four different interpretations which we will attempt to analyze. We will play them off against each other since they necessarily overlap, something we have already touched upon a little. The four meanings that we will in turn give philosophy are the following: philosophy as a culture; philosophy as a field; philosophy as an attitude; philosophy as a competence. At times, these different meanings will share a common direction and nourish each other; at others, they will ignore one another or even come into conflict. In the context of the choice we have made, we will very briefly address the first two meanings of philosophizing: as a culture and as a field, to then engage more deeply in the last two: as an attitude and as a competence.

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## Philosophical Culture

For many people, the primary meaning of the term philosophy – in memory of the lessons we were able to follow from our school benches, the conferences we attended, the books we read – is that of a culture with its authors, its doctrines, its schools, its eras, its consecrated ideas, its various conceptual tools. Philosophical discourse is generally learned and referenced, which can make it obscure to the uninitiated. Nevertheless, if each individual mind can hardly be expected to reinvent the whole of mathematical science, how could it in the same way reinvent the history of ideas, recreate the substantial contributions produced over the centuries by the slow work of generations and by the labor of illustrious geniuses? Are we not dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants? The temptation is great to believe in our own genius and to ignore our debts.

On the other hand, if all of this is about gaining autonomy of thought, should we

not realize that the established concepts license numerous short-circuits of thought? Like the formulas of mathematics or physics, these classified concepts let us avoid long explanations and as such they are useful. But they are also used to freeze thought, preventing it from thinking by itself: they introduce new evidence, and since the tool is never neutral it is easy and natural to establish the instrument as dogma. This is how Aristotelian or Kantian distinctions, particularly useful and striking, easily lead to an avoidance of problematization. As history shows, it becomes difficult to abandon or even criticize the thinking of these authors, which has become as reliable and indispensable as any reference dictionary. Fashion has its reasons which reason ignores. Artifice, a human specificity, a tool which makes it possible to distinguish between nature and culture, is both a blessing and a curse.

And so, as we have said, no more than it is possible to recreate the entire history of mathematics by ourselves – the contributions of the ancients are very useful, necessary even, for thinking about shapes and numbers – no more can we claim to overlook the philosophical cultural heritage without both depriving ourselves of crucial elements, essential to a thought worthy of the name, and ignoring the historical genesis of our own thinking, the long intellectual collective process of which we are the heirs. Access to a philosophical culture allows us to become aware of ourselves and to structure our thinking, provided that we do not glorify the elements of which it is composed, attributed to geniuses, without trying to see the close relationship that these exceptional men maintained with common or mainstream thinking. Even though philosophy clashes with the banality of opinion.

Opinion is undoubtedly one of the greatest handicaps for philosophical practice, as Parmenides recognized in his day. A classical idea, since opinion portrays an appearance of thought, a ragbag of ready-made ideas collected here and there, without distance or analysis, where everyone is repeating what everyone else is saying without even realizing it. Opinion is common in that it is banal and devoid of anything special, since it involves no particular work or effort. Parmenides categorically opposes the “well-rounded truth” to the “opinions of mortals in which is no true belief at all”.

In a different, more problematic sense, opinion hinders philosophy since it is a scarecrow, the sword of Damocles that we feel hanging over our head and that we wield over others. Anyone who would be bold enough to try to think for himself, without passing under the yoke of established authors and referenced discourse, would be threatened with excommunication: he would be struck by opinion. By extension, the same goes for those who would claim to interpret the thought of an author in an original way. Opinion would be that which is considered false. But we also see the reverse: to philosophize would be to say what nobody has yet said, or to claim the opposite of what everyone else is claiming. It should come as no surprise

that professional philosophers find it very easy to anathemize each other.

Plato also warns us against simple ideas, against established words. He suggests a path which allows us to work on these ideas, to apply thought. Besides, if he criticizes “vulgar” opinion, he also criticizes “learned” opinion, the orthodoxy which remains mere opinion. If the philosopher escapes from the cave, from its darkness and illusions, to contemplate the truth which he has found outside of it, he still feels obliged to come back “inside” in order to let his fellow citizens benefit from his newfound light and to confront them. Far be it from him to take refuge in an ivory tower, even if he should die from this return to “reality”. As for arguments of authority, they are ceaselessly criticized or ridiculed by Socrates who is more interested in single combat which allows for the emergence of an autonomous thought than he is in knowledge and in the rehashing of “genius” ideas. Still, he is not above providing some elements of his own philosophical culture from time to time, or imposing some of his intuitions on us. Learned opinion is always opinion since it is fixed. It is no longer being born, it is no longer a work in progress, and therefore it no longer questions itself.

Apropos of this, let us mention Pascal’s intuition regarding opinion, when he claims that truth can certainly be found in opinion but not to the extent that the conveyors of it imagine. That is, opinion is not opposed to truth since truth lies at the heart of it, but in a confused way, and in less proportion than the promulgators of these opinions tend to believe. The consequence of this perspective is that access to truth can be facilitated through the return of the opinion to itself, by the work it will perform on its own matter, by an awareness of itself. It is no longer so much by looking on the outside for a good and intelligent word, as artificial as possible, that the philosophical process will be conducted. It is rather by contemplation, by repetition, by reflecting thinking on itself. Thereby philosophy maintains a dialectic relationship to opinion. This is also what Kant attempted to explain in his analysis of common sense: at the same time the founder and the obstacle of philosophizing.

As we have already mentioned, our thinking is not generated spontaneously. It emanates both from a personal history and a cultural and social genesis. But if thought must lean on the first, it does not lean any the less on the second. If the Chinese do not think like the Americans and the Americans do not think like the French, it is because cultural factors act upon these singular beings, as witnessed by the notorious philosophical differences between these various countries. It does not matter then that the established authors of a culture have shaped that culture, in which they are its “typical product”, its outstanding representatives. In all events they will enlighten and nourish the singular mind who would be foolish to deprive itself of them, even when they only make it confront its own banality. The same goes for authors who are foreign to us, who by their otherness invite us to see our

idiosyncrasies, to understand our characteristics.

So, remaining in our perspective, that of a philosophical practice – or of a practical philosophy, the philosophical culture, the history of ideas, the understanding of the major debate issues of authors and schools – will help us detect and decode our own personal moorings and those of our interlocutors in order to seize the dilemmas which inhabit them. The established conceptual operators will be useful to us: technical tools that we will benefit from knowing, not for the sake of vain erudition but because they will make our job easier and render us more precise and more efficient. This in no way excludes gratuitous knowledge, on the contrary. It will liberate us from the burden of expectation since it will no longer be a question of obeying the orders of institutional opinion, of protecting ourselves from specialists ready to cut and thrust for a point of detail, since from then on it will be a matter of using the contributions of history as we see fit, adapting them without ulterior motive at our discretion.

This leads us to quickly distinguish two types of relationship to philosophical culture: the historicist view and the pragmatist view. The first is more typical for the “continental” view, more metaphysical and focused on content; the second is more inherent in Anglo-Saxon philosophy, more analytical and preoccupied with form. The latter, following the example of science to which it wants to get closer and on which it tries to model itself, even its techniques, prides itself on scientificity, efficacy and modernity. It is interested in the nature of discourse and of methods of evaluating its validity, or even the practical aspects of discourse. Continental philosophy rather tries to set up great universal and founding schemes, carriers of values and axiologies established a priori. Ethics, moreover, represents an obvious battlefield of these two visions of the world where pragmatic logic, interested in the consequences of actions, will confront eudaimonistic logic, prone to promote virtues which postulate the nature of good and evil in themselves, more autonomously and more detached from the consequences. Quite naturally, without therefore authorizing any automatism, the act of founding rather turns towards the past, while efficacy turns towards the future of thought. Each of these two aspects carries with it the root of its own self deception.

By way of conclusion on the cultural dimension of philosophizing, in order to put it into perspective, it seems useful to us to invoke the German concept of “Bildung”. This term, developed in the 19th century by philosophers such as Humboldt and Hegel, literally refers to the idea of education, to the formation of the self. This maturation of the subject represents a kind of harmonizing process of the heart and the mind, for the individual as well as for society. This transformation of identity, its fulfillment, is carried out through the testing of the knowledge and the beliefs of the subject, by a necessary confrontation with “natural consciousness”, a perspec-

tive which goes against a certain prevailing psychologism where the “nature” and “character” of the person are presented as the intangible and unavoidable data of the subject. However, this concept in no way excludes the plurality of talents and personalities, since this multiplicity, and the dialectic relationship which it entails, is constitutive of the development of society. Moreover it includes a critical dimension in the relation between the individual and society, from an ideal perspective. It is about humanizing man, developing his emotions as well as his intellectual capacities. It is no longer about a kind of formal or scholarly “general culture”, of a display of knowledge or references, but of spiritual, existential and social growth. In this, “Bildung” stands out just as much from a metaphysics of being as from a postmodern rejection of all universality.

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## The Philosophical Field

The second meaning of philosophizing that we will propose is what we will call the philosophical field, or the philosophical domain. For if philosophy claims to be interested in everything, if nothing is in theory foreign to it, it still has its favorite grounds. If some philosophers can seem more concerned about the method they develop than the content it generates – such as Socrates and his maieutics, always ready to do whatever it takes to question and to make the mind work; Hegel and his dialectics, with the work on negation which it implies; or even Kant and his transcendental analytic – it nonetheless remains true that in the history of thought, preoccupation with content largely takes precedence over methodological questions. We can argue that most philosophers nurture a thetic vision of their work; that is to say they defend above all a vision of the world: idealist, materialist, empiricist or utilitarian, and that they put forth certain concepts on which they will found their “system”. As for the problems they identify, they generally choose certain ways to deal with them, in opposition to other philosophers from the opposite perspective, thereby defining themselves by opposition or by criticism. There are, however, some rare eclectic philosophers like Leibniz, who said he agreed with all philosophers except when they reject the proposals of other philosophers, which is by the way refuted by some of the positions he took.

So what are these concepts, these problems that define the philosophical field? Let us try to provide some indications, although the history of thought is marked by important domain changes. Man first questions himself about man, what we might call anthropology or existential anxiety – because narcissism oblige, no doubt, or because he is the key to everything since he is the thinking subject. Who is he? What is he doing? Where does he come from? Where is he going? Is he simple or a compound? Is he mortal or immortal? Is he free or determined? What is his pur-

pose? Then other themes emerge, subsidiary to the first but just as crucial. Firstly cosmology. Where does man live? What is the world? Are there more worlds? Is the universe finite or infinite? Is it created or does it exist by itself? Then epistemology, which deals with the means of knowing and with truth. How can we answer our questions? What do we know? Can we know? How can we know? Is our knowledge reliable? What are our guarantees of truth? Then metaphysics, which responds to the desire of going beyond the obvious, what is immediately perceptible by the senses, by postulating that there is necessarily another primary reality, foundational or paradigmatic, which can account for the one with which we are familiar. (Let us specify, however, that the order in which we present these fields has no causal or chronological claim since no order can be established as a universal model.) What was there before the world and man? What causes observable phenomena? Does a first cause exist? What is there beyond sensible matter? What escapes or constitutes time? Do we have a soul? Then comes ethics, which from the opposition between good and bad questions the legitimacy of human actions and guides their everyday decisions, in particular in their relationship to others. What should I do? What do we have to do? How do I know what to do? Am I free to do what I want? What do I owe others? Then psychology, which tries to understand the functioning of the human mind, the tensions which drive it. Is the mind one or many? Can the mind claim autonomy? What do we want? How does the mind work? Is the mind prone to disease? How can we educate our mind? And finally aesthetics, which is concerned with harmony, with beauty, with creation and imagination, with the pleasure of the mind and of the senses. Why do certain objects please us? Do we all like the same things? Can taste be educated? Is the beautiful beautiful in itself or because it pleases? Can the ugly be beautiful?

We could, for the sake of simplification, resort to the traditional division between three disciplines: epistemology – formerly logic – whose object is the true; morality, whose object is the good; and aesthetics, whose object is the beautiful. These three transcendental concepts – true, good and beautiful – seem to structure the philosophical reflection through time and place. And just like a great many simple schemas, at the risk of reductionism, such a division is quite operative, even though these concepts are no longer so topical on a formal level. In the same way, we could make it more complex by adding more fields to philosophizing, fields which mainly emanate from modernity, such as for example political philosophy, social philosophy, or philosophy of mind linked to cognitive sciences.

But our concern is first of all to mark out the boundaries of philosophizing, to comprehend its limits and exteriority, in order to be able to seize this philosophizing in a single operation of thought, rather than look for any exhaustiveness. Like any categorization, ours, as a signpost of an approach, makes it easier to define or

to become aware of its object, by replacing and rethinking the singular idea in the context of which it is supposed to belong. Without banning the emergence of disruptive singularities, this type of formalization makes it possible to navigate and consider the implicitly contained relationships, and indeed the proper nature, of a question. This includes precisely to catch a glimpse of the characteristics of a single question, which would otherwise be drowned in an undifferentiated mass. So, in delimiting the philosophical field in a relatively arbitrary way, it allows us to keep in mind, as a provisional truth, a unifying principle which serves as a working and thinking hypothesis.

Let us now enter into this third meaning of philosophizing, somewhat more developed, where we will more specifically tackle what we describe as the “practical” dimension of philosophizing.

### Vacant thinking

The philosophical attitude is a “way of being” we might consider a condition for philosophizing, the state of mind which makes this exercise possible. There are certain attitudes which are more or less generally accepted, but we will not go so far as to say that they are universal. The history of philosophy is populated by individuals who take a perverse delight in calling into question the slightest point of agreement that risked being hitherto conceded, in order to forever mark this harmony or consensus with the seal of their distinctive individuality. These general qualities would for example be: The desire to know, which presupposes the awareness of a certain ignorance. Hence the desire to see this knowledge progress; The doubt, although it is sometimes strangely articulated within a sustained dogmatism when it prohibits the risk of making any statement, however provisional. Zen philosophy qualifies it as “poison” for its paralyzing part in action and decision making; The suspension of judgment, which allows for the examination of a problem with a relatively open mind. A mind which too often confines itself to study adverse hypotheses in order to understand them, while at the same time being convinced of the legitimacy of its own. In this sense, problematization, the capacity to consider the problems posed by particular and divergent ideas, would be a more adequate term, which in no way excludes bias. But we will see that when we deal with the competences, although that is also an attitude; Astonishment seems to be another more or less generally accepted attitude, which enables us to look with fresh eyes or with amazement at what for others looks like the banality of everyday life, and which has therefore become invisible. For if observation and analysis seem to be essential for philosophizing, these are competences which are acquired through an attitude, which we could call availability or attention, the source of astonishment. In fact, the act of distinguishing presupposes an increased attention where ordinary events become extraordinary because they are no longer taken for granted. The same goes for questioning, which, prior to being a conceptual or analytic competency, presupposes a *mise en abyme* of the world of knowledge and of the thinking subject where nothing is postulated in advance. It is a kind of return to infancy where nothing is predetermined, where the demand for why and how applies it-



self almost systematically to everything: the mind operates by remaining vacant, no longer filled with its own presuppositions and theories. It has to unlearn what it knows in order to think; such is Socrates's advice.

## Opposing Attitudes

Secondly, after the generally recognized philosophical attitudes, let us mention a few particular attitudes, more controversial, but sufficiently common or prominent to be noted, if only because they pose an interesting and promising problem. The first is the agonistic dimension of philosophizing, which feeds on contradiction and incites confrontation. If it is already present early on in Greece, with Heraclitus or Socrates, it is to some extent set aside among the stoics, just as in a tradition we might call scientific and which we find for instance in American pragmatism – it is no longer the confrontation between mankind and their principles which is the key element of the advancement of thought. For the stoics, it is more about the ability to accept the world. It becomes, in a way, the ability to act on oneself by the very fact of this apprehension or understanding of reality. It is about “taking on the task yourself” rather than “fighting”. In American pragmatism, as in the scientific approach, it is the collaboration and the collective work that are highlighted, what we might call a “complementarist” vision of diversity, based on a certain sympathy. A thinker like Marx, inspired by Hegel, will nevertheless combine the capacity to understand the world and consciousness with a confrontation of that world with itself. The agonistic dimension here finds its articulation and its meaning in the dialectic realization of this world through the mediation of man, himself historically steeped in these conflicts. Acceptation of the world and of conflict will be two primary philosophical attitudes, crucial as well as often opposed, something Descartes specifies.

The same goes for “detachment”, established by some philosophers as a crucial condition for philosophizing. Phenomenological reduction is an example, which requires surpassing the factual in order to seize the general and conceptual issues, of which the fact is nothing but the symptom. A principle which refers to an ancient tradition for which in order to philosophize, in its attempt to seize the essential and the categorical, moves away from the particular and the accidental. But then again, movements such as nominalism, cynicism, positivism or existentialism challenges such an attitude, which grants too big and artificial a reality to concepts or universals to anchor the subject more specifically to a concrete or material reality.

A last opposition of attitudes we think we should mention is the one about humanism. Again, if care for man and empathy for the thinking being – the only one to have access to reason or to philosophize – seem to be obvious, to the point

of glorifying the human being by clearly distinguishing him from everything else that exists, in particular from the animal world, this attitude is not completely generalizable. The philosophies of suspicion, as Ricoeur called them (which we find in Nietzsche, Marx and Freud among others), wanted to show to what extent this particular power of man is the cause and principle of his failure, to the point of making him the most hateful being of all, which we will see in Schopenhauer. Pascal or Augustine also invoke this human weakness, but only to testify to its glorious uniqueness. The relationship with the divine often distorts things on this point, because man will be both the only being capable of receiving God, subject to grace, and, for the same reason, fallible and and perverted in his repeated refusal of good. On another issue, Arendt will show us the potential for evil that humans contain in their everyday banality.

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## Radicality

From this, let us conclude, as a common attitude, on a certain radical posture of philosophizing. Because even as he proclaims himself to be exceedingly attached to the singular, the philosopher tends to fix himself to a certain world vision, from which he will read and decode facts, events, things and beings, seeking a certain coherence, not to say a justification of its general choices a priori. In this sense he will always be ready to pursue and denounce the inconsistency of others, even as he, like Montaigne, has tried to develop a certain eclecticism designed to be an alternative to dogmatism and to the systematic spirit. Or Nietzsche again, criticizing the heaviness of philosophy, but who, while developing a theory of a Gay Science, could not stop himself from advocating a thesis which is strongly supported, very demanding, and charged with consequences. This radical posture, however, sometimes claims a middle ground, conceived as an ideal of wisdom. Thus in Aristotle, virtue is to be theoretically found between two extremes: for example, the cautious is situated at an equal distance between the reckless and the timid. In Kant, the critical position, echoing the Cartesian doubt, also tries to place the just attitude in a “neither, nor”, between dogmatism and skepticism: neither naive, blissful and rigid acceptance, nor systematic, suspicious and fearful refusal. The critical perspective emanates from a universal distrust regarding a priori judgements, but it invites us to probe the foundation and the conditions of their possibility. We might wonder, however, in Descartes as well as in Kant, whether the refusal of the argument of authority did not give way to a kind of unbridled power of the singular reason, to new evidence, perhaps more complex, or even more legitimate. And if this evidence, although emanating from the mind of the individual and proudly proclaiming the autonomy of the singular reason and of the individual, did not fall

into other, more subtle or more modern forms of traditional dogmatism. Such as postmodernism, which tries to reduce any adherence to the rational and the universal to a sinful act.

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## Acquired Ignorance

Among these specific attitudes, dear to different thinkers or currents of thought, there are a few on which we would like to linger because they seem to us to be particularly promising. We could call the first one acquired ignorance, humility or sobriety. As we have already mentioned, the term philosophy was born out of an acknowledgement of lack, and the desire to make up for this lack. However, throughout the history of thought, a phenomenon has bit by bit established itself, attributable to the success of science: the certitude and dogmatism linked to the systematic spirit and its succession of established truths. All through history, more than one professional philosopher has had little scruple in asserting a certain number of non-negotiable truths, which according to him cannot be problematized, especially throughout these last two centuries of “philosophy of the professors”. Because from now on, it is no longer a question of wisdom, the quest of which is open or infinite, but of the efficiency of a thought or an axiology, both on the level of knowledge and on the level of morals. Indeed, any thought, however interrogative and unassertoric, necessarily holds some affirmations which act as postulate. But it is nonetheless true that in terms of attitude, that of the relation to ideas, certain specific patterns more naturally bring about a feeling of unmistakable certitude, in particular in regards to the elaboration of a system, whereas others advocate a state of systematic incertitude, the implications of which will be substantial.

Let us take for example the principle of “learned ignorance” of Nicholas of Cusa, which roughly consists of confirming that ignorance is a necessary virtue, which is acquired and which enables thinking, because any thought worthy of its name is nothing but a conjecture, an approximation, which demands to be constantly examined with scrutinizing and critical eyes. This also connects to the more recent idea of Popper, his principle of “falsification”, by which science is characterized precisely by the fact that every proposition can be questioned, contrary to dogma, to the act of faith, a certitude which is rather of a religious nature. For Leibniz, it is more a question of worrying, of promoting this worry which prohibits carefreeness, because the latter signals the death of thinking.

## Strictness

Another common attitude is rigor, or strictness. The rigorous logic of a Kant, where each term is defined within an implacable mechanism, does not encourage such a distancing or *mise en abyme* of a thought as was discussed in relation to questioning at the beginning of this chapter. The attitude of the question and of the problematization is not that of the response and of the definition. The latter, however, in spite of the question for certitude, knows its own legitimacy through its demand for rigor, if only because to philosophize also means to put a speech to the test of itself in order to form it. This is about both engagement and questioning. The building of a system involves establishing an architecture where concepts and propositions interlock during the development of this thought. And as Leibniz explains, the longer the journey lasts through time and space, the more difficult it is for the thought to remain coherent with itself. The quality of the architecture will define the consistency of the thought, beyond the very content of it. This is the case with the disciples of an author, who will verify their interpretation in terms of the extent of thinking which serves as referent. And if the risk of falling into the trap of dogmatism generated by the argument of authority is great – the typical example is medieval scholasticism and the quasi-pathological relationship it maintained with the thinking of Aristotle, a philosopher whose proposals were considered indisputable for centuries – let us not forget that the reverse problem is just as disastrous, that of unbridled thought which can unscrupulously assert anything and make anyone say anything. And when Nietzsche writes that the philosopher has to proceed like a banker, “to be dry, clear, without illusions”, he is trying to tell us that words and thoughts have a precise value which is not to be taken lightly. So, the strictness of which we may blame the philosophers is also a quality which is not to be taken for granted, although again, Nietzsche does not shy away from the contradiction by criticizing philosophical asceticism and the laborious dimension of the Socratic method which requires giving an account for the slightest term or the slightest expression. This same rigor requires listening to what we say when we say it, hearing “the truth of our opinions”, as Pascal said. Therefore, rigor requires an attachment to reality which has to surpass that of sincerity, the desire for appearance, the craving to be right or the feeling of ownership. If it does not fall into dogmatism, rigor might incarnate a real trial for being and of thinking, although under the pretext of scientificity it risks obscuring and crushing all thought, all intuition, all creativity.

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## Authenticity

This takes us to another philosophical virtue: authenticity, which we would like to distinguish from sincerity. It is linked to courage, to tenacity, to will, in opposition to the intention and complacency of opinion, and not to some sweet and momentary feeling. It stems from the affirmation of the singular, in its conflict with otherness, with the whole, with the opacity of being, in its clash with obstacles and with adversity. It is without doubt one of the primary forms of truth, which we will call singular truth, or the truth of the subject. It is being as a whole, but in its singular form, its vector and substratum, and not just some simple discourses. It is the one we hear murmuring behind the Kantian injunction of *Sapere aude!*: “Dare to know!”, that is, “Dare to think!” Already dare to know what you think, or you will never know and learn. That is why your thought has to be expressed through words; it has to be objectified, become an object for itself. It is this demand that lies behind Descartes’s recommendation that we should continue on our way in case of uncertainty of the mind: the “provisional morality”. And more bluntly expressed by Kierkegaard, when he assures us that there is no other truth than subjective truth. Authenticity is what makes us say that a person is “real”, beyond or below speech, or through speech. Regardless of any kind of truth or a priori universality, we just wonder whether this person takes charge of his own speech, till the end, provided that that “end” is meaningful; even through its contradictions and its unconsciousness, and perhaps because of them, being cuts a path and forges itself. He will measure his bankruptcy or his lie in proportion to his concessions, to his small internal calculations. As deviant as his being may be in the eyes of the world and in his own eyes, he pursues his destiny, he perseveres in his being, as Spinoza would say. This “instinct for truth” gives us permission to assert ourselves, despite the risks of making mistakes and of opposing judgments. It is this parrhesia, this frankness, this freedom of speech, this truth-telling which always threatens to break the social bond, something Foucault calls “the courage of truth”.

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## Availability

Faced with this authenticity, which is difficult to deal with since it is often unbearable for others, let us look at a third, opposite, philosophical quality which we will call availability, openness, or receptivity. It is about being there, being present in the world, connecting with the other. Because if authenticity tends to be deaf to otherness, availability is completely vested in it – moreover in two different ways: available like the tiger lying in wait, or available like the leaves in the wind. In this

distinction, only the outcome of the case, brought about by the nature of being, varies. The tiger is no more “autonomous” than the leaf: it does not ultimately decide to leap on its prey; its “tigerness” takes care of everything. Just like the tiger, the leaf, carried by the wind, adopts the slightest roughness of being. It is carried by reality, but in a more accidental way. Although we could say that the tiger, contrary to the leaf, is animated by an intention, which automatically makes it less available, even if its intention generates its availability.

This availability can be understood in different ways. Such as the relationship between the self and the other: the presence of the world, the presence of others, or the presence of everything that can become a tool, everything that can be instrumentalized, as Heidegger understands it and criticizes it. But above all, it concerns the availability of ourselves: opening ourselves up to the world, a self that can be reduced to the status of a simple opening, a crack through which the flux of being and things can pass, as the daoist vision tries to describe it, which to the Western and voluntarist spirit sometimes appears as a passive and powerless attitude. Or it is about the availability of ourselves to ourselves; that is, concern about ourselves, as in Socrates, Foucault or in Buddhist thought. However, for those to whom this attitude seems fatalistic or passive, let us ask them if reading a text, or listening to a conversation, or watching a show, does not require just that type of availability. How many times do we claim not to understand a particular speech when it is not a problem of understanding, but instead only a refusal of acceptance? A refusal to change places or positions, even for a moment. To think, to enter into a dialogue with ourselves, as Plato prescribes, does that not presuppose a form of alienation? If I am not ready to not be myself for a moment, how could I think? If I am not willing to take a detour to otherness, if I cling on to myself like a drowning man to his life jacket, how could I claim that any deliberation is taking place? If my ego and the thoughts that belong to it are so obvious, how could this conversion which is at the heart of the philosophical dynamic occur? Being available is to divide ourselves in two: it is to listen to the world, it is to accompany the other on his path, it is even to go in front of him on his own way in order to show him or to help him avoid the pitfalls and the traps it includes – just as Socrates does with his interlocutors, because there is no “right” way. The road we choose is inevitably muddy and strewn with ruts. To accept to pursue another direction is to be aware of the fact that ours is not necessarily the best one; it is to risk learning something and to envisage new horizons.

Close to this more radical receptivity we find contemplation, the “other” way of being, distinct from action. Because the one who acts does not have time to contemplate, his spirit is too busy producing, surviving, working, he is too engaged in mundane affairs – he is perhaps too busy thinking. So in Aristotle or in Plato,

the contemplation of the good, the beautiful or the true is a disposition par excellence of an intellect worthy of its name: the one who has time, or who takes time. From this comes the concept of liberal arts, such as music, rhetoric or mathematics, activities of the free man who has time to think because he does not have to work. That is the origin of the word “school”: *skhole* in Greek meaning free time. As well, the one who contemplates is to be found in the temple, this space which, etymologically, means a space of sky or land delimited orally by an augur, a piece of ground used for taking auspices, a sacred precinct, a building consecrated to a deity. The thinker is watching attentively, he is absorbed in the vision of the object in an almost mystical attitude; he expects nothing from the world, except to be able to be seen.

The Greek term “*epoché*”, taken up among others by phenomenology, somewhat captures this availability. It describes a mental action, a moment of thinking or of contemplation, where all our judgments, our knowledge, our convictions, our *a priori* – of whatever form they may take – are suspended. This theoretical *mise en abyme* may similarly imply a suspension of action, mental or physical. A distancing from the very existence of the world and its nature. Our own conscience is thus subjected to criticism, to questioning, it is examined through doubt. Not to condemn it to a limbo of eternal absence of judgment, but to rebuild its paradigms, its foundations, its modalities. The idea of judgment is not abandoned as an inherent source of error, but momentarily suspended in order to examine its legitimacy. We are far away from the radicality of a pyrrhonism, determining that we can trust neither the senses nor the reason, urging us to remain impassible and without opinion, thus condemning us to aphasia, the mutism of thought. Although such wisdom undoubtedly remains one of the ways leading to *ataraxia*, this absence of problems and suffering. It is this momentary suspension which Descartes conveys as an epistemic principle of the “methodic doubt”. In Husserl, this will be articulated through “phenomenological reduction”, a principle which enables us to avoid the pitfalls of our beliefs – naive or constructed – concerning the existence of the world, in order to examine the phenomena such as they present themselves to consciousness in an original and pure way.

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## Prudence

The last, relatively collective, philosophical virtue we would like to address is prudence. Prudence, which is supposed to make us become aware of the dangers that lie ahead of us and which could therefore turn us to inaction, out of fear, out of a precautionary principle. Prudence does not like unnecessary risk, and from there we might easily glide into the rut and conclude that all risk is unneeded. This

is true for our “good students”, big or small, who will most likely not take the risk of affirming anything which is not perfect: which is not complete, which is not faultless, which is not a faithful reflection of the extent of their thought. In trying to predict the unfortunate consequences of our actions we will want to avoid them; and to simplify our lives, to gain more security, we will abstain from action. Since all speech is a form of risk-taking we might as well be silent, especially if others are listening to us.

But apart from this prudence which resembles a cautious and bourgeois morality, a not so very generous half-heartedness which Saint Paul passionately condemns, what more vigorous meaning can we give to this term? It is still one of the cardinal virtues: it simply invites us to think before we speak and act, to make a conscious decision, to do what is appropriate rather than react in an impulsive or inconsiderate manner. Kant is interested in this practical and ancient wisdom: for him it constitutes an ability, that which makes us choose the means which lead to the greatest well-being. Prudence presupposes clarity of judgment and of mind, it shapes the citizen, it is sometimes even more about politics than about morality. But if philosophy is a practice, as we understand it, then philosophical art must also subject itself to this prudence, which waits and seizes the opportune moment, which gets hold of the most appropriate means for the sake of efficiency, this other form of truth. Just like nature, which proceeds by the principle of minimal action.

Indeed, Plato distinguishes the statesman from the philosopher by “kairos”, seizing the right moment, a crucial modality of efficiency, unlike the philosopher who “aristocratically” ignores temporality. But after all, if he invites the king to be philosopher, he also invites the philosopher to be king, to become political: that is to grasp the limits of his being, in space and time. Not all truths are good to say, at any time and to anyone, Jankélévitch tells us, but to know what to say, what can be said, how to say it, who to say it to, when to say it, is that not also part of truth? Truth is collective, it is neither singular nor transcendent, the pragmatists tell us, and without a doubt, here they take better charge of the practical dimension of philosophizing, which is not a simple knowledge, but a know-how: knowing how to be, knowing how to act, of which prudence is a constitutive virtue.

Attitudes are aptitudes. The origin is the same, the meaning almost identical. Except that the first returns to being, to knowing how to be, and the second to action, to knowing how to do. It remains to be seen whether action must determine being, or whether being must determine action. Again, whether an attitude or an act of faith, this positioning determines both the content of the philosophy that is being taught and the way it is taught, the necessity of teaching it, the relationship to the other, the relationship to ourselves as well as the relationship to the world. In order to take on this problem, we must not deny that philosophizing has a sub-



ject: ourselves or the other. An observation which prevents us from speaking for philosophy, and allows us to grasp speech solely from the reduced perspective of a singular being, a singular speech. But again, this is to advocate a specific attitude which cannot escape criticism from those who wish to escape it.

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## Synthesis of philosophical attitudes

To sum up, let us add this little rundown that we have drawn up for our pedagogical work. It contains all the attitudes essential to philosophical practice in a teaching setting. The attitudes in question are cognitive and existential ones, which must be distinguished from moral attitudes, even if they might conjoin. It is about making ourselves available so that reflexive activity can be practiced.

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### Settle down

Calm down the body and the mind, quiet down, silence the hurly-burly of the spirit, get out of the rush of thinking and the urgency of speaking. To do this, the teacher must monitor and balance the pace of the work, whether it is a lesson, a written assignment or a discussion, so that the students become conscious of their own functioning and act in a more deliberate manner.

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### Acquired ignorance

Introduce an element of uncertainty in the class work. Go from a pattern of passing on knowledge – learning – to the implementation of hypotheses – thinking. It is about being capable of abandoning our own opinions, of suspending our judgment, if only for a moment of rigorous and critical examination. To do this, the teacher must no longer rely on the paradigm of the “right answer”, unique, absolute and all-powerful, but instead work on the process of reflection, common reflection and problematization.

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### Authenticity

Dare to think and to say what we think, to risk making hypotheses without worrying about fear or looking for approval from the class or the teacher, without letting ourselves be undermined by doubt. It is also about taking responsibility for what we say, what we think, what we do, in a rigorous and coherent manner. To promote this individual thinking, the teacher has to encourage the more timid stu-

dents, orally or in writing, and invite everyone to complete their idea despite the consequences, in a clear way so as to make sure that they are being understood, and to prevent any collective manifestation of disapproval or mockery which interferes with the process.

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## **Empathy/Sympathy**

Develop the capacity to put ourselves in the position of others in order to understand (empathy), to feel attraction to others (sympathy), to decenter ourselves, a state of mind which makes the student present to others, classmates or teacher, ready to listen to an unfamiliar speech without prejudice or animosity, but with interest. It is about introducing cognitive rather than emotional relationships, founded on reason, which means not identifying with the other: neither to feel what he is feeling or necessarily agreeing with him, nor to reject his person, but understanding his emotions and his ideas. To do this, the teacher must invite the class to become aware of the problematic relationships between the students and to work on what causes interfering friction.

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## **Confrontation**

Develop the capacity to confront the thinking of others and of ourselves, engage in criticism and debate, without trying to seek agreement or consensus at any cost, without minimizing or glorifying our own thoughts or those of others. It is not about respecting either ideas or opinions in themselves, but respecting the reflexive activity, which involves replacing soft tolerance with some vigor. To do this, the teacher must encourage the students not to fear each other, to reconcile the students with the concept of criticism, so they can see this activity as a game or an exercise and not as a threat.

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## **Astonishment**

Learn to accept and recognize surprise, our own surprise and that of others, in the face of the unexpected, in the face of difference or opposition, in order to detect what is causing the problem and grasp what is at stake. Without this astonishment, everything becomes routine, thinking is blunted, everyone returns to themselves and their own platitudes, everything is just opinion and subjectivity or certitude and objectivity. To do this, the teacher must take into account the diversity of perspectives and tighten the relationships between ideas in order to generate a dynamic tension, productive of new hypotheses.

Trust in others and in ourselves, without thinking that it is about defending anything: our image, our ideas, our person. Without this trust, everyone will be suspicious of everyone else, trying not to answer them, refusing to admit the obvious errors or aberrations, because of a suspicion of a hidden agenda or a fear of being caught out or humiliated. This trust is a factor of autonomy both for ourselves and for others. To do this, the teacher must establish a climate of trust where errors are dedramatized, where absurdities can be laughed at, where there is room for a collective appreciation of a great idea, regardless of who the author is.

After culture, field and attitude, the fourth meaning of philosophizing, or the fourth modality of its definition, would be its operativity. To approach it from this angle, we will use a term taken from pedagogy: competencies, which imply a know-how, because they formulate both the requirements and the criteria of this know-how. That is to say, philosophy is here conceived as an art, as a technique constituted through a procedure or a set of procedures, or even as a process which we submit to ideas, and the process itself interests us more than particular ideas. Therefore it is a question of philosophical formalism; not as content, that is to say established concepts, but as progression.

The first aspect of this progression consists in deepening thought, deepening ideas. Naturally, we start off from the principle that in the mind of every person there are always ideas, there is always a minimum of knowledge which we will call opinions. Although this opinion, as Plato distinguishes it, can come under “right” opinion, also called “true” opinion, or under common opinion. The first differs from the second by the work already done, and in this sense it is more reliable, although this does not fundamentally change anything about the process which remains to be accomplished. For this thinker, truth is first of all a requirement, a tension, a calling, a power which transcends all particular ideas, and which in this sense can never be an idea or other, nor even a system of thought, no more than an approach or an attitude, even if these two last conceptions already come closer to the concept of truth. Therefore, truth can never be anything but a dynamic, no matter from where we start; what is important is the demand we put on ourselves.

So deepening becomes the permanent expectation of a desire to go further in a content in order to work on it. This expectation is a result of acquired ignorance, from this knowledge that we know how to ignore, from this awareness which makes us say that we do not know what we are saying. Therefore, any comment that we hear, from our own mouth or from others, any proposition that we make ourselves will be demanded to be deepened; that means excavated, amplified, highlighted, dramatized, clarified, etc. But in a more precise and concrete way, let us see what this deepening means, let us examine the different ways in which it operates, which is not an infinite number, and which it seems useful to circumscribe and delimit. Because the indeterminate and its infinite appearance tends to dazzle the thought which then believes its operations fall under, or should fall under, a mysterious “genius”, the only human potentiality capable of accessing such a level of operations, an almost divine power, alone capable of penetrating a highly restricted area. Delimiting, on the other hand, is to set up technical foundations, familiar procedures, repeatable and relatively certain, and because of that reassuring and useful. When

everything is possible, strangely enough, everything becomes impossible by a form of mirror effect where the mind drowns in the abyss it has produced itself: the creation of a space devoid of reference points where there are no constraints, which certainly brings a feeling of freedom to the mind, but also worries it to the point of paralyzation.

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## Explaining

Deepening is on the one hand to explain. To explain is to leave the fold, to reveal what was folded up – folded in on ourselves, that is – because this fold makes the reality or entity in question inaudible and invisible to the exterior gaze, even to the very gaze that holds it. The encounter with the other, then, remains the privileged opportunity to make the invisible visible, or to make the visible visible. Not least because the other, our fellow being who acts as a mirror – provided that he assumes and plays his role adequately – will ordain this opacity, underline this opacity, attract our attention to it, so we can go beyond this feeling of habit and personal comfort which tends to blind us. “I do not understand what you are saying!” he says, if he does not fear our inertia and our reluctance, and if he is not afraid of looking like a fool. From then on, we can either stubbornly repeat the clarity and the obviousness of our speech, or to various degrees take charge of the feeling of impossibility which is confessed to us by putting forth some new proposition, the function of which is to throw light on what until now has remained in the shadows. That is, to deal with the blind spots or the apparent contradictions. A legitimate refusal to explain can object to this request, either for pedagogical or existential reasons, in full awareness of the cause, or by some psychic or intellectual deficiency: by an inability to go any further or by the return spring of some defensive or unconscious mechanism.

To explain is to transpose to other terms, to other places, it is to develop that which is simple, to bring closer that which is distant, it is to put into context, it is to give examples and to analyze them, it is to transform the place, the words and the circumstances. It is to study a light beam as it reflects on that which it is not. And for this reason it is indeed about deepening, since it is a question of moving, enlarging, multiplying, amplifying and expanding. To explain is to develop, to consider the consequences of a statement, it is to establish analogies which allow us to see how the form of our comments can regain its reality underneath other, unexpected skies. To explain is to clarify: it might involve making things more complex, but it is also to simplify. It is to simultaneously take on various and contradictory operations which allow us to see and understand better, to construct a thought at the risk of wandering astray. Therefore, deepening is also to transgress the limits

an initial statement has assigned to itself, never mind whether those limits are intended or not, whether they are temporary or not. There is a time for everything. Descartes invites us to learn how to carve out an idea and to take it only for what it is, for what it offers, without caring about the multiplicity of its possible and actual connections. But we can also infinitely take advantage of the virtuality of an initial meaning.

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## Critique of the explanation

Nevertheless, let us make clear here that the implicit does not have to be considered only as a defect or a lack: it also has its own *raison d'être*. If from a conceptual point of view or from a communicational perspective, the critique of the implicit – particularly due to the lack of clarity which accompanies it – can be considered legitimate, then let us see why an explanation is sometimes neither legitimate nor desired. First, let us invoke the limitations and the abuses of the ideology of “transparency”, a scientific vision which claims to make any phenomenon visible to anybody, be it a singular or universal totality. To us this neither seems desirable nor possible: the dark side of discourse and of being remains necessary and inevitable, even if the attempt at transparency is also beneficial. As always when it comes to knowledge, there is the usual paradox: if knowledge is a power whose desire, constitutive of the being, is completely legitimate, the temptation of omnipotence which accompanies it inevitably transforms the tiniest part of this power into an abuse of power, because this power turns on itself and the spirit which generates it in order to annihilate the dynamics which gave rise to it. As a conclusion: by all means explain, and try to explain, but keep in mind the artificial side of explanation, which will often be more of a repetition or an a posteriori rationalization than a real clarification. The work on problematization will in this sense try to show the importance of the critical perspective and the *mise en abyme* in order to really see the truth of any statement.

For now, let us all the same raise our pedagogical objection to making an attempt at explanation, in particular that of the teacher towards the student, which also involves that of the speaker towards the listener. Our Western tradition generally favors fullness rather than emptiness. Absence and ignorance rather lead to negative connotations, presence and fullness reassure: they procure a feeling of plenitude while absence is the cause of lack and pain. So the teacher feels obliged to say everything, both because he feels obliged to “do everything” and also because he is supposed to “know everything”. This is contrary to the more Eastern perspective, in which emptiness is also a reality, even the source, the founding reality, the matrix. There, the teacher can just throw a simple sentence at the student which

he will be required to meditate on, to analyze, because it is he who is responsible for giving meaning to it. This reversal of responsibility prohibits the principle of “spoon-feeding” which can often embody our pedagogical tradition, where the author of an idea feels obliged to provide the “instructions”, to explain himself, even to be accountable for it.

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## Contemplation

To go to the end of our critique of explanation, let us also consider another possibility: the contemplation of the idea: idea here understood as the articulation of a proposition or a series of propositions. Let us momentarily distinguish the initial idea from the explanation we could give it. It might be interesting to emphasize the discrepancy between these two moments, for two different reasons. The first is to consider that an idea has a form in itself, a life of its own, a morphologic, syntactic and semantic specificity. And if this specificity is taken for granted in poetry, it seems to us that it could be the same in philosophy. This is without a doubt one of the reasons why it can be interesting to know or to remember a given formulation in its initial version in the text, or even in its original language. This philosophical aestheticism, despite the abuses we could make of it, all the same finds its full meaning in the singularity of individual language. Ironically, it is also for this very reason that we can justify the fact that every listener or reader of a text reformulates a proposition read or heard in his own way in order to ensure, through this work, that he appropriates the ideas in question. In any event, this moment of contemplation of an idea, as for a painting or a piece of music, where we observe and let ourselves be penetrated before analyzing, judging, or reacting, is a pure moment of receptivity, of availability, which assures that we receive as much as possible of the given speech.

The second reason we give for this discrepancy is that any interpretation, any explanation, like any translation, is a treason, since it necessarily transforms: it transposes, it supports, it dilutes. A treason that we must accept, because we must always be capable of mourning the original, whether it is the words of the other or our own words. A living word is a betrayed word: its implementation and its operativity are inevitably reducing and restricted acts, even if their deployment in otherness, acts of alienation and denaturation, could not be more natural and necessary. However, it is a matter of being aware of the role played by this transposition, particularly when moving from the concrete to the abstract, or from an idea to an example. To be sure, refusing an interpretation on the pretext that it is an interpretation would encourage excessive formalism and rigidity. But in the same way, experiencing a moment's hesitation before inserting an original statement in

a particular context which does not belong to it, is a measure of intellectual hygiene which shows respect for the unique and singular word. This is an invitation to problematize the meaning, to not stick to a single reading, even if it is the author himself who invites us to this particular take on his own words, to an exegesis of his own text.

Let us for example take the interest of contemplation as a form of identification different from explanation. Quite often, during discussions, a person throws himself into a sudden or extensive explanatory answer following a question or a proposition. But it quickly becomes clear, to his listeners and sometimes to himself, that the initial remark has been abandoned. Carried away by his own ideas or emotions, the speaker forgets where he comes from, he does not know how to keep his mind fixed on a course, a pole set in his mind like a fixed star, a specific problem to be dealt with. Keeping an idea in mind is a form of constraint, linked to memory and concentration, independent of any other idea which might come to mind thereafter. In a way modeled on the principle of choral singing or jazz improvisation, the challenge to be taken up consists on the one hand in thinking for ourselves, and on the other in hearing what is going on outside. To be able to simultaneously think of the original and the subsequent, the inside and the outside, the result and the process, a center and a periphery, an idea and its explanation. This, it seems to us, is the double perspective which the mind must learn how to deal with, from which it must operate, as a condition for real thinking: that which takes otherness into account, that which knows reality as a principle of exteriority which protects us from ourselves, this inner safe-guard which we must try to never forget.

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## Arguing

Arguing is another important form that the deepening work on thinking takes. To argue is already to take a stand, to have taken a stand, since it is about justifying, proving, noticing the reasons for an idea or a theory. Even if this standpoint would be momentary and artificial, it is still acceptance or endorsement: it must account for the existence or the truthfulness of a given idea. To justify is to make a proposal just, to bring justice to a proposal which would not otherwise have this status, which could otherwise be considered unjustified or even unjust.

The question is now whether arguing necessarily leads to deepening. In a certain way we will attest that it does, since by attempting to consolidate a theory in the eyes of an audience, real or imaginary, a number of other ideas will be reported, which through the effort of showing or convincing will support the initial idea. Anyway, the nature of the argumentation can vary hugely. Argumentation



consists in producing one or more propositions, facts or ideas, in order to justify an initial statement. But is it to prove, in a rhetorical way, that we are right? Or is it to better understand, in a philosophical way, the reasons, the origin and the legitimacy of an initial statement? Arguments can appeal to the pathos of the audience, to their feelings; they can refer to authority, artificial or abusive; they can use forms, turns, and other rhetorical tricks solely designed to obtain consent from the interlocutor, to weaken his resistance rather than make him reflect, by referring to platitudes or commonly held views, by pleading rather than examining – so many procedures which flatten the discourse more than deepen it, which numbs the spirit of the listener rather than make him think.

The more the attempt to argue is addressed to a large audience, the more it universalizes its points, thereby distancing itself from an educated and predictable public, the less it risks falling into the trap of looking for the approval proximity encourages. If the argument is intended for human reason in general, as far as possible, a regulatory ideal which is useful to keep in mind, it will be more attentive and critical of its own content. However, as advertising, political propaganda and religious proselytizing proves, it is also possible to address everyone and argue in an abusive manner, by attempting to use the other for our own purpose, to turn him into customer, supporter or follower, to reduce him to being the object of a desire or a will. And let us not forget, as we have said, that an argument emanates from a subjective standpoint which tries to justify itself or to criticize an opposing position, which amounts to the same thing.

Unlike the analytical or logical approach, which claims to objectively examine the content or the consequences of a statement, the argument is already committed to a vectorial matrix which orients and directs it. What is more, argumentation is supposed to operate in the field of the contingent, of the probable, precisely where logic or analysis have stopped to operate: argumentation does not arise from necessity, it does not arise from logic, says Aristotle, but from dialectics, which for him is less reliable. Ultimately, it is a last resort, but a last resort which is indispensable for us, since reality does not appear to us in the form of a logical system, since our knowledge of the world constitutes a disparate and often contradictory whole.

So the argument, in a philosophical sense, enables deepening since it gives reasons for an idea, considers its consequences, makes parallels and analogies, convokes examples, analyzes content, establishes links. But its power is limited, insofar as it does not problematize, does not take distance from itself, or does not enter into a critical relationship with itself. However, if the argumentation remains a mere moment which is part of a wider thought process, then it will play its limited, but constitutive and essential role in the elaboration of a thought. The thought

will freely commit itself, not as a thought where the game is already played, where the dice are loaded, but as a thought which remains capable of considering its own negativity, its own nothingness, the very condition for an argumentation worthy of the name. Failing that, it will remain in a lifeless obviousness in front of itself, it will reduce itself to a sort of tautology. The whole difficulty lies in the paradox of the mind, which in committing itself can both nourish its own limit, strengthen an ego which might end up believing in its own invincibility, and examine these limits, allowing itself to overcome or break free from them. To dig is both to lay the foundation and to sink, at the risk of getting stuck. Because if the argument consolidates we can also say that it conditions: it determines the meaning, it anchors it, fixes it, and what is more, in doing so it claims to prove the truthfulness of the statement.

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## Proving

To argue is also to prove, by a demonstration which confirms the necessity of a statement, by establishing a bundle of proofs which supports its probability, by proposing a reasoning via the absurd which forces us to conclude the impossibility of the opposite, by exposing inevitable presuppositions or consequences, which sharpens and facilitates our judgment, which further legitimizes our inner belief. And if arguing does not prove the truthfulness of a statement, at least it lets us consolidate its content. The hypothetico-deductive method, which invites us to think “if this, then that”, feeds off of these sequences which alone constitute a good part of the fabric of our thought, which structure the matrix of our ideas. Of course, the act of arguing does not always prove anything, by lack of necessity, but the simple attempt to manifest the coherence of the ideas which hide behind the ideas provides an increased legitimacy to the production of our thought, an additional degree of truthfulness or plausibility, by uncovering the genesis of the idea. The trick is to not start believing everything we say, to not lose sight of the fragility of our being and its concoctions.

Besides, the argument often takes the form of a condition, such as in the following: “I carry an umbrella when it rains”. Carrying an umbrella is justified by the rain, but the rain is only occasional, which means that it is not always justified to carry an umbrella. The trick is to know whether it rains or not, to predict whether it will rain or not. Implication is also an important modality of argumentation: “I do this or that, because if not ...”. We argue by invoking consequences considered undesirable, or the absence of consequences considered desirable. The thing is then to know if there is a relationship of necessity, only of probability, or even of mere possibility. Is the link strong or weak? A common error is to overvalue the quasi-

consubstantiality of cause and effect, of the act and its consequence, by underestimating the fragility of the argument, carried away by the conviction or the desire to persuade. Here we can recall Hume's attack on the idea of causality, which reduces this "founding principle" to a simple subjective opinion. The argument certainly supports, but it necessarily relates back to the fragility of a presupposition, and this postulate undoubtedly articulates the fundamental difference between a rhetorical and a philosophical argument: the first persuades, the second establishes an area and shows its limits.

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## Analyzing

The analysis is the division of a physical or ideal totality into its constituent parts in order to examine and determine their values and their relationships.

To analyze, in its most immediate sense, whether in chemistry or in philosophy, amounts to dissolving, to going from the complex to the simple, to break down the whole into its parts. To this end, it is a question on the one hand of being able to think about these parts as parts, which poses the problem of the name, the concept, the etymology, and on the other hand of being able to think of the collection of these parts, of the rules which order this collection, which very naturally takes us to the problems of language as well as to those of logic. Analyzing mainly consists in examining the content of what we already have, in interpreting its constitutive meaning, without claiming to add anything else. That is why Kant opposes analytic judgment to synthetic judgment, the latter bringing new concepts, external to the initial proposition. In this sense, we are getting closer to the explanation, except that the analysis is without a doubt more restrictive, since it cannot seek anything outside of itself. This interdiction can be seen as painful because of its relatively ascetic nature. Examining words without claiming to "go somewhere else", mourning this "moving forward", so dear to men's hearts, overlooking our own intuitions, however great, is not always easy. In particular when it is a matter of examining and explaining our own words, to understand their limitation, to see the extent of what they deny by what they do not say, without claiming to resort to the misleading "what I meant was" or "what I would like to add is", perhaps experienced as a painful moment where the somewhat crude and limited truth of our own words hits us.

The analysis instantly comes face to face with the feeling of omnipotence, inexorably linked to speech. The latter always protects its claims to the truth, it always claims to be on the right side of ethics, whatever the nature of that ethics. For this reason, analysis will often look like a reductive operation, which forces us to grab hold of definite, even very short statements, like a simple sentence, in or-

der to examine its content, however limited, which very often gives away our vague intention. Socrates asks us not to give long speeches in order to be able to really grasp the meaning of the speech, and those who nevertheless provided him with great speeches got upset because they did not seem to recognize themselves in the mangling which they were subjected to in the subsequent discourse. It is sometimes a question of examining a single sentence, a single proposition, even a single word, and to deliver a very specific meaning. "You make me say what I did not say!" they cried, enraged. "You must be angry with me for doing this!" is the inevitable conclusion that follows. Ultimately, we might arrive at a single word, reducing a discourse to a single concept which it is then a question of defining, of which it is a matter of checking its operability. In this sense, conceptualization is one of the limiting forms of the analytical process.

As noted earlier, analysis is a static method since it does not allow "to move forward", but compels us to stay where we are to explore a given meaning. Even worse, it can be a regressive method when it attempts to trace facts to causes, to start from consequences and end up at principles. This process will be conducted either to try to prove the validity of a proposition, and in this sense the analysis will be equivalent to a demonstration, or to identify the presuppositions of this proposition, which makes it possible to understand it better, even to problematize it, since we will have identified what it is that conditions this proposition and therefore what could have modified its nature. Of course, here we sort of overlap the work of argumentation. But the analysis, in particular logic, is content to work on what is established, on what is contained in what is established, on its composition, on the intrinsic given, without seeking to convoke other propositions. The only exception is the rules of logic, or rules of composition, where the analysis makes it possible to verify the legitimacy of the collection in question. Knowledge of these rules and of their transgressions conditions the work of analysis here, for which logic provides the tools. These formal rules make it possible to detect to what extent one proposition leads to another, is compatible with another, or contains another. These relationships are first and foremost relationships of necessity, which cannot tolerate exceptions, and not those of probability or of contingency, permitted by the broader and less rigorous principle of argumentation. And if the advantage of analysis is rigor and objectivity, its disadvantage is on the one hand its illusion of objectivity, because we can easily forget that the value of each logical proposition is conditioned on the value of its premisses, and on the other hand its rigidity, because any logical system is confined within itself, since it does not allow any input from external elements. Logical analysis is an evaluation of the consistency of a statement, it invites criticism to the extent that it verifies the possible universalization of the sequences used. The principle of causality is constantly put to the

test, and this is precisely the general interest of this mode of deepening. But it tends to define, that is to lock up, to narrow, more than to open up the statement. However, it is very interesting and useful to work intensively on a given statement, rather than in a vast and open way. The demand is not the same, it is harsh but very meaningful and formative of the mind.

Apropos of analysis, let us return to a principle that we have approached in attitudes: the critique, a term formulated by Kant in order to articulate an intermediate position between skepticism and dogmatism. Remember that the Kantian “revolution” rests on the impossibility of knowledge to access reality in itself, an affirmation that we have access only to phenomena or to appearances of this reality, even if these phenomena are not devoid of reality. The critical methodology consists in analyzing the foundations of thought and action, assessing their extent, evaluating their limits. It is above all reflection and self-criticism, since it reflects on itself. However, as we have already mentioned, the temptation is strong, under the guise of “scientificity”, to profess, despite all these precautions, to a kind of ultimate knowledge, to establish new certitudes. And if it is proper to undertake such a practice, such an adventure of systematization, it is also important, as Gödel calls for us to do, to remember that any system can know its own truth only from its exteriority, by emerging on its own in order to perceive its own limits. Any totality which claims to contain itself will necessarily suffer from an enlargement of its own being and forge its own illusions.

In that respect, there is a final conceptual distinction coming from Hegel, which we find useful to mention, between internal critique, which has more to do with objective analysis, and external critique, which is more concerned with an exteriority, with another bias. If it is possible and desirable to criticize a thought from inside, by confronting it with itself, the necessary counterpart of this internal critique invites us all the same to analyze a thought through the postulates which are foreign to it: the external critique. One is no less legitimate than the other. Why indeed accept with a straight face the presuppositions imposed on us? This dialectical position, which encourages us to be at the same time inside and outside, offers us an additional guarantee of detachment and of critical analysis. A dialectical position the vanity of which Nietzsche, true to himself, will hasten to denounce, insofar as this reduplication of the thought on itself, an extreme sophistication, this laborious work of negativity, encourages excessive development and illusions of our tiny reason: the omnipotence of our intellect, rather than accepting and letting the great reason of life emerge, the only reliable and true yardstick.

To analyze is to try to grasp, sort of in-itself, the composition of being, illusory as this grasp may be, since thought from then on claims to operate from a detached and disembodied perspective: it becomes the penetrating gaze of God. And if we

have to warn against the abuse and the sterility of analysis, we must nonetheless invite everyone to this moment of alienation of the thought, to this asceticism which asks us to apprehend the reality of the real beyond ourselves. This requires learning to ignore ourselves, which regardless of any effectiveness or any result is a highly advisable practice, initiating us into sobriety of thought, into the humility of being. Knowing how to analyze is to only make the word say what it says, it is to know what we say, to be aware of what is said. It is to accept the limits, it is to abandon the accidental and the desirable, it is to accept the finitude and the limitations of a given. Of course, analysis has its own pitfalls. For instance the “It is not relevant!” of the scholar who distinguishes in an extreme way and thus distinguishes himself. Or the “It fits!” or “It is the same thing!” of the novice who combines things and believes in it. An infernal couple who represent a kind of Scylla and Charybdis of thought. In summary, to analyze is to learn how to read, to learn how to reread, to learn how to reread ourselves.

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## Synthesizing

The primary meaning of synthesis ties in very closely with that of analysis. If analysis decomposes and studies the composition of the composite, it in fact suggests its opposite, the art of synthesis. Logic stems from this practice: the art of composing in a legitimate way. Synthesis can appear like it is part of analysis, like its second moment: we decompose in order to recompose. But if synthesis is conditioned by analysis and vice versa, since logic – or the study of coherence or linking – does not belong to analysis any more than to synthesis, it also has a peculiarity compared to its mirror image. Analysis starts from a given that it is a question of deconstructing and reconstructing, while synthesis, instead of reconstructing, constructs, which often implies destroying. In fact, it must abandon a good number of elements considered secondary, by a work of negation. Its given is not a composite, but a pile of scattered elements which it has to sort and assemble. For analysis, the puzzle is already put together; not so for the synthesis. And this difference, which can only be one of form, contains important stakes.

The first consequence is that the synthesis is open: it poses the problem of what it is possible to combine with an initial proposition which it must formulate, and also envisage how it can be combined. The reported elements could be of any kind, even what is – at least in appearance – radically contradictory to a given proposition: the working hypothesis. That is what makes synthesis the key moment in dialectics, after the thesis and the antithesis, a process which can be utterly opposed to analysis. As Hegel, who establishes dialectics as the foundation of thought and of the real, extensively identifies, juggling opposites enables a work of negativity

leading to higher levels of rationality. Indeed, if analysis confines its object to what it is, synthesis allows for the articulation of an object in a relation to what it is not, a “what it is not” which is nevertheless constitutive of its being. The famous example of the relationship between the acorn and the oak, an opposition which is articulated in the concept of “becoming” (quoted in the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*) is a classic example. We will deal with this further in our subsequent chapter on dialectics.

The two basic processes which constitute synthesis, the founders of logic, are deduction and induction. The analytic deduction is content with deriving from a given proposition what it contains; synthetic deduction gathers several elements in order to constitute a general proposition. The first type of inference produces a multiplicity of parts from unity; the second produces unity from multiplicity. The syllogism is one of the oldest, most common and most famous cases of synthetic inference. It mainly consists in taking a general proposition, called the major premise, adding a singular proposition, called the minor premise, and drawing a conclusion from it. As for induction, it is opposed to deduction insofar as instead of dealing with general propositions, it passes from the singular, or a set of facts, to the general, by attempting to elaborate propositions likely to take charge of these very facts which often come under observation.

If logic is often considered to be an important part of philosophy by some philosophers, the Stoics for example, for others it is considered as a simple additional instrument because of its reductive or purely formal aspect. Indeed, its rules ensure the consistency of statements rather than their truthfulness, it verifies propositions rather than generating them. However, the break-up of classical logic into a diversity of “logics” in the twentieth century largely contributed to reestablishing it as a science of “truth”, particularly in Anglo-Saxon philosophy, for which the analytical method represents the regal and “scientific” way of thought. Beyond the purely logical and formal aspect, which consists in collecting propositions and working out the principles which govern these collections, synthesis is a practice of theorizing, of conceptualizing, since it is a matter of gathering under a single and brief idea what initially is part of multiplicity. And so, when we read a text or listen to an author we will try to condense what is said into a short statement or a simple sentence, in the form of a summary of its content, or of the intention which guides it, a disclosed or undisclosed intention, or even by establishing an implication or a central consequence of the words expressed. The principle of synthesis is here to bring out what is essential in a discourse, or at least what constitutes its unity, its substance, its main attraction. This unity can already be explicitly contained in the discourse, and the one doing the synthesis will then be content in choosing a consciously expressed proposition which he will extract from the text. Or he will forge

a proposition which he will think transcends the text and articulates its primary reality, with a lesser or greater degree of interpretation, which may even be disputed by the author of the text. Again, analysis joins synthesis, since analyzing a text can also consist of such a condensed proposition, even if we can expect an analysis to be more detailed and developed than a synthesis. In the same way, the work of conceptualisation joins that of synthesis, since it is a question of producing a term or a reduced expression which sums up a wider thought, which claims to capture its essence.

To reduce – reduction – is an important aspect of synthesis. Traditionally, reduction in logic consisted in reducing a set of complex propositions of unusual form to a recognizable, identifiable, and therefore qualifiable form. Reduction makes it possible to unify the field of knowledge, to integrate data into common and reduced laws. Consequently Husserl and phenomenology proposed to reduce facts to essences, thereby getting rid of the abundance of their concrete individualities, which had the main advantage of consolidating knowledge.

The anagogical method strikes us as another interesting case of synthesis, a particularly radicalized form of the process which we find in Plato. It consists, from the starting point of a given proposition or a set of propositions, in trying to go back as far as possible, up to the first and founding transcendentals: the unity, the true, the beautiful, the good, the being, etc. It finds its origin in Plato, and if it inspired the phenomenological reduction it does not have the same presuppositions, because in Plato they are metaphysical and in Husserl they are empirical: me and the world, in other words they come under experience. In any event, in both cases it is about determining the fundamental issues underlying any particular proposition, however insignificant it may be, by showing beyond the obvious the presuppositions contained in a given proposition. Either way, this involves abandoning one important part of the given, a particularly empirical one, the narrative and the circumstantial, which remains a psychologically important obstacle of the synthesis: quite often the human mind does not want to give up all the narrative elements, since they make up this sequence which we call existence. Plato also defines the essence of a discourse, its unity, through the purified simplicity of its intention.

In opposition – or in addition – to induction and deduction we wish to propose, as a modality of synthesis, a third concept, less known and more recent, which originates with Peirce, inspirer of the American pragmatist movement: abduction. This concept is interesting insofar as it allows us to account for scientific discovery: while observing and reflecting, the mind encounters different empirical or ideal data which impose itself on it, surprise it, force it to advance new hypotheses, sometimes in complete contradiction to established principles. This concept differs somewhat from the Hegelian scheme, as another description of the hypothetico-



deductive scheme, in the sense that new hypotheses are not relatively foreseeable constructions of the mind, produced through an effort of reason reflecting on its own content, but emerge on their own, in an uncontrollable way to an open mind, observant and attentive – something which implies a certain mental availability. In this process lies a certain non-linearity and a possibility of reconsideration or divergence, which, as always with pragmatism, tries to defeat the dogmatism linked to overdetermined anchorages of thought. The omnipotence of the postulat, of the will and of the system is here blocked, since this calls into question the a priori thought in favor of a first and transcendent reality of the world, the manifestations of which are not always predictable. For if Hegelian thought attempts to take charge of opposites, it is always by integrating them into a system whose powers of integration are never questioned, given that it tends towards an implementation of the absolute. Both synthesis understood as a reduction of discours, as résumé, and synthesis as a collection of disparate elements, or even as the outpouring of an intuition, enabling us to see, enabling us to think, are factors of awareness. In each case it produces the direct from the indirect, it fills in the gaps, it establishes the links; it is a genuine thought and not an additional or secondary tool. But the paradox of synthesis is that it allows us to deepen while saying less, while speaking less: it speaks thanks to an economy of words. In this it is a costly intellectual act, because it invites a certain harshness, an asceticism, a letting go. It calls for detachment, for pruning, for abandoning our futile and vain hopes of totality and exhaustiveness. Synthesis deepens because it clarifies, it clarifies because it detaches and makes visible what otherwise disappears in the stream, in the mass, in the flux. In this sense, just like when pruning a tree, it makes the structure visible, it structures the moving mass of words and ideas which would otherwise be much more confused. It reorganizes and restructures because it makes short-circuits, sometimes surprising, without which we would not see anything. Synthesis is not a neutral act: it makes connections which change things; in eliminating various opacities it gives fluidity to speech. Synthesis is therefore a producer of meaning. Not because we ignore the elements of which it is made up or even the principles which it reveals, but because of the uncommon densities of its words which enable us to see what was previously diverse, and which we did not necessarily realize. Synthesis makes us see what we were already seeing, what we could see without seeing, what we were seeing without being able to see, what we were seeing without wanting to see.

## Exemplifying

Kant is warning us against intuitions without concepts, which according to him are “blind”, but also against concepts without intuitions, which are “empty”. The first part of the injunction impels us to analyze, to produce propositions, and in so doing put forward the concepts that articulate them and make up them. We restrict ourselves to the example, to the narrative, to the empirical: reason must be implemented and perform its work of abstraction, account for what represents and contains the empirical data mentioned or shown. It forces us to think rationally and to develop an abstract thought, avoiding the trap of the anecdotal and the recitation. Citing the idea of a chair helps us to avoid picking up and naming the various elements of all the objects or entities which are part of this category one by one: to name every chair by a particular name. In this sense, it is about making a generalization. Conversely, to produce an example, to exemplify, enables us to concretize or make the concept visible, but it also makes it possible to test the intellectual construction which produces ideas and puts them together. Therefore exemplifying fulfills two crucial functions: The first is educational, because it allows us to see, to understand, to explain by referring to the concrete. The second consists of a test, since it is about experiencing the concrete, verifying, embodying, comparing the product of thought with the data of experience.

Philosophy, as a practice and like any practice, is confronted with matter. Its subject matter is our knowledge of the world, in the form of narration and explanations: mythos and logos. Narration is a collection of facts and lived or imparted experiences which constitute empirical data. Explanation is a set of ideas and theories which account for empirical data, which ensure coherence and predictability. Philosophy establishes itself in exteriority when confronted with this matter: it doubts, it criticizes, it examines, it evaluates, it compares, although matter is also a tool, an instrument which manipulates as it likes. But if it puts the knowledge of the world to the test, if it examines our relationship with the world, it also puts itself to the test by this knowledge of the world and indirectly, or through the mediation of knowledge, it is tested by the world itself. This is how the pedagogical and the experimental work come together, by the fact that the philosopher must confront otherness. That is why the convocation of the example is crucial for him. Without it he risks losing himself in the maze of his own mind, imprisoning himself in a jail he built all on his own. To give examples is to know what we are talking about, to make known what we are talking about, and to check the viability of our speech. Of course, a speech has its own truth, and the task or reason is to check the coherence of the speech, its transparency to itself. But since this discourse also tries to account for the world, it generally claims to take charge of a reality which

transcends it, a founding and constitutive reality. It is also a question of examining to what extent it can take charge of this reality, under its various forms. Producing an example seems to be the minimal act that this verification requires. Where is the access to reality, to exteriority, to the otherness of the matter, if no example is provided? How can we then claim a critical relationship to the world and to knowledge? It is in this sense that we need both the discourse on empirical data and the empirical data itself, that we need both the discourse and the discourse on the discourse in order for there to be a philosophizing worthy of its name. Without it, the discourse risks closing in on itself and starts believing its own content, only because words are spoken and we give them unlimited credit by the simple fact that they have been spoken.

However, it is not for us to let the popular presupposition perish, which establishes the concrete as a unique or primordial “reality”. Therefore the common reaction: “They are nothing but ideas!” which gives a reliable certainty to materiality, a watertight guarantee, endowing it with a confidence which ideas or concepts, considered too abstract, would not merit. Already because this materiality does not reach us directly but only through the imperfect and biased tools of our body, when the information provided is not terribly intellectualized. But paradoxically, we will grant it its status as bearer of truth when we will grant it its status of strangeness and mediation, and no longer that of familiarity and immediacy. Matter is that which is other, that which is foreign, that which resists and acts on us, that which escapes us, that which alienates us. From this perspective only, matter protects us from ourselves. As for the concrete, its interest is its contingency and its arbitrariness. It brings together that which in the absolute, that of thought, would not have to be brought together. It is not on principle or a priori that the concrete is what it is. In a certain way it is accidental, as a phenomenon. We can always rationalize its existence, but that would only be to reassure ourselves and to ease our consciences. No, the concrete has no reason to occur, at least no fundamental reason; we only explain it by the combination of a few circumstances, via some efficient cause. Going further and attempting any kind of teleology would be rather hazardous. But to risk verifying our hypothesis with the existence of a singular concrete, very different from a universal theoretical concrete secreted from within, that seems to us a reflex stemming from great wisdom. Not that this concrete is more real. Or if it is more real, it is only because we realize that it escapes us. The concrete, the matter, the phenomenon therefore has as its primary virtue to remind us of our own finitude, to force our thought to model itself and not to freewheel or to fly around. It is at this moment that the concrete is really concrete, and no longer the phantasm of an anxious mind that at all costs looks for a place to reassure itself. It is the test of the thought.

## Identifying the Presuppositions

The reality of a discourse is to be found in its unity, says Plato. Its unity is very often its origin, objective or subjective. The subjective origin of a discourse is its intention, the reason it was said, what it claims to accomplish: to respond, to show, to prove. But quite often the discourse is not aware of its own nature, of its intention; it cannot qualify what it is. Most of the time it only exists as a reaction: it only expresses a feeling which distracts us, mentions a particular idea which crosses our mind without regard for the timing, or it wants to defend itself, to justify itself. And it would be difficult for it to determine its motivation. It will resort to vague and cowardly expressions such as “taking turns”, “expressing ourselves”, “wanting to speak”, etc. It talks, simple as that. Anyway, that is what it thinks it does.

The objective origin is above all the matrix of thought from which an idea is expressed, the “philosophical school” to which it belongs. For example the “concern for pleasure” which is betrayed in a speech, whether this term is mentioned or not. Or it could be the principle behind that idea. The logical and demonstrative claim of an argumentation would be such a principle. In a simpler and less philosophically engaging way for some, it could also be a specific idea, not articulated, conceived by the listener as an undeclared preamble to the voluntarily expressed idea. This implied acquisition is then interpreted as a presupposition of the idea in question. For example, when I assure that “I will certainly be at our meeting” I claim, without realizing it, to know the state of the world beforehand, to predict the future and ignore death; otherwise, I would simply say that “I will do anything to be there”. Or I would add “Inshallah!” as Muslims do.

The problem with identifying presuppositions is to determine what is conditioning the judgment. Judgment is here understood as attributing predicates to a subject or subsuming a particular within a universal. It is a matter of identifying the contents of a proposition, explicit or implicit, without making it say what it does not say, what Kant calls analytic judgment. According to him, such a judgment does not add anything new to the subject we are dealing with, no new concept is brought: it is only a question of breaking down the content of the proposition or of the initial concept by analysis, to uncover various predicates which were until then “thought in it”, but in a confused way. Take Kant’s example: the triangle. I can declare analytically that it has three angles, since that idea is contained in the term “triangle” without being made explicit. But I can also more implicitly, by reasoning, derive the idea that it has three sides or that the sum of its three angles is one hundred and eighty degrees. Here Kant introduces the concept of synthetic a priori judgment, since I can make this judgment without resorting to “external” empirical information, using only the workings of reason in order to obtain new

knowledge. Without entering into these fine distinctions, not always clearly determined, let us start from the principle that to identify presuppositions implies determining the intellectual matrix from which a statement is uttered, and clarifying and explaining the concepts which structure and give birth to a thought.

To the extent that philosophical practice is not constrained to strict formal logic, determined by relationships of pure necessity, identifying presuppositions can certainly fall under the necessary but also the probable, although it is nonetheless a question of distinguishing the two cases when we make this judgment. For example, if we use the principle that every affirmation is a negation, we can hold that the person who is determined by value A is not determined by value B or C, and in a way has rejected these. Obviously, we can object that in the absolute, B and C could also be chosen, for instance at a later stage, since they are not explicitly rejected. Nevertheless, it was neither B nor C which were called up in this affirmation, but A. We must trust the “said” and therefore suppose that what appears is that which is. By the principle of parsimony, it is advisable to avoid the mere possible, the “what might have been said”, the “what might be”. Otherwise, we fall into the mistake of the unjustified hypothesis. This mistake, which is quite common, stems from the fear of making mistakes which Hegel denounces as the first mistake. Because if we suppose that only the “necessary” authorizes the judgment and that the “not necessarily” is an acceptable objection, a good number of relevant judgments will be eliminated, judgments which nonetheless belong to common sense. So if a person utters the injunction that “you must not harm your neighbor”, I can conclude that this person has a moral view of things. But we could object that the speaker is perhaps concerned with the simple fact of maintaining a good reputation, that he is rather motivated by a concern for recognition. Certainly, this is undeniable, this possibility cannot be categorically denied, but since nothing indicates such a concern in the injunction, the judgment must be based on what is given, on what we “see”, nothing more, nothing less. At least until we have more information, which might then change things.

Another clarification must be made. As we have said, to identify presuppositions implies identifying the conceptual matrix from which a discourse is made. But there is a rhetorical technique common in discourse which consists in stating concepts while denying them. For example in the expressions “it is not a moral problem” or “I am not doing it because it suits me”. In the first case, the author announces a moral vision of things, in the second an “instrumentalist”, “utilitarian”, even an “egocentric” vision. But it can be objected that in both cases the concept is denied, even implicitly criticized since it is rejected. We will answer that be that as it may, the concept in question structures the sentence, founds it, gives it its meaning, which implies that it is its very substance. Regardless of the author’s re-

lationship to this concept, it occupies his thinking and articulates it, which makes it a founding concept, which makes the matrix of the concept a presupposition of the concept at issue. We could say it differently: this concept determines the register of discourse, its tonality, and therefore its substance. The atheist who fights with God brings him into existence. The avenger who fights for equality for all is concerned with power. We can hardly escape our actions and our words, no matter how much we twist and turn.

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## Interpreting

One of the obstacles in identifying presuppositions is that of subjectivity: since we claim to be objective in analytic judgment, we should not add anything of our own. However, we cannot a priori refuse the contribution of this subjectivity, a conceptual contribution covered by the synthetic judgment. The only problem is to determine to what extent this subjective contribution is arbitrary and unfounded, or to what extent it is part of common sense despite its particular nature. Therein lies the problem of interpretation. Because it is about explaining, giving meaning, translating, making understandable, it will be necessary to add concepts, at the risk of imposing a certain change of meaning to the content, since different terms are never equivalent. Just as the actor plays his role in his own specific way, with a certain style, thereby fleshing out the text of the author, the musician performs a piece of music by translating the thoughts, feelings or intentions of the composer in a personal way. In psychology, the verb “interpret” takes on a much more negative meaning since it means “to attribute a deformed or erroneous meaning to a real fact or to an event”, a negative connotation which is rather widely spread.

While wishing to grant interpretation a status of intellectual legitimacy, we must nevertheless be mindful of the misuse such a judgment can entail. Whether we want to or not, we will always unconsciously attempt – the importance of subjectivity obliges this – to approach the red line and attribute to a discourse what does not belong to it. Nevertheless, it is a question of undertaking this risk, otherwise we will no longer dare to think. Some think they can get away with denouncing interpretation and claiming not to interpret or not to judge, however absurd that pretension may be. On the one hand, if they really were to act like this they would not think, since judgment as well as interpretation is necessary for thinking, to the extent that these faculties invite us to evaluate the discourse we hear; otherwise we would simply hear words and the purely factual dimension of their meaning. On the other hand, it is usually a lie: we tell ourselves stories in order to ease our conscience, because it is practically impossible not to judge, especially if we profess not to judge; already because the prohibition of judgment is a contradiction in

principle. Banning judgment is a radical judgment, with heavy implications of intellectual and moral presuppositions. At most we can try to momentarily suspend our judgment, or try to separate the part of judgment from that of what is given. Two regulations which will require a lot of work on ourselves, a great deal of skill, and which will not be carried out without difficulty.

In interpreting, to have the right to identify a content and to engage in this activity, there is an important presupposition: the speech does not belong to anyone; that is, it belongs to everyone. Nobody can boast about being the true interpreter of someone, and certainly not of themselves or of someone close to them. The argument of the expert, the pretension of he who “really knows” the person or his thoughts, and above all the argument which consists in professing in a peremptory manner, “Still, I know what I am saying!”, have no value here. Not that this status prohibits these people from risking a judgment: on the contrary, in the absolute they would be in a better position to carry out such an analysis. But in reality this is not the case, precisely as we have already mentioned, because all too often, speech is used in order to defend and to justify. Too many interests are at stake. As soon as there is something to lose, speech is distorted, falsified. It is therefore no longer the actual speech which is at the heart of the intellectual activity, but a person, some status, power, an image, a possession, etc. And so a person will cry out: “You do not understand me. What I meant was ...”. This is where the problem lies. There is no way to hear what was meant, only to see what was said. Now, since the speaker quite often has a hard time to reconcile with his own words, he is the very last person to be trusted to know what he said. He is too much inside himself, plunged in his intentions, his fears, his denials, and so on. Anyone who listens to him is without a doubt in a better position to understand the content of what is being said. If only comparatively, if he is not himself too directly involved in what is being expressed. Consequently he is better suited to identify the presuppositions. But if a speaker has enough distance to himself he can certainly see himself thinking, which is called philosophizing.

And so Plato, for whom thinking is to have a dialogue with ourselves, invites us to the anagogical rise of discourse as an ideal regulator of interpretation. As far as we can, to identify the unity, or the essence of discourse. Moreover, this brings us closer to the work of identifying presuppositions. To go to this place of the conceptual and philosophical unconscious, the crucible where the crucial choices are made, where the determining options of thought are taken up. In this return to the original, in this archeological excavation of knowledge, we will again find our true image. A return which constitutes the condition sine qua non of any intellectual or spiritual deliberation worthy of its name. This passage to infinity, this testing of the simple, is not an easy asceticism. We often prefer to bury ourselves in the ex-

pression of our feelings and the display of our learning. Seeing us is a painful thing, and so it is with others. So the majority of discussions make a pact of not venturing into these dangerous regions, too close to the intimacy of being. Or, since we are overly sensitive, it is war, the place of all animosity, of abusive and hazardous interpretations, where it is above all a question of getting at the other and hurting him. Theater of cruelty, that which consists in really saying what we think, letting our own thoughts run their course. Unacceptable violence between friends, behavior which contravenes the manners of the good society. Yet it is this violence, this cruelty, which lies at the heart of the Socratic act of giving birth to souls. It is not just a matter of being restricted to producing beautiful babies: it is also necessary to bring forth little monsters. Because they are there, they have just as much a right to live, even if it is only for the sake of being sacrificed.

There is an interesting approach to interpretation which is reformulation, which can also be called the exercise of paraphrasing: to say something in other words than those which have already been expressed. Now, if it is difficult to reformulate an idea, it is even more difficult to judge a reformulation. Because if we are used to our terms, if our lexicon is familiar to us, this is not the case with our neighbor's. Such an evaluation is therefore a proper exercise for thought, between rigor and flexibility. For this reason, not a few teachers prefer repetition to reformulation: the task is less risky, less tiring. The pitfall of repetition is that we do not know whether the student has understood or not, to what extent the meaning has been internalized. Under the pretense of caution, the formal approach of literal repetition is favored. But it is true that to link an initial text and the reformulation which is made by someone else implies an intellectual gymnastics which is far from being obvious, because the suggested reformulation might have chosen an angle which surprises us, carried out with the help of unexpected terms, where the choice of the essential, the rejection of the accidental, is not quite the same as ours. All the same, even if we would not have produced such a reformulation ourselves, we must still examine to what extent it is acceptable or not. To resume the musical analogy, we have to listen to the musician playing his piece and determine to what degree his execution is faithful to the work, even if this is not how we understand it, even if we do not really like it, if only by the surprise it causes in us. This does not imply falling into the trap of relativism, where "anything goes", where an artificial "freedom of intellectual conscience" takes precedence, because betrayal is also a reality. We can indeed misinterpret, under-interpret, overinterpret, and these terms have real value. We can give a thought a meaning which differs too much from the initial content, omit certain essential aspects which makes the reformulation insubstantial, or outrageously exacerbate certain aspects which distorts the whole thing. Interpreting is an art which is the only guarantee of understanding. It is necessary



to translate in order to understand, but all translation is in fact a treason: “traduttore, traditore”. Translator, traitor. We answer such a suspicion by invoking the awareness of imperfection as the guarantor of understanding. And the same goes for understanding ourselves as for understanding others.

## The Concept

Concept – or conceptualization – is a mysterious term which is nevertheless characteristic of philosophizing, essential to its activity. We use it as a tool, we refer to it as a criterion, and still we never sufficiently try to define its being or identify its function more precisely. In the teaching of philosophy, no particular effort is exerted on establishing a practice of its utilization: what we might call practicing or learning conceptualization. Or it is limited to an exercise in definition. This happens for a primary reason, quite common and limiting of philosophizing: philosophical theses collide on the very notion of concept. What distinguishes the concept from an idea, a notion, an opinion, a theme, a category, etc? Let us ask ourselves what may be the interest or the use of this type of nuance or distinction. For some, the specificity of the concept lies in a certain pretense of objectivity, of universality. To what extent does this term match this specific attribute or the general claims attributed to it?

Because of that, and to avoid the quarrels and trials of heterodoxy so common in philosophy, let us take the minimalist approach of attesting that the concept is something that we use intuitively, a term which structures our mind: a kind of key word, since it is that which opens and closes the doors and coffers of thought. Of course, by doing this, by avoiding theorizing too much on the question, we will also avoid risking articulating its “real” nature. “Real”, at least in the mind of the one who is supposed to introduce the students to the philosophical approach, which traditionally requires defining the concepts that are used. But rather than definition, without excluding it, we would prefer coherency or clarity of use. A method which, if it can save itself from gauging the concept of the concept, can hardly do without concepts. Perhaps it is exactly in this gap between definition and utilization that the particular nature of the concept is situated. In fact, in everyday language, if we “find” or if we “have” an idea, if we “have” beliefs, we “invent” and “use” a concept. So the concept is very naturally a tool, an instrument of thought, an invention, like that of an engineer. If the idea is a representation, if the belief is knowledge, then the concept is an operator. And it is by the yardstick of this operativity that we determine and evaluate the concept.

But what about the universality of the concept? Are concepts specific or general? Do they belong to an author, such as the concept of “noumenon”, attributable specifically to Kant? Or do they fall under common sense, such as the “concept of justice”, which seems to emerge from the beginning of time? We can oppose these

two types of concept, but we can also say that they are inseparable. If the first is more particular and less frequent, its meaning and the proof of its operativity is to be found in the echo offered by common sense. In fact, in the case of “noumenon”, it is easy to admit or to imagine that any given entity is endowed with some sort of interiority. The second, “justice”, despite the banality it has today, is the product of a genesis and a history, which, from a common intuition, have then generated two meanings: on the one hand institution and legality; on the other hand principle and legitimacy.

Anyway, in order to connect the two attributes of the concept – universality and function – we propose the following hypothesis: the universality of a concept is determined by its effectiveness, by the possibility of its use and usefulness. In other words, if the concept must be clear in order to be a concept, its usefulness must be evident, otherwise it will only be formal. Therefore we must avoid the infinite nuances of definition, the interest of which we no longer really understand. Like a mathematical function it must enable the solution of a problem, it does not exist for nothing, it is not its own end. If we cannot do without precision, to an even greater extent we cannot do without application. Unique as it is, its operativity will give it a status of universality. So to escape from an empirical practice where everything is done on a case-by-case basis, from a simple recipe, we will attempt to conceptualize the particular action or thought. That is to say, to abstract that which is essential and common to the possible specific cases. Therefore it will be a question of leaving the story telling, the opinion and the concrete in order to enter into analysis.

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## Working on the Concept

There are different modalities or forms of conceptual activity. Admittedly, we can create a concept, by which we recognize the great philosophers, as Deleuze suggests. But we can also recognize a concept, that is to identify an established concept, to convoke it. We can also define a concept, which makes up the preamble of any dissertation or theoretical work for many philosophers and teachers. But in a more intuitive way, we can also use a concept, which is still a conceptual activity, but in a less analytical way.

Let us suggest three types of activity related to concepts.

- Knowing the concepts generated and approved by the philosophical tradition. It is a question of knowing and using recognized and referenced concepts which are presented as concepts, with all the credit that is given to them from the start. These concepts can be general or specific. To know, we have to learn. That is to say to acquire, to memorize. We also have to define, that is to specify, to explain the concept. Knowledge which, of course, conditions the capacity to use a concept.

The classic major pitfall here is to learn concepts without learning to use them. By restricting ourselves to a simple statement or to a definition, acts devoid of any real appropriation.

- Recognizing a general concept. It is a question of recognizing a concept that is used when it appears, without explicitly appearing as such. Being able to identify a concept when we see it. Here there is often a problem of abstraction: the fear of abstraction, accompanied by the impossibility of perceiving this abstraction when it appears. Some turn it into a posture: the refusal to see the abstraction. The concept is no longer a concept: it is relegated to a simple articulation of a particular case. It is deprived of its general operativity, deprived of its universality; all that is left of it is a specific, almost concrete case.
- Creating a specific concept. It is a question of articulating a concept in order to solve a thinking problem. The term that is used may be a common term in its usual sense, a term deviating from its meaning, or a neologism. What is important is to recognize the specific use that is made of it, because very often the concept will emerge in a rather intuitive way.

In the traditional teaching of philosophy, the learning of classical concepts is the only aspect of concepts which is relatively systematized. Through the teacher's lessons and the texts studied, the student will have to assimilate a certain number of concepts which he will have to more or less appropriate. So in the key exercise, that of the essay, he should preferably show that he is in possession of a certain number of them, not simply by citing them, but by using them in an appropriate way which shows both understanding and mastery. Ultimately, however, he is mainly asked to develop – on a subject provided for him – a thought constructed from his own idea. In other words, to provide a certain number of concepts which now belong to him, to which he will have to integrate course elements, that way articulating a coherent whole. But no practice, no exercise, no class will have trained him to such a level of mastery of his own thought. On the one hand he will have his own personal culture, on the other hand he will have seen and heard the teacher perform such acts, but he will virtually never have practiced this in the classroom. The only moment he will apply this art will be during the few essays he will write alone, under examination or at home, profiting from any further guidance from the few comments scribbled on his copy by the examiner. In other words, only the first part of our triptych is truly a course object: the definition. As well, only on a theoretical level, not in practice.

## Functions of the Concept

As we mentioned earlier, the concept is a filter through which we make sense of the world. What follows are some examples of how this can work.

**Ordering** – The world in its unordered, or pre-ordered, state is chaotic, complicated and messy. We are bombarded with shapes, colors and sounds. The concept helps us structure and categorize our impressions, decide what goes together and what does not, what is similar and what is different, what is dangerous and what is benign, etc. We are no longer overwhelmed by impressions since the concepts allow us to differentiate between things.

**Visualizing** – The concept makes the invisible become visible. What was until now a mass of green and brown becomes trees. More precise conceptualizing turns the trees into oaks, elms, birches and pines, and so on. The manufactured things in a room become furniture which becomes chairs, tables, chests and bookshelves. With the concept we now see what was hitherto hidden in plain sight.

**Understanding** – Conceptualizing makes it possible to carry out scientific investigation through the act of unification and generalization. Without the concept we would have to deal with one item after another since there would be no regulatory principle for grouping together what have similar properties. The universal “tree” allows us to establish general principles by induction rather than having to examine every individual tree in turn.

**Communicating** – Communication becomes easier and more efficient through the use of concepts. It is no longer necessary to just point at a certain thing or give unwieldy explanations when we have a name for it. Furthermore, the concept lets us ask for any member of a category when the specific individual is not required. One hammer is as good as another when we want to drive a nail.

**Palliating** – Conceptualizing can have palliative effects when the symptoms of an affliction are explained in terms of a condition. It clarifies the causes and lets us understand that this is something already known and therefore less mysterious. It makes it seem more manageable since understanding is often the first step towards a solution. It can have the reverse effect, of course, if the concept is a heavy one, loaded with negative connotations. But even then, the very process of naming and identifying through conceptualization helps us focus on what is relevant which allows for a more efficient progress.

## Recognizing the Concept

Therefore, the second part we mentioned seems to us to be the most immediate crucial question to be addressed: recognizing the concept that is used intuitively, in its status as operator of thought. Thinking of one chair after another makes any scientific progress impossible, because such an operation is the negation of any universality, or at least of any generalization. The scientific approach always presupposes a certain form of unity: seizing the whole in its regulatory principles. This universality, or this generalization, a process which allows us to comprehend the world, is a product of the mind: a construction, an intuition, a reasoning, etc. The concept works as a filter through which we make sense of the world. That which passes through the filter of “chair” is a chair, or becomes a chair. This specific chair, I can touch it, see it, sit on it, and so on. The senses serve as a starting point, a tool for initial information, and a tool to verify what is being said. Concretely, in the extreme, I do not need the word to express my thought: I can point my finger. The concept (or the idea) of a chair, deprived of such demonstrative elements, rests on a tacit agreement: the other is supposed to know what I am talking about, without the immediate possibility of showing and verifying anything empirically. Here we are dealing with a pre-verbalized or pre-conceptualized concept. Not yet named, not yet conceptualized, but still a concept.

Nevertheless, the known concept encounters certain obstacles. The first type of the problem: the borderline case. Does this particular object or phenomenon apply to the name or not? The tree trunk I am sitting on, is it a chair or not? And a wooden crate? This situation forces us to recognize that the chair is not a particular object, it is not an obvious fact: it is a product of the mind, which like all products of the mind knows its limits. Here we oscillate between recognizing and creating: to confront borderline cases forces us to specify the concept, to bring it out of its status of pure intuition, to conceptualize it further. For example: is the chair defined by its form or its function? As the case may be, if a chair is defined by its usefulness, to sit, well then the trunk is a chair. If it is defined by its form, it requires legs and a backrest and the trunk is not a chair. Operativity is here either a function or a form, or the two together. This precision is what could distinguish an idea from a concept: by postulating that the idea is more general or more subjective than the concept. Although the requirement of definition, inherent and necessary to the idea, brings us tremendously close to the concept. Let us propose the following hypothesis, in order to distinguish between concept and idea. The idea rather relates to a general entity, it rather refers to one in itself, while the concept is instead a function or a relation. If the idea is restricted to intuition, the concept is more engaged in use and definition, since defining a thing necessarily implies a relation to other things.

Let us admit that in the end, this distinction is very fragile. It nevertheless allows us to reflect on the status of the object of the thought. To avoid an excessive theorization, of the concept or of something else, let us ask the question, what does this change? In this reflection, an initial distinction seems important to us. Is it a matter of first defining and then using, or is it possible, even preferable, to use first and define later? The first assumption is the most common one in the advice given to students in order to help them with their writing. But the reverse is a practice just as valuable. Moreover, this crucial choice opposes Aristotle, partisan of defining first, to Plato, partisan of working on the problem. The presupposition of the definition as a first action implies to know the ideas used in advance, then combining them among themselves, at the risk of freezing thought, rather than proceeding through successive general hypotheses and then bringing out the concepts or ideas that are used. In the first scheme, the student will hazard proposing a few initial concepts, but thereafter no longer necessarily try to carefully analyze his work by trying to perceive the concepts generated by the flow of writing: concepts just as important as the first ones, concepts which will risk modifying, yes even contradict, the proposals initially announced. This is why we propose working on the principle of “concept recognition”. It is not about proclaiming the primacy of one method over another, but to consider different possibilities with their various advantages, both philosophical and pedagogical. All the more since some students will feel more at ease with one way than another, facilitating their own construction of thought. Some will prefer to start with a general movement, at the risk of vagueness; others with well-defined building blocks, at the risk of rigidity.

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## The Use of the Concept

The concept must be recognizable; by its definition, but mainly by its use. For example it must make it possible to solve a problem, to answer a question. It must above all be able to establish links; that is its chief operation. The concept “glass” links all glasses together, despite their many differences. It must also attach two terms of different order to each other. Thus the concept of glass connects drinking with water, as a medium for example. This idea of a relationship corresponds to perfectly ordinary reasoning. But a good deal of the work of philosophical teaching is to make the student conscious of the ordinary, making it extraordinary, giving it a meaning beyond the obvious. This is what characterizes concept and conceptualization. What is the link between glass and water? The glass contains water. Above and beyond the intuitive answer, it is a question of realizing that we have brought in a new concept: contain. Between the different glasses there is another role, another type of link: the generality, or the abstraction, the categorization which merges the

entities of similar qualities, rather than the operation of a relation, causal or otherwise. Perhaps we have here another possibility of distinction between the idea, closer to category, and the concept. However, it is also an operation, but more qualitative than functional. This second operation represents another type of difficulty. “What makes two things alike or not?” or “Which predicates do two entities share?” is different from “What is the interaction which connects two objects or two ideas?”

From this, a number of exercises becomes visible. What does A and B have in common? What is the relationship between A and B? What are the concepts used, which give meaning to this or that sentence? We will see that it is difficult to make a link. The natural tendency is to force each idea to remain in its place, in its intellectual isolation, in its empirical or ideal singularity. The common expression “It has nothing to do with this!” is its most obvious manifestation. The “It is something else” will postpone the resolution of the problem or the elaboration of the idea indefinitely. Conversely – a symptom consistent with the previous one – despite the formal opposition, the ideas will be linked together without any consideration for logic or substantiality, without precisely articulating the link, without testing it. It takes the form of a shopping list, with completely isolated or arbitrarily collected ideas. Philosophical orthodoxy easily falls into the same trap, by an extreme consideration for precision linked to the deformation of the definition, a consideration which often takes priority over any other consideration.

The difficulty is to understand that the concept is nothing but a tool, fluid by its nature, which will appear explicitly or not at all in the finished product. And in any event to be able to identify it and clarify its meaning for the purpose of explaining its use. If the concept appears in a sentence, it is simply a matter of recognizing the key word around which the proposition in question revolves. To weigh its meaning and consequences. To see the novelty it brings and ask what it is responding to. If it is proclaiming something, if it is responding to something, it is necessarily some form of negation or other. So let us ask ourselves what it is denying, what it is refusing, what it claims to rectify. For this reason it is interesting to use the principle of opposites. What would happen if the concept was not there? What is its negation? What does it refuse? What is it hiding? It is therefore a question of identifying the issues linked to this precise concept. This will make it possible both to better understand what is said and to change the concept if, by testing it against its meaning, it suddenly appears inadequate. It is also possible that the concept does not appear in the proposition. It is then a matter of expressing it in order to qualify it. To add, if we see the need, an articulation of the concept in a supplementary proposition. Or to use its articulation to formulate a new problem. To formulate the concept not spoken, the principle of opposites is just as useful. To what does this proposition respond? What is at stake between this proposition



and that to which it responds? How do their respective qualifications oppose each other? Invariably, as we here operate on the meta-level of thought, we have to find the great antinomies of philosophy: singular and universal, subjective and objective, finite and infinite, noumenon and phenomenon, etc. Here we refer the reader to the subsequent part of this book which concerns antinomies.

One of the common difficulties with this type of exercise – without a doubt due to the relativistic and consensualist tendencies of our time – is the recurrent refusal to grasp oppositions. In a relationship between two propositions we see “something else”, something “complementary”, a “precision”, but it is more difficult to see the opposition. Faced with the antinomy between the singular and the universal, which will distinguish a general proposition from a concrete and specific case, many will hesitate to mention opposition and instead prefer to use the terms mentioned. It would not be a problem if it was not for the fact that the stakes are no longer expressed, the consequences of the proposition erased; the conceptual axis is not clearly grounded.

Another classic way in which the student tries to escape the opposition is the “more and less”. Consequently he will write that the first proposition is concrete, the second less concrete. But he will refuse to really qualify the second: he will qualify it by default, negatively. However, the meaning of the “concrete” concept he uses will differ depending on whether he uses “universal”, “abstract”, “vague” or “general” as opposition. It is therefore a question of refusing the use of “more and less” in order to qualify the concept in a more specific way. The square table is not “less round” than the round table – it is square. The idea here is to understand how the use of opposites, the choice of a specific pair, makes it possible to clarify the thought and to test it. Such an exercise helps us to make a concept less obvious, by highlighting it thanks to its opposite. Let us take an example: a student suggests qualifying a general proposition as “universal”, and after some hesitation qualifies its opposite, more concrete, as “natural”. When questioned, she proposes “artificial” as opposition to “natural”. The universal, is it then artificial? She rejects this outcome and replaces “natural” with “particular”. She could also have seized on another antinomy, like “natural” and “artificial”, insofar as she could have made sense of it. And so, thanks to the principle of opposites, the connotation is articulated, making it possible to clarify the concept and to advance steadily in the reasoning, even posing new problems. In this specific example, the student will formulate one proposition called “universal” and one called “particular”, establishing a link between them, which also makes it possible to test the “universal” proposition. All this in a conscious and explicit way, rather than a vague, intuitive and implicit one.

Another frequently occurring obstacle in this type of exercise is the refusal of intensive work. The extensive work generally seems more comfortable and less

anxiety-inducing. Rather than analyzing a proposition at hand, the student will prefer to add words, to adjoin new propositions or new examples; supposedly in order to explain the first proposition. But in fact, what follows is either another idea which does not really explain the first one, or it somewhat tautologically repeats, in other words, what has already been said. Sometimes, almost by luck, the idea is really explained. But that will be by tackling the consequences of the idea rather than confronting the idea itself. The reason is simple: the ideas we formulate seem so obvious to us that it does not seem necessary to dwell on their status, their meaning. We prefer to “go on”. To stand still is too painful, we prefer to run. And yet, it would help problematize our own thinking, but such a desire is not always present. The mind finds it easier to add ideas than to work on the concept and conceptual justification. Admittedly, the definition of concepts can be an interesting exercise, but it is too often proposed as an absolute and fixed determination, which makes the exercise simplistic and limiting.

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## Training, or a Miracle?

The practice described here must be part of teaching; otherwise we can not expect the student to engage, miraculously, in a conceptualization of his own thought. For this purpose we must be prepared to account for such a process, and not suggest that it is the teacher’s own and irreplaceable genius, or incidentally that of the student, which produces the concept. It is a matter of being ready to identify the mechanisms and to be aware of them. Perhaps some students, and the teacher himself, have an innate access to conceptualization, but it would be absurd to think that this is the case for the majority of them. And even if it is an intuition here, there is everything to be gained from conceptualizing the conceptualization. While Mozart probably did not simply rely on lessons in music theory or composition, it is different for ordinary people. It would therefore be presumptuous to think that our students and ourselves can do without it. And if the concept is limited to established concepts, in the alleged objectivity or universality provided by the genius of their author, let us not be surprised when the students for any essay offer a collage of more or less understood quotes and ready-made opinions. The core of a reflection and the true criterion of evaluation is still conceptualization and the articulation of an individual thought. So we had better teach the practice, rather than simply visiting museums.

What is a problem? This term, this concept, is so embarrassing that occasionally voices are raised demanding its elimination, pure and simple. A vague concept, complex and elusive, and yet trivialized since it is understood and used today in a number of different areas. But perhaps we have to accept this trivialization as being the truth of the concept, as of any concept: the generalization of its operativity guarantees the liveliness of its substance, at the risk of weakening it. After all, why would exclusivity be a guarantee of philosophical quality? Is not the genius of a concept summed up in its blatant obviousness, insofar as this obviousness, once it is named, becomes evident to everyone? Is not genius the look which perceives simplicity in a single glance? Until then, nothing was visible, colors and shapes were vague, but once the finger points at the thing, once it is named, no one will be able to look at it the same way again. The thing is born, animated and defined by the concept which gives it birth. The more visible this thing, the livelier the concept. It is by a perversion of thought that a concept to be admired becomes reserved for some sophisticated and smug elite. So if the concept of problem disappears in the eyes of delicate minds, perhaps we must appeal to universally shared common sense, in order to see and admire what it allows.

### Incertitude

What is problematic is uncertain, undermined by a doubt which creates problems, a doubt which is anxious and therefore encourages discussion. Historically, one of the earliest meanings of the term “problem” is just that, this incertitude which makes us hesitate before certifying or using any entity which can be qualified as problematic. The problem, from the Greek *problēma*, is what is thrown in front of us, the obstacle which threatens to trip us up. At best it attracts the eye, it forces us to slow down our pace, to make an effort, whether it is to walk around it or to step over it. At worst it downright interrupts us, paralyzes us. From Kant on, the problematic character will be defined as that of hypothesis, in opposition to two other terms: the assertoric, what is simply declared, and the apodictic, what is proven, necessary. Between two certitudes, the act of faith and the act of demonstration, incertitude will slip in, the shadow which generates doubt.

What is problematic springs from the realms of possibility, it is a simple hypothesis. Although this hypothesis seems necessary or inescapable to us, like in the unhypothetical, the presence of which is crucial in Platonic architectonics: an hypothesis whose presence is necessary, but whose articulation causes a problem.

It is the hypothesis par excellence or the negation of the status of the hypothesis. For example, do we not have to think about the unity of the self in order to attribute some sort of predicate to it? Do we not in the same way have to postulate the unity of the world in order to be able to talk about it in any kind of way? While at the same time doubting the nature of this unity. Because if we can declare, induce, deduce, prove lots of things about the world or our being, the problem of thinking strikes us when it comes to seizing or specifying its unity. We are obliged – without even thinking about it, without being able to devise it – to postulate this elusive unity in order to be able to think. And if we stop ourselves for a moment to question the legitimacy of that on which this discourse is founded, the gap in the thing in itself offers itself or imposes itself on our alarmed gaze. The alleged postulate then resumes its true nature, that of hypothesis. At last we realize that we have made choices which we put forward, perhaps too quickly: taking part in a shady affair, simply for the sake of functionality, of utility, just because we wanted to move forward. This risk could not be more legitimate, provided that it was taken with full knowledge of the cause, provided that the hubris which supported it remained aware of the transgression that was made. The concepts of universe and singularity does indeed capture, as examples, the problematic nature of transcendent concepts.

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## The Unhypothetical

Whether it be time, space, being, unity, freedom, existence, reason, or any other fundamental concept absolutely necessary for thinking (a necessity of mind from which philosophy takes action) – nothing which is the basis of discourse can escape problematization. A problematization not conceived as an external and contingent action, but as a vital and constitutive substance of the concept itself and the thought which maintains it. For as “evident” as the least of these transcendental terms are to us, their indecisive, ambiguous or contradictory nature forces us to let go when we think we have grasped them firmly by some operation of thought.

It is always possible to make a proposition problematic, insofar as any proposition necessarily articulates a fixed relationship between two terms. However, if it is possible to articulate a first term in relation to a second, it is also possible to instead put it in a relationship with a third term, even a fourth, and so on, a more or less determined and finite process which makes the apprehension of things unstable. But there are terms, or concepts, which more than others seem to contain in themselves a kind of otherness, no longer extrinsic in relation but intrinsic. They hold a manifest power of thought. We can call them founding concepts, or border concepts, depending on whether we launch the thinking process with them or if

this process comes to an end, which in general amounts to the same thing. These founding concepts are declared unhypothetical: their meaning comes from unformulable but necessary hypotheses, an unconditioned which conditions thought. Naturally, the propositions which concern these concepts take the form of paradoxes: these concepts attract the formulation of questions, they generate contradiction and antinomy. What contradictory questions and propositions have not been formulated on the one and the many, on the finite and the infinite, on freedom and necessity, on the discrete and the continuous, on being and non-being! So many couples, each of whose members maintain an unequaled prestige, an opposition which we cannot decide between unless our reason can grant them some “concrete” reality. We are therefore forced to concede a primordial role to them, and as a consequence an essence or an existence, but it is very difficult for us to define them in themselves other than by the ridiculousness of a tautology: being is being, unity is unity. And again, we cannot be certain that by putting the least of these concepts in relation with itself, we are not presenting ourselves with a clear case of transgression.

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## A Set of Questions

So what escapes us is problematic. This does hardly prevent us from bestowing a reality to this slippery chase. Otherwise how could it escape us? We would not dare to assert anything about it, nor to prove anything. We must now ask questions. We must now articulate paradoxes. Any affirmation will have to pass under the yoke of conditions, under the pretense of conditional mode, a formalism which will necessarily refer to circumstances, to specifications, to determination: a necessary reductionism, an emergency solution whose nature should never escape us. We walk the road of the undetermined, of the false, of the approximation, because this is the place where we discover the truth. Reversibility of a reality which only makes sense to the extent that it is known to be senseless. The unconditional is affirmed, which cannot be substantiated; the conditional is substantiated, which cannot be affirmed. For this reason, we come to the third meaning of the concept of problem, derived quite naturally from the first two. After the doubtful and the hypothetical, the problem is a set of questions raised by a particular situation or proposition. It is a set which may very well be summed up by one of the particular questions, considered more essential, and supposed to capture the generality of the situation at hand. It can also be a set of sub-questions of a given question; this set is called the problem of the first question, or it is supported by it. Unquestionably, the term “problem” could in some ways be replaced by “question”. Insofar as a set of questions can be summarized by one question. To the extent that a statement

raising a problem for reason, such as a paradox, can also be replaced by a question. Anyway, even if everything is reduced to a matter of forms, it seems as if the question of form is not deprived of substance. The distinction between unity and multiplicity is not insignificant even if it is about forms. That between affirmation – be it hypothesis or paradox – and question no less. But it is not really on this battlefield that we think it is most urgent to engage in combat at the moment.

## Reclaiming the Question

The crucial place where we wish to start working at this moment is on a pre-supposition which hinders the philosophical work terribly, because it continuously causes a suspicion of opinion, out of habit or out of conviction, with respect to the value itself of a problem. This blind spot is the status of the question, with its consequences for the status of the problem. In common thinking, a question is an illness which we can only cure with an answer. A question without an answer is like a hammer without a handle, a ship without a rudder: without it nothing can be done. Worse still, a question in itself bothers us, it embarrasses us and it prevents us from sleeping. It is a problem, a “stumbling block” that gets in our way, an obstacle which slows us down and prevents us from moving forward. Even if the problem can be perceived as a challenge, as the unexpected which is likely to stimulate us or keep us awake, it is often stated in its negative dimension: what opposes our will, what opposes our reason, what opposes our actions, what opposes our determination. A question is a hole, a lack, an incertitude, it explicitly refers to our finitude. It would be bad faith to look surprised when faced with such an attitude. To perceive the question as a problem we would promptly like to get rid of is a reflex that could not be more legitimate. And it is precisely this legitimacy we wish to analyze and criticize, because if the position in question were not legitimate, we would not really see the interest in dissecting its substance. Only what is true deserves to be proven false. Yet what is false is neither deprived of substance nor interest, so we do not see why we should not linger on that which is in this way deprived of being.

The human being is occupied with matter: he exists, he is incarnate. Hence he is a being of need, of lack, of pain and passion. He nevertheless desires to persevere in his being, and in order to do this, he must confront and overcome anything that is an obstacle to this being by means of his limits, his constraints and his fragility. If he was not aware of this fragility, what would he need to anyway want to persevere in his being? That would be absurd. Perseverance is only necessary in the resistance which is imposed on it. Without that, being would simply be, without worrying about any otherness, without worrying about the other, without worrying about what would be opposed to it. Nothing would be opposed to it, since it would ignore

otherness.

Faced with this situation of lack and thwarted will, it is above all a matter of resolving: resolving in order to know, resolving in order to choose, resolving in order to act, in short to come to a decision at all costs. Here we see the dawning of the crucial role of free will, of liberty, because without incertitude, without doubt, without questioning, there is no possible freedom, but only the diktat of blind necessity. Let us therefore distinguish two moments in all this: the moment which precedes the choice: the moment of suspense, the moment of reflection, the moment of questioning, the moment of incertitude; and the moment which succeeds the choice: the moment of relief, the moment of commitment, the moment of action and deployment. To all intents and purposes, we decide to ignore the moment of choice itself, a simple and indivisible moment, a classical discontinuity, that of an ephemeral present whose nature we cannot know and whose role consists in separating a before from an after.

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## Power and acting

The temptation is great to subordinate the before to the after, as if the former gets its *raison d'être* only from what succeeds it. Beyond the natural tendency of the human mind, which constantly tries to satisfy its needs – a pattern which brings about a mechanism of utilitarian thought: “what is in it for me?” – there is another one, linked to the first but more explicitly philosophical, which reflects this bias of posteriority. This pattern is broadly speaking that of Aristotle who opposes power: a capacity or power to do things, to acting: to do things, to bestow a sort of primacy to the act, as the fulfillment and realization of the pair power/acting. This pattern is opposed to that of Plato for whom power has value in itself, since it represents one of the primary forms or definitions of being. The power to act could from this perspective be considered ontologically primary, since the single and determined act would be only one of the infinite possibilities of action to be able to act. Although Plato grants a certain strength and legitimacy to action through the concept of *kairos*: the opportune moment, the opportune situation, making the act unique, valued compared to any other specific act, since this act knows how to take charge of the otherness of the world, characterized by temporality.

The value of a problem would therefore lie in the capacity to be, in its capacity to act, in the liberty it grants the subject. Knowing how to raise a problem is to grow in the being, to be free to act in full awareness. Knowing how to ask real questions is to free the being from the burdens of its determinations and of immediacy. Life is no longer set as an act destined to satisfy its own needs, but as a moment of release from contingency, not to flee this contingency, but on the contrary to regain

possession of it. Eastern non-action, such as the tiger hiding in the shadows, ready to leap, making itself available to the world to better perceive it, is entirely consistent with this vision. But to make ourselves available to the world, to perceive it, we have to unlearn, we have to question the conditions of our thinking and of our being. Here it is a matter of thinking the unthinkable, of opting for this radical position which consists in no longer taking anything for granted. Not by claiming any artificial neutrality, or a vague and ephemeral suspension of judgment, but by identifying the most profound, the most indisputable presuppositions and asking questions likely to momentarily suspend an affirmation. Through this desperate attempt to think the unthinkable, the hidden premises will appear, which during the previous moment were so taken for granted that it would have been impossible to formulate them.

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## Problems and Existence

Our theory can be summarized as follows: any proposition is problematizable. Or: nothing is settled. Or: any proposition is only a conjecture. The meaning or the quality of the truthfulness we assign a given proposition is never more than the tacit, fragile and momentary agreement we grant a particular position. Or: any proposition is an hypothesis, inclined to operate and carry out its work in a given context and within a given framework. A context, limit and operativity which of course must be determined and defined in order to problematize that particular proposition. Beyond a mere theoretical bias destined to make us give further thought, or beyond a mere academic exercise, this rather radical bias, which a priori sows suspicion in every thought, may seem excessive. We may accuse it of paving the way for relativism, indifferentism, passivity or cynicism, and this accusation would not be totally unfounded. Like any attitude pushed to excess, or by plain distortion, this necessarily risks leading to some form or other of abuse or rigidity.

For this reason, it seems useful here to highlight the link between problematization and existence, if the latter is not yet clear. We assume that existence is a form of engagement: engagement in matter, engagement in society, engagement in others, engagement in ourselves, engagement in temporality, engagement in a priori principles, etc. In that sense, problematization is a form of disengagement, since it drives us towards intellectual detachment, into a critical position, via speculation and abstraction. That way we can understand how it would be seen as an abandonment or a betrayal of existence, and why any attempt at dialectization will, depending on the situation, tend to generate a certain resistance through survival instinct. Nevertheless, once this is expressed, we also have to admit, along with



Plato, that an existence which does not know how to question itself without a doubt suffers from a serious deficiency. And what about self-awareness? What about the deliberative process which theoretically should serve as preamble and preparation for important decisions? In other words, is not problematization the very condition of freedom, freedom of choice, which alone protects us from a certain conditioning: of our education, of our society, of the present, of utility, and so on. In other words, if problematizing is a betrayal of our engagement in existence, is not this betrayal an essential hygienic measure for this other dimension of human existence: awareness? And there we will see that awareness is in fact a suppressor: suppressor of action, suppressor of desire, suppressor of will, suppressor of self. Some would say, for example, that the work on awareness suppresses the state of being in love. But without the undermining carried out by this suppressor, how do we create this tension which is essential for the life of the mind? And like any work on negativity, this one, left to its own devices, risks inducing a pathological annihilation of being. But no tool in itself is the guarantee of any kind of perfection.

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## Problematization Techniques

To problematize is to look for objections or questions which makes it possible to show the limits or the imperfections of an initial proposition, so as to eliminate it, modify it or enrich it. The premise of this competence is that any statement raises a number of problems. It is a matter of considering every proposition as a simple hypothesis, possible or probable, but never absolute or necessary. To think critically is to analyze what has been said in order to verify whether the proposition is valid, and to see in which way it is false, limited or useless. It is not about inventing a problem, but articulating a problem without any obligation to solve it. It is to be capable of simultaneously taking a perspective and its opposite, in order to test an hypothesis, to construct it and to elaborate it. Some important questions underlie this premise, such as: “Are there moments where this proposition is false?”, “What are the limits of truth of this proposition?”, “What are the conditions of truth of this proposition?”

There are two different contexts for problematization, which in a way change the meaning or the aim of the act of problematizing. In relation to a determined assertion, to problematize means to take a sentence out of its definitive, categorical and necessary status. In this case, asking the question “Why?” does not problematize, since it only asks the reason for this status. This does not shake the presupposition, or if it does it would be purely accidental. The problematization question must necessarily “deconstruct” or “break” the foundation of this sentence. For example, suppose as an initial sentence, “We must always act according to moral val-

ues". If someone asks, "Why must we always act according to our moral values?", the person will respond by explaining and justifying his position, which might be very coherent and in itself not cause any problem. But if someone asks, "Can moral values be opposed to each other?", a question where the answer should logically be "Yes", since according to common sense and experience moral values are rather divergent, then the speaker has a problem. Because acting in accordance with moral values regularly implies acting against moral values with opposing content. Also, what was evident and unquestionable has now become a problem, since in affirming one thing we also affirm the opposite.

In the case of life, a story or an entire text, the concept of problematization changes form, function or nature. Because in an unequivocal sentence, there is not in itself a problem a priori, it is only a categorical, descriptive or prescriptive sentence. Consequently, the problem must come entirely from the subsequent sentence. When we are dealing with a narration, either made up or in relation to a life event, nothing is unequivocal. In a way, we might say that everything is explicitly or implicitly problematic. Therefore, the function of the problematization question no longer consists in bringing a problem from the "outside"; it is sufficient just to underline it, to reveal it, to explain it, to show it. Because we can say that in life or in a story, there is no explicit presupposition of content, there is only one interpretation, necessarily subjective in scope. However, we cannot deconstruct something that does not really exist, but we can visualize a problem which is implicitly contained in a sequence of events or in our experience of a situation. In such a context, problematizing no longer means visualizing the impossible or the necessary in order to question it, but to make what is explicit implicit, or to abstract a general problem from a concrete situation in a conceptual mode. As a consequence we see that in the latter case, more questions are acceptable as problematization questions. For example, the question "Why?" can raise a problem in a narration, which is not the case with an assertion. The same goes for an entire text, given its complexity. For example, if I ask, "Why do people refer so much to authority?", which questions life in society, I have to face different possibilities of an opposite nature. On the one hand, I can consider it legitimate to assert that we cannot invent the totality of knowledge ourselves, and that we therefore have to refer to experts or to books. On the other hand, I can criticize such a position by asserting that because of fear or insecurity, people do not dare make any judgments themselves. So this question has created a problem concerning our behavior in life. This however does not mean that all questions problematize.

If I ask, "What is the capital of France?", this does not seem a priori to create a problem since the answer will probably be unambiguous and categorical, and this will not cause any doubt or debate. However, we can take for granted that in a

narrative context, more questions problematize than in a conceptual context, especially when the conceptual text is brief. It is therefore more difficult, more demanding and more restrictive to problematize a sentence than to problematize life or a story. In the case that no framework is specified, in order to determine if a question problematizes we can consider that it refers to the totality of existence, to knowledge or to any other conceivable context. In other words, if there is no context, the question is unlimited and can refer to anything we might imagine.

## Problems, Concepts and Dialectics

The formulation of a problem is not just an operation of negation. It is not the simple doubt or the confession of a state of anxiety. It is also an act of creation: creation of concepts. Really, how would we problematize without generating concepts? It seems almost impossible. Any problem deprived of the emergence of a concept would only be the articulation of a doubt or a suspension of judgment, which in itself is not pointless, but only the first stage of the process. The state of mind which enables – a necessary but not sufficient condition – the production of new ideas.

As an example, think about the following statement: “Human beings are free to do as they wish”. Now suppose that I want to problematize that proposition. A simple doubt would be expressed like this: “Are human beings always free to do as they wish?” which, although insufficient, is already in itself an attempt at problematization: it asks for a verification of the universality of the proposition. But to go further in this process it will be necessary to generate concepts. Let us look at a few examples. Consciousness: can I be aware of my desires? Conditioning: can desires be the product of conditioning? Being: are our desires always congruent with our being? Will: does the will have to yield to desire? In other words, to question our proposition, we must introduce new concepts which will serve as a tool for investigation and verification. Based on this, we can even put forward the hypothesis that problematization is the link between a proposition and a new concept, or the new illumination that a new concept produces on a given proposition.

By the same way of negation or questioning, which in any case invites criticism, a process of dialectization is established. Here it is a matter of working on the appearance and the nature of the initial proposition by studying the conditions of its affirmation or of its negation. Via concepts external to the initial proposition, which we therefore call “new concepts”, a work on deepening can be carried out, which shows the meaning, the many meanings, the shifts in meaning, the reversal of meaning and non-meaning – sense and non-sense – of the proposition in question. But we will look at that in our next chapter: Dialectics.

We end this chapter by affirming that there is a tragic dimension to problematization, as the history of philosophy shows. Let us take the inaugural act of Plato which he himself described as “parricide”, when he turned Parmenides’s famous tautology “being is, non-being is not” on its head by declaring that “non-being is”. Plato, student of Socrates the dialectician, responds to the “force of certainty” of his predecessor Parmenides by problematizing the real, for example the “good”, this supreme obviousness. It is a question of considering the virtual, potentiality, like a first reality, underlying the immediate rational evidence. This will not stop him from arriving at some more dogmatic visions in his later works. And his student Aristotle will likewise perform his own betrayal on some major points. For example, by accepting the principle that some ideas are obvious, and should therefore be accepted at face value, when for Plato nothing is accepted as obvious. Or, instead of maieutics, he defines the mind as a tabula rasa whereon information has to be “poured”. Let us take as another example Kant’s “Copernican reversal” which marks the start of a crucial break in the vision of the world: it is not the object which is at the center of knowledge, but the subject. Ontology is replaced by epistemology. Transcendence is of thinking and no longer of being.

It is therefore a matter of acting directly on paradigms, on the conditions of possibility of thinking, on its structural principles, its foundations, by shaking them, by inverting them. We are looking for limits, counterexamples, the exception in order to derive new principles which reverse what is. Not only in substance, but in form itself. Nietzsche criticizes the laborious and reductive outlook of Socratic questioning, to which he preferred the generous and aristocratic aphorism which is given immediately, of course to he who is capable of receiving it. From him we can also retain an important problematizing concept, that of “transvaluation”. Nietzsche uses it in the ethical field, in order to restore the natural order of values, according to him perverted by Christianity, which has reversed the natural order of values. This religion of “compassion”, by glorifying the weak and condemning the strong, goes against the very principles of life. Here it is again a matter of carrying out a “Copernican reversal” by inverting the connotation of the terms. So what was positive becomes negative, what was negative becomes positive. If this “revaluation of values” can be done in one way it can also be done in another. But Nietzsche is not Hegel; for him transvaluation is undirectional, contrary to Hegel’s dialectical principle. Nevertheless, the concept stays, it goes down in the annals of thinking. And the simple fact of naming this capacity of reversing conceptual polarities indelibly marks the power of thinking.

Among the philosophical terms which are being sold off cheaply, and which want to say everything and nothing, after conceptualization and problematization there is a third one which seems interesting to tackle: dialectics. An ambiguous term if ever there was one, which can just as well be used to certify the precision of an argument as to denounce its vague or sophisticated nature. Since the dawn of philosophy, with Plato, this term takes on a strong connotation: it is the only type of knowledge superior to geometry, the road par excellence to access truth and the divine. Old age no doubt explains the trivialization or ossification of the term. However, more precisely, we can identify two main pitfalls in the dialectical process, a delimitation which allows us to better determine the problem. On the one hand, the logical or formal temptation of thinking, a dogmatism which, under the pretext of truth or scientificity refuses to question its own presuppositions. On the other hand, the fusional temptation of thinking, for which everything is in everything and vice versa, and in particular the famous “complementarity”, very popular these days, which straightaway ignores or refuses the very concept of contradiction.

In order to clarify our point, we will take as a starting hypothesis the following definition of dialectics: a process of thinking which takes charge of seemingly contradictory propositions, and which is based on these contradictions in order to generate new propositions. These new propositions make it possible to reduce, solve or explain the initial contradictions. However, etymologically, dialectics is nothing but the art of discussion: in Greek, *dia* means with or through each other, and *legein* means to talk. So how did the art of discussion transform itself into an art of manipulating contraries? As is often the case, once the question is clearly posed, the possibility of an answer becomes clearer. In fact, what is the main characteristic of a discussion, if not the opposition which emerges from a difference? An opposition between terms, between presuppositions, between judgments and choices, between registers. Even in this silent soliloquy, this dialogue with ourselves, which is what thinking is, according to Plato, the mind operates through oppositions and contraries, through and thanks to contradictions. It is from the word, or the verb, *legein*, and therefore from contradictions, that the concept of *logos*, reason, emerges.

### Heraclitus

We will return later to the modern trend, pathology even, which consists in shrugging off or smoothening out the idea of opposition or contradiction, referred

to as a mere diversity of opinions. Perhaps it will suffice the reader embarrassed by the conflicting or dramatic perspective that we propose to suspend any negative connotation of these terms for a brief moment in order to more comfortably follow our train of thought. In Heraclitus, one of the main influences on Platonic thought, along with Parmenides and Pythagoras, we find the following fragments: “War is father of all, king of all”; “what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre”; or “in being taken apart they are brought together” as Plato reports in *The Sophist*. Aristotle relates that “Heraclitus blamed the poet who said, ‘Would that strife were destroyed from among gods and men.’ For there could be no harmony without sharps and flats, nor living beings without male and female which are contraries”; “Everything comes about in accordance with strife”. Therefore, if unity is not excluded – quite the opposite – this unity expresses itself, exists and is discovered through the tension of that which opposes it and thwarts it, through a conflict which is the life of the world and of the soul. Let us also specify the very restrictive access of the individual to unity with the two following fragments: “Unapparent harmony is better than apparent”; “Of this Word which holds forever men prove uncomprehending, both before hearing it and when first they have heard it”. So, an infinite task, that of human reason which tries to see the coherence or cohesion of all things, including that of its own existence, but which constantly collides with the reality of opposition, of fracture. And to punctuate our business, in order to show the harmony between the thinking and the behavior of this Ephesian thinker, Timon of Phlius, Pyrrhonist philosopher, describes Heraclitus as follows: “He stood up, shrieking like a bird, cursing the public and speaking in riddles”. Visibly the “conflict” was the very essence of him who found himself being nicknamed “The Obscure”.

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## Plato

From this perspective, the killing of Socrates hopefully loses its purely anecdotal and singular status, and instead brings to light the issues of a specific functioning and its philosophical dimension, a tragic gesture which inaugurates that which we can call Western philosophy. In fact, Socrates is the one who annoys his fellow citizens with his constant questioning. Aside from a small clique of friends and followers, he is either misunderstood and ignored, or he is detested. What, concisely, does his practice consist of? By the use of questions challenging the rhetoric of those who claim to possess knowledge, whatever the subject, in order to test their knowledge and make them grasp its limits, and of questioning those who do not know in order to help them discover knowledge within themselves. The specific means which is used to make this questioning operational and effective is contra-

diction. To produce or to cause propositions or concepts to be produced which collide more or less directly with the propositions or concepts already used: this is the role of questioning, of maieutics. Taking on these obstacles forces the abandonment of an initial hypothesis now considered a dead end. It enables us to overcome them by producing a new hypothesis, or at least to work on it. The implicit presupposition of the exercise: any premise, proposition or concept is considered limited and shaky from the outset. Discourse cannot be made up of anything but conjectures and hypotheses, which are only operative within well-determined limits. The truthfulness of a proposition therefore consists in discovering this threshold of dysfunction and indeterminacy, since the absolute by definition cannot be articulated, except by pure convention. Reaching the truth is therefore to go beyond common opinion, it is also to go beyond right or scholarly opinion, to enter into this awareness of ignorance which forces us to let go and to abandon all certainty, everything we have learned. Fragility of speech and of being is painful to accept; it is a work of pure negativity as liberating as it is terribly thankless. Dialectics here consists in producing objections and questions which allows us to enter into the anagogical process of ascent towards being, or towards good, or any other particular form of the unconditioned, the absolute.

Three general accusations are made against Socrates, by sophists or by others, throughout Plato's dialogues. "You cut my speech into pieces, you tear it apart"; "You make me say what I do not want to say", therefore "You are trying to wrong me". These three accusations moreover constitute an irrefutable proof of the historical and effective reality of the Socratic practice. In fact, any questioning which requires that a spoken word is held accountable for the reality of its content will from time to time face this type of specific resistance. These three accusations nevertheless circumscribe the stakes of the Socratic dialogue fairly well: revealing the anchor points of a speech: "Cut the speech into pieces"; making the speaker discover the presuppositions and the consequences of his words, an often undesirable observation: "Make him say what he does not want to say"; forcing abandonment and overcoming, which is usually unpleasant: "You are trying to make me be wrong". Here we clearly see the terribly controversial dimension of dialectics, in particular because it deprives the thinking subject of anything that could comfort and reassure him. He is alone in faintly resisting this corrosion of thinking, the permanence of being, but a being which does not really recognize any substantial status of the existing, since even the individual human soul is being absorbed in the divine fire. To know yourself is to find the beginning or the totality, against which we are nothing.

## The Cynics

A less-known filiation of Socratism, other than Platonism, will experience a boom during the Hellenistic period: the Cynics, less famous than other currents, because they will not put down many roots in Western philosophy. Aside from a few rare heirs – diverse, varied and more or less direct – such as Montaigne, Rabelais, Pascal, Voltaire or Nietzsche, they will stay mainly ignored and above all misunderstood. In spite of their radicalism or their anti-intellectualism, it seems useful to mention them in this presentation of dialectics, because of their attempt to criticize or to overthrow the dominant values of their era: in them we find the subversive dimension of dialectics: parrhesia. This term refers to an authentic attitude, speech which is tough and true, a solid assurance, a foolproof simplicity, a radicality that nothing can stop.

Problematic terms, like nihilism, will be invoked, which will mask or obscure the reality of this current, closer in spirit to Eastern thinking, Zen for example, than to the general philosophical functioning of our culture. Our business at this point is not to initiate a history of philosophy, but only to illuminate the problem of dialectics. So let us look at some main aspects of this philosophical current. Its known founder, Antisthenes, declared absolute contempt for all conventions, opinions or values received and accepted by society. A refusal which is not gratuitous, contrary to what is sometimes suggested, but for the sake of truth, integrity and authenticity. Of course, such a care taken to its extreme leads to a certain radicality both in speech and attitude, encouraging a provocative posture.

With regard taken for some variation among different individuals, for the Cynic virtue consists in unlearning what is bad, in particular what concerns complacency, tradition, established authority, property and convention; an unlearning which is never very pleasant. Because of this he tends to be apolitical, asocial and stateless. Happiness and truth are deserved, through a certain asceticism. His values are those of the individual: will, freedom, endurance, self-control, in particular control of desires and passions, and because of that he does not respect superficial dignity, which he considers vapid and small-minded. He does not trust beautiful speeches and the intellect over which he prefers acts, often violent ones, which lead him to confrontations. His constant pedagogical concern is uncompromising, his main tools are surprise, irony and symbolic gesture. He does not engage in explanation and multiplication of words, but in capturing his interlocutor, through a single sentence or a forceful gesture. He criticizes the stiff appearance and serious words of the official thinkers who put their knowledge on display: he opposes the natural to the cultural, which is always deceitful. For this, he does not argue, he fires arrows.



An unbearable character, in general he becomes a marginal figure, he is considered an anarchist. Plato called Diogenes, the most famous of the Cynics, “a Socrates gone mad”. To which Diogenes replied by saying of Plato: “Of what use is a man who, having practiced philosophy for a long time, has not upset anyone?” The same Diogenes who showed his contempt for his fellow citizens by walking around with a lantern in his hand, saying to anyone who cared to listen: “I am looking for a man”. Another famous sentence: “Get out of my sun”, addressed to Alexander, invincible conqueror, who came up to him because he wanted to meet him. Humor is his main tool, which gives us access to the laughable aspects of existence.

## Zen

In order to show a non-Western example of dialectic spirit, we will briefly tackle Zen philosophy, which advocates both working on the game of opposites and the practice of authenticity. The Chinese, and then the Japanese version of Buddhism distinguishes itself through certain characteristics: its fierceness, its radicalism and its relation to physical exercise. The name Zen is the Romanization of a Japanese term which means “silent meditation”, whose Chinese equivalent is Chan. This refers in particular to the posture of the historic Buddha, when he reached enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in India more than 2,500 years ago. Just like in the term “meditation” – which derives from “medium”: center, space and mediation – the idea is based on the principle of centration, to be in the middle in order to act better. It is said that Buddha suddenly stopped to preach, took a flower and twirled it between his fingers, thus surprising his interlocutors. In this gesture we see the common experience of perfect attention to reality such as it is, an attitude which is at the heart of Zen practice. It is a matter of going beyond speech, speculations and routine discourse in order to come in contact with what is real. Even the knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and sutras is relativized, because it is about privileging a direct experience of consciousness. There is also a famous injunction which shows the radicality of this philosophy: “If you meet Buddha, kill him!”

The three pillars of Zen are meditation, wisdom and discipline. This practice is also supposed to help us live; according to the Lotus Sutra, it is a question of solving “the big issue of life and death”.

Zen is part of the Mahayana Buddhism tradition, the “Great Vehicle”, which states that every being has in itself, autonomously, what is necessary for illumination and salvation. “Everything is Buddha” some will say. For Zen, consciousness captures the totality of the real: it is therefore a matter of realizing the true nature of our own consciousness to reach enlightenment. Although enlightenment is not a goal in itself.

Some practitioners prefer to work on koans, absurd stories, paradoxical phrases, the purpose of which is to provoke cognitive dissonance and to take the subject out of his mental patterns in order to reach enlightenment. The student must enter into emptiness through nonsense, in this way removing his self, which is egocentric, possessive and desirous of certainty: thus liberated, he becomes a perfectly smooth surface which reflects reality as a mirror. An important point to be understood about Zen philosophy is that it is not a doctrine but a knowledge of ourselves, a self-awareness, linked to a dissolution of the self. “To study Buddhism is to study yourself. To study yourself is to forget yourself.” “The only Zen which you can find on a mountain top is the Zen that you carry there.” The rest is just circumstances and decorum. The annihilation of the subject and of being is more pronounced here than in the Socratic “know thyself”.

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## Reversal and Conversion

Why this little historical inventory of philosophy? Because at the heart of philosophizing lies dialectics, which feeds on opposites and contradictions, the goal of which is reversal of thought, what religion traditionally calls “conversion”. And if it is always possible to analyze the history of philosophy in terms of heritage and continuity, it is just as valuable, no doubt more enriching, to consider it from the perspective of negation, rupture and discontinuity. Aristotle criticizing Plato by opposing materiality to ideality. Descartes criticizing scholasticism by rejecting authority a priori and proposed “thinking for ourselves”. Kant, who topples metaphysics from its pedestal and transforms it into a process of thinking. Hegel, for whom philosophy must cease to be timeless and embody itself in history. Schelling, who rehabilitates narration in the face of the primacy of the concept. Marx, from whom philosophy should no longer analyze the world but transform it. Heidegger, who wishes to go back twenty five centuries in order to track down Being and no longer be confined to a being.

What would be the philosophical stakes if the history of thought was not articulated around these oppositions, was not structured around a certain number of these great antinomies? One of Kant’s important contributions is without a doubt to have identified some of the most crucial: finite and infinite, discrete and continuous, conditioned and unconditioned, etc. His work remains one of the main historical attempts to clarify fundamental antinomies, after Plato and his dialogue Parmenides.

## Nothing is Determined

Beyond philosophical generalities and antinomies, let us see if there is a dialectical specificity. Rightly or wrongly – in the absolute the problem should not really occur – philosophers side with their predecessors or their contemporaries to the extent that what they believe is just and true. However, is it enough to side with and to oppose in order to speak of dialectics? If the opposition and the contradiction, which Hegel calls the work of negativity, are absolutely necessary for the dialectic operation, it does not seem that this is enough in itself. Unless we think that any philosophical opposition in fact contributes, dialectically, to the totality of philosophy, which in a way is the Hegelian perspective.

To deal with this question, let us introduce an Aristotelian distinction: that between dialectic and analytic. For Aristotle, analytics deals with what is certain, while dialectics deals with propositions which do not have any value except for the possible or the probable. Kant will take up this distinction between a dialectic “logic of appearance” and an analytic “logic of truth”. Now in Plato, for example, this distinction does not apply, because certitude does not in this sense have any real status: any discourse is just conjecture and imperfection. It would therefore seem that any particular philosophical approach which would help us discern what is dialectics and what is detached from it is not, or does not claim to be, dialectic. Although this difference regarding dialectics already makes everyone redefine dialectics, unless it is the other way around: the fact of defining dialectics in a certain way either makes the author practice it or not.

From the outset, what fundamentally opposes Plato and Aristotle is the status of the sensible, the reality of perception, the value of empirical knowledge. For the former, it is a question of mistrusting these: they are illusory; for the latter, they constitute a guarantee of validity for thought. This demarcation line is one of the most important of those which cross the history of philosophy. If for Plato, only thinking is the source of true knowledge, for Kant, for example, thinking cannot produce objects of knowledge by itself: it is constrained to depend on an empirical exteriority. This standpoint has another consequence: the relation to certainty, which determines whether philosophy is an art or a science. In fact, if science sometimes pretends to provide reliable knowledge, art is content with producing what is beautiful, useful or true, without any pretense of having the articulation rights and the claim to any indisputable truth. Now, this pretense of certainty is generally centered on two main criteria of knowledge: empirical, which concerns matter, and logical or analytical, which concerns thinking. Hence Kant and Aristotle established a priori rules and principles concerning the functioning of reason, rules they considered unsurpassable and inviolable.

For Plato, as for Hegel, these a priori limits and rules make no sense, since dialectics, the privileged path to accessing truth, is a process of thinking which necessarily passes through and returns to the thinking subject, identified as an object of thought and not as postulate. In other words, contrary to logic, for dialectics nothing is determined. Let us take the undoubtedly most striking example, at the heart of logical functioning: the principle of noncontradiction. This principle, which excludes thinking about a thing and its opposite in the same way, a pillar of logic, is not overshadowed or radically denied by dialectics, but neither does it constitute an impassable limit of thinking. Passing this limit is for dialectics a crucial moment: the thought taking itself as an object, which is then developed and constructed. Dialectics is an art, capable of producing, clarifying and verifying the rules which preside over its progress. Even the method is an object for itself.

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## Dialectics

Unlike science, which is based either on proven effectiveness or established rules, dialectics is aesthetic, singular and performative, like artistic work. Although it must of course address what is right as it is universal. Obviously, science also claims universality, but not in the same way. At the heart of dialectics we find an anagogical process of ascent to unity from the plurality of the singular, a process already identified by Plato. Naturally, this unity is anhypothetical, a necessary hypothesis which cannot be formulated, since it passes or transcends all formulation: it founds and cannot be founded. Therefore any contradiction, the articulation of any problem, makes it possible for us to access a higher level of thinking, where what at first seemed contradictory actually unifies by obtaining a new concept. This new concept is what Hegel calls synthesis, the outcome of dialectics. In the interest of operativity and completion, he believed that thinking cannot remain at the stage of contradiction: it cannot be confined to the work of negativity. Any tension, any division, must be resolved in the articulation of a new affirmation by a principle of identity or reconciliation. Not so with Plato, for whom an aporia, a deadlock, a paradox, is not a problem in itself. What is more, the problem posed like that must be valorized in itself, because it establishes an indispensable tension, the life of thinking, since it perpetuates its dynamics. This is an “open” and not a “closed” dialectics. In the latter, the concept or idea is not the finality of thinking, no particular object can constitute an end, for the good reason that reason is not a means but a cause, and a cause can not be liable for its effect. Reason is its own finality as reason, in relation to the object, since reality is nothing but the reflection of an absolute reason, a thought which is no longer one because it surpasses itself. Being, Unity or Good – no name is adequate to characterize the cause of everything,

of which reason is one of the prime characteristics.

This position, more Socratic than Platonic, is closer to Eastern thinking than to Western tradition, scientifically oriented and concerned with positivity and efficiency. It is for this reason that in the latter, concept is king and definition remains fundamental, because without this idea of the affirmation and the finite, without the postulate of “definitive”, temporal as it is, it is hardly possible to make any decisions and to operate in mundane and everyday reality. Here, a question, a problem, a contradiction is only valuable for its use, as an answer, a resolution or a synthesis which follows. From this perspective, dissatisfaction caused by *aporia* is considered unbearable. The mind cannot accept being kept in suspense. At the very least, it needs an explanation, some words to put it at ease. The proposition which consists in suggesting to simply meditate on a difficulty, to directly contemplate the inability of the mind to grasp a disparate totality in a single glance, or the incapability to make a swift decision without any other satisfaction, at best, than a vague aesthetic feeling driven by a radical absence or by our own emptiness – this seems unbearable. For thinking, as opposed to art, wonder is not enough in itself.

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## Scylla and Charybdis

The work on negation seems – this is what we have tried to describe – essential to to dialectical operation, or the dialectical perspective. Because it is as much an outlook as it is a particular mode of action. The fundamental obstacle, or opposition, to dialectics is therefore the rejection of negativity. An opposition which appears in three different forms, which we have already briefly mentioned in our introduction. On the one hand the scientific opposition, which hardly suffers from staying in a mode of doubt or suspension of judgment, a posture which requires definitions, procedures, established rules, established logic and means of deciding. Right opinion, says Plato, is knowledge which stands in the way of truth. On the other hand the sentimental opposition, fusional, which does not support conflict, confrontation, opposition; a state of mind which prefers intention, desire, faith and the postulate of undivided unity to rules, rigor and requirement. Such a tendency invites itself a little too quickly to the table of the divine, as Hegel says. Lastly we encounter a thinking of fracture, which postulates respect for an irreconcilable difference, an indispensable condition for the postulate of a singular which represents its own finality. In such a scheme, we assert the inescapable irreducibility of the singular, thus avoiding confrontation which becomes superfluous.

If dialectics is work on negation, its living substance is to be found in uncertainty. It is therefore understandable why discussion is so indispensable here. How can we in ourselves find the radical otherness which is necessary for our own mise

en abyme? We now have a better understanding of the Socratic type, which obsessively challenges everything that moves and questions in order to probe the souls and to see where all the side roads lead. Because dialectics is not eristics, the art of debate which more looks like pleading, where it is all about defeating and persuading, that is to say to be right. It is not simply an open debate, nor a demonstration. It is an interrogation, a test, a vacating of the singular, in order to see through its foundations and its fragility, a multiplicity of nothingness which alone authorizes the unveiling of being.

Now, there are two ways of avoiding the reality of discussion: either to posit a particular position or proposition as an absolute and incontestable truth, or to simply accumulate perspectives without confronting their presuppositions. Dogmatism and relativism make a wonderful couple to block the dialectical process. According to temperaments, situations and manners, they surreptitiously conspire to suffocate thinking and to drown the call for truth, since truth is built on the support of a constraint: that of opposites. And this is where a properly constructed dialogue poses a real problem: how to think simultaneously about a thing and its opposite? Still, it is from this apparently absurd act that meaning and novelty can emerge. But for this it is crucial to know how to let go of the prey you hold firmly between your teeth, and to risk going into the uncertainty of the shadow. Unless you prefer a perspective that hardly cares about truth, because it chooses the option of sacralizing difference.

## The Status of Intuition

Any teacher of philosophy will at one time or another – hopefully – labor on a certain dilemma: what is the status of intuition? In fact, if some students do rather well in the academic exercises of scholarly “dialectics”, which consists in understanding and memorizing formal elements of the course, providing arguments, taking the opposite view of their own ideas, formulating some problem, use various quotations; then others, without any ill will, succeed much less well. This would not be a problem in itself if it was not for the fact that occasionally, even though it is rather rare, some students in the second category seem clearly more philosophically inspired, creative and original than those in the first. A regret, or a guilty conscience, then overcomes the examiner confronted with this problem, who on the face of it feels obliged to give a good grade to the first student and a bad one to the second, since, to make it brief, we can assure that in the teaching of philosophy, compared to other subjects, the method outweighs the content.

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## Presuppositions

Contrary to a widespread illusion, there is hardly anything to philosophize or reason about which is neither founded nor supported by presuppositions. This is in itself hardly an objection to the validity of philosophizing – on one condition of course: that we are aware of it. After all, since human beings are bound by space, time and matter, it is hard to see why their thinking should not be. Lest we forget that the construction of thinking is by nature thetic, local, biased and partial, and that access to pure reason devoid of empirical objects and subjects, totally objective, is only an horizon or phantasm, quite interesting and useful, but to beware of. It is only in fairy tales that the hero can ride on rainbows. So what about the presuppositions of philosophical teaching? Is it possible to determine such an anchoring, mutual and inescapable, when the sources, styles, schools or perspectives that punctuate the history of philosophy differ so much? So what does the expression “the philosophy professor is the author of his course” mean, if there are dogmas which cannot be escaped? But inversely and symmetrically, would it not be reasonable to ask on which criteria to evaluate and grade our student, if there was no specific and collective yoke for the apprentice to pass under, in order to determine if he really learned anything at school? Which are then the criteria for philosophical success, if it is not about consuming a particular content likely to produce

the right answers, even if this vision of things is not itself excluded? An old problem which the difficult and tumultuous community of philosophy professors constantly comes up against.

Everyone will bring their own answers here, and if some people will know how to single themselves out on the articulation of these questions and the answers that follow, it seems all the same as if the philosophical establishment over time has implemented various non-negotiable achievements, and it is not very clear how it could have been otherwise. However, there is a philosopher who on this point bequeathed us a legacy heavy with consequences: Hegel.

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## Hegel

Let us, for clarity's sake, shed some light on this thesis by some of Hegel's frequently quoted statements. "Unless it is a system, a philosophy is not a scientific production. Unsystematic philosophizing can only be expected to give expression to personal peculiarities of mind, and has no principle for the regulation of its contents" (*Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*). "The systematic development of truth in scientific form can alone be the true shape in which truth exists" (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*). "What is rational is real; And what is real is rational" (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*). Regarding the opposite thesis, that of "romantic" philosophy which he criticizes and which he practically denies the status of philosophy, he sums it up as follows: "If, that is to say, truth exists merely in what, or rather exists merely as what, is called at one time intuition, at another immediate knowledge of the Absolute, Religion, Being [...] from that point of view it is rather the opposite of the notional or conceptual form which would be required for systematic philosophical exposition. The Absolute on this view is not to be grasped in conceptual form, but felt, intuited; it is not its conception, but the feeling of it and intuition of it that are to have the say and find expression". A summary which he concludes with this comment: "When such minds commit themselves to the unrestrained ferment of sheer emotion, they think that, by putting a veil over self-consciousness, and surrendering all understanding, they are thus God's beloved ones to whom He gives His wisdom in sleep. This is the reason, too, that in point of fact, what they do conceive and bring forth in sleep is dreams" (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*). Outside of the concept, therefore, there is no salvation. This will make Schelling respond to Hegel: "For him God was not both just a concept and the concept God; for him the concept had the meaning that it was God." (*On the History of Modern Philosophy*). According to this frenemy of Hegel, megalomania is great in the latter, author of a philosophy which "boasts of being a philosophy which [contrary to earlier philosophy] presupposes nothing, absolutely nothing" (*ibid.*). A



boasting which apparently was rather influential.

In order to get a feel of the stakes of the affair, let us show the “parricide” which Hegel risks in his desire for an ultimate philosophy. In the third chapter of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, in the section about Plato, the author explains: “However much, therefore, Plato’s mythical presentation of Philosophy is praised, and however attractive it is in his *Dialogues*, it yet proves a source of misapprehensions; and it is one of these misapprehensions, if Plato’s myths are held to be what is most excellent in his philosophy. Many propositions, it is true, are made more easily intelligible by being presented in mythical form; nevertheless, that is not the true way of presenting them; propositions are thoughts which, in order to be pure, must be brought forward as such. The myth is always a mode of representation which, as belonging to an earlier stage, introduces sensuous images, which are directed to imagination, not to thought; in this, however, the activity of thought is suspended, it cannot yet establish itself by its own power, and so is not yet free. The myth belongs to the pedagogic stage of the human race, since it entices and allures men to occupy themselves with the content; but as it takes away from the purity of thought through sensuous forms, it cannot express the meaning of Thought.”

The different parties are clearly established: on the one hand the all-powerful discursive reason and the concept; on the other the image, feelings, intuition and the fragility of the subject. Philosophy is not poetry, truth and thinking definitely has privileged access to a process of analysis, synthesis, critique, logic and, at a pinch, dialectics. Let us now, recklessly, try to answer Hegel, and to try the path he encourages us to take.

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## Immediacy

The term intuition generally refers to a direct and immediate knowledge, which bypasses any process, especially reasoning. The word comes from Latin “intueri” which means to watch closely, admire, “take into consideration”. Reason, which opposes intuition, is derived from “ratio”, which means calculation, and from there the meaning of reasoning, a conscious process of thinking, where truth is not likely to be had straight away. Let us take a closer look at what constitutes this antinomy. The most striking aspect, which we have already mentioned, is the opposition between the immediacy of intuition and the mediation of reason. In this sense, it initially seems that for intuition, knowledge is given, while for reasoning there is something more that needs to be done. In this sense, reason takes on the appearance of an activity, while intuition resembles passivity.

It would be beneficial to relate the term passivity to its origin, which it shares with passion and patience: derived from Latin “pati”, which means to suffer, tol-

erate, support, admit, permit. Among these various meanings, if it is possible to oppose inactive intuition to active reason, it is also possible to show that intuition is the manifestation of another type of activity, no less painful and commendable, no less productive and constitutive of knowledge, than the much celebrated work of reason. The primary work on intuition is availability, that of the mind and the being, which is more the manifestation of an attitude than a specific act, something which belongs more to being and less to doing, more to the self and less to an object. Now what shocks the advocate of the reasoning mind here, is that it seems that in intuition there is nothing to do: just idly look on, and there it is! Perhaps mistakenly because it is still a matter of being available, which is not a given.

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## Contemplation

Intuition is contemplation, because despite the apparent instantaneity which characterizes it, it can be maintained over time. The absence of a procedure and certain steps tends to cause a moment which might very well last to be written off as devoid of temporality and as simple discontinuity. Without this continuous and sustained dimension of contemplation, an intuition would be too transient: the mind would hardly have time to comprehend it. However, contemplation is discredited, because from the point of view of reason, it is considered a waste of time since nothing is constructed. And still, for a very long time it represented philosophical activity par excellence, if only because of gratuitousness that characterizes it. In the vision of liberal arts, for which the usefulness or the performance were often seen as secondary activities, contemplation, in particular that which made it possible to contemplate metaphysical objects, great transcendental entities such as truth, beauty or the good, presented itself as the noblest activity of the mind, the one providing true happiness. “For, firstly, this activity [the pursuit of happiness] is the best (since not only is reason the best thing in us, but the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects) [...] And this activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*). “The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you’ll grasp what I hope to convey [...] In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything [...] in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private

or public must see it” (Plato, *The Republic*, “The Allegory of the Cave”).

So it would indeed be a matter of “seeing”. From this perspective, does not reasoning become the intellectual activity of the needy and the poor, of all who are incapable of directly seeing the truth of things, or who pursue a goal without knowing how to stop? Does not the analogical approach, a process of ascent towards unity and origin, as inaugurated by Plato and picked up in particular by the mystical religious tradition, propose the vision of the absolute as its outcome and purpose? Moreover, it is another temptation of omnipotence. Reasoning would then be nothing more than a last resort: the apprentice must still break down and calculate what the master knows at a glance, or even what he accomplishes without even having to think about it.

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## Evaluating Intuition

Consider another problem: the objective value of intuition, its universality. The problem does not arise for the discursive approach: to follow a procedure implies entering into a metareflection applicable to different specific situations. This perspective is distinguished from a situation where we fumble step by step without recognizing the generality of this situation. That is how it works with a mathematical function or a philosophical problem: they establish a general relationship between different pairs or sets of numbers, values or ideas. It is a question of establishing links, deepening knowledge, becoming aware of reality. If it is about awareness, the trick is to recognize what we already know in what we do not know. By recognizing someone, I become aware of their identity, since in fact I already knew them; without immediately realizing it, I can know certain things about them without being initially aware of it. Chemical analysis provides analytical procedures which make it possible to identify the constitutive elements of a compound, elements known a priori, since it is about reducing and assimilating the unknown to the known.

To discover is therefore to learn and apply these procedures, which allow access to another level of knowledge than the immediate. But as we have already pointed out, is it not a risk that these procedures will act as short-circuits of thinking? In other words, procedures – like established formulas, concepts or ideas – rather than enabling a higher degree of awareness, can they not sometimes, on the contrary, obscure thinking installing it and wrap it up in hollow forms devoid of substance? The procedure and the concept, symbols of learning and mastery, would therefore fall off their pedestal. Indeed, Kant warns us against the danger of pure form. “Intuition therefore and concepts constitute the elements of all our knowledge, so that neither concepts without an intuition corresponding to them, nor in-

tuition without concepts can yield any real knowledge” (Critique of Pure Reason). Now, if it is possible to formally verify the manipulation of concepts through definitions or articulations, just as it is possible to verify the use of chemical formulas and mathematical functions, to what extent are we capable of evaluating intuition? How to measure what the other sees? Perhaps he does not see the same thing as we do, and we will be tempted to say that he is mistaken. Because if the procedure is intended for communicability and explicit universality by means of verification, or thanks to it, the same does not go for intuition, which is altogether immediate and subjective. The question is still whether subjectivity is incompatible with universality. If this is definitely the case for the general timbre of Western philosophy since Aristotle, it is not a position which everyone supports. For example Kierkegaard, who here returns to the Socratic innovation of summoning the subject, is an exception: “When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must include an expression of the antithesis to objectivity [...]” (Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs). Naturally, Hegel is opposed to this view of things, since subjectivity is synonymous with contingency, with fragmented and superficial truth. That said, following Kierkegaard, if this truth is not necessarily shared, how to evaluate its content objectively?

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## Availability

Here we tackle a quality of the philosopher or the teacher of philosophy which is not often explicitly mentioned: listening, or availability. The difficulty is to recognize such an attitude when there is no formal procedure of recognition. One of the criteria on which he is rooted is argumentation. Does the student provide evidence in order to show that he knows what he is talking about, to deepen his idea, to justify it? Because it is not about staying with a simple, personal opinion, often a simple echo of a common opinion, that is to say staying in the “familiar”, rehashed a thousand times, but about producing meaning. Now the good student, in the classical sense, is the one who by referring to the course material, to recommended procedures, will perform some kind of work of a completely expected nature: the “new” meaning is already known. But do we not also encounter students uncomfortable with formal rigor, unwilling to precisely regurgitate what they have been given, instead endowed with a certain creativity? “Our students are not geniuses! They are not Kierkegaard or Nietzsche” the professor cries out, “otherwise we would know about it!” So intuition has to be brilliant in order to be intuition? But are they being asked to be brilliant when the procedure that is being used is evaluated? No, definitely not, but it looks easier to recognize what we have planted in a student than to detect the uniqueness of his words. Do not the difficulties of

the often heated discussion between teachers show this unavailability of freedom and originality?

This idea of availability, however, is rooted in our philosophical tradition, among others in Plato, in *The Statesman*, with the principle of *kairos*, this seizing of the right moment, which precisely distinguishes the politician from the philosopher. Now if the politician is to become a philosopher, the philosopher must become a politician, and *kairos* exactly represents the weakness of the philosopher. What is the blind spot here? The capacity to listen to this inner stream called intuition. Therefore, politics must above all be perceptive and efficient, as Machiavelli later theorized, a great thinker of this art who is often misunderstood or scorned. Historically closer to us, de Gaulle, man of action inspired by Bergson, follows up with similar arguments. “Often, on the other hand, the intellect is unwilling to allow instinct its proper share [...] Accustomed to working from ‘solid’ premises, the unaided intelligence wants to deduce its conception from constants known in advance, whereas what is needed is to induce the conception from contingent and variable facts in each individual case. This tendency, it is true, exercises a special attraction over the French mind. Inquisitive and quick in the uptake, the Frenchman feels the need for logic, likes linking a series of facts by a process of reasoning, and trusts more readily to theory than to experience” (*The Edge of the Sword*). The same is true of the poet, who hardly cares about proving, justifying or explaining his intuition. But the question remains: should philosophy be modeled on science, as Descartes wishes, or is it an art, with all its share of contingency, of subjectivity, of uniqueness and invention?

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## The Assertoric

In his table of categories, Kant proposes three modalities of “the function of thought in a judgment”: apodictic, problematic, and assertoric. The apodictic is about necessity, since it proves. The problematic is about possibilities, because it establishes conditional relations with respect to hypotheses, whereas the assertoric affirms, makes judgments in relation to facts, without conditions. Now, what is a fact? If for material objects the judgment seems less questionable, that which concerns the object of thought seems much more subject to debate and disagreement. Still, how would anyone who makes judgment in this area be less authorized to do so than he who judges materiality? Certainly, the assertoric can come from banality and want, from false evidence and ease, but can it not also express the operability of thinking in action? Is Zarathustra trying to justify, to show, to prove himself? What about the metaphors of Heraclitus? Or aphorisms in general? No doubt this is more a speciality of Eastern philosophy, where the student does not have to un-

derstand and repeat what the teacher has said and demonstrated, but discover and understand, even explain and prove to himself what the teacher tries to teach him. Of course, contemplation plays a very important role here. A problem is posed in a short sentence, usually of a paradoxical nature, a problem on which to meditate over time in order to work on their own thinking.

Descartes, a safe bet or alibi for “philosophical scientism” also gives a major role to intuition. “From this we may gather that when propositions are direct conclusions from first principles, they may be said to be known by intuition or by deduction, according to different ways of looking at them; but first principles themselves may be said to be known only by intuition [...]” (Rules for the Direction of the Mind). So the fundamental is intuitive! It is an early sign of the Kantian distinction between understanding, which deals with concepts and the empirical, and reason which deals with first principles. In case of doubt, does not Descartes through his provisional morals urge us to pursue our first intuition? And these “first principles”, according to some people, do they not, like proofs and demonstrations, have a lesser or greater value? And do we really know how to judge the intuitions we are given? Or do we only value those we know or those we like? With a greater preference, depending on the reader, for form or substance. Baudelaire, producer of ideas if ever there was one, is he less of a philosopher than another because he does not construct a system? Or because he does not provide us with justifications or references? As for the student who meditates – to different degrees – on an author or a problem, allowing him to work his imagination, is he less of a philosopher than someone who knows how to quote and analyze in a specific way, without being in the least shaken by what he produces? Obviously, it all depends on what the teacher is looking for, as a person and as a teacher.

Leibniz describes it like this: “For the rest, there come to us involuntary thoughts, partly from outside by means of objects which strike our senses, and partly from within by reason of the impressions (often insensible) which remain from preceding perceptions [...] As regards these we are passive, and even when we wake up, images (under which designation I include not only the representations of figures, but also those of sounds and other sensible qualities) come to us, as in dreams, without being called [...] As regards these we are passive, and even when we wake up, images (under which designation I include not only the representations of figures, but also those of sounds and other sensible qualities) come to us, as in dreams, without being called” (New Essays Concerning Human Understanding). Is this a lesser philosophical work, under the pretext that we do not know the process? Should we not expect a philosopher to provide us with insights which make sense? Are some images not more striking than their explanations? Should we still produce them, perceive and express them?

## Making Choices

To end this reflection on intuition, we will appeal to Schiller, both philosopher and poet, who for this reason tries to give an important place to two fundamental human instincts: sensitivity and reason. For him, two dangers await thinking: savagery and barbarity. The savage is someone who only listens to the immediacy of his thoughts, his emotions, his desires. The barbarian is someone who devises formal systems, someone who operates in the a priori and who imposes a straight-jacket on the mind. Both unreservedly grant a value of truth or absoluteness on their thoughts. Between pure sensitivity and formal reason, the mind wanders astray and tenses up: in both cases it tenses up on what seems obvious to it.

But if in our anthologies, used as an introduction to philosophy, Hegel, his logics and his concepts occupy a special place, what about the aesthetic education of Schiller (to stay in the same era), or the truth of Jacobi's feelings, or the power of intuition and of Schelling's instant knowledge? So many critics of the hegemony of the concept. Naturally, we have to make choices. Why not for instance that of the omnipotence of the scientific model ...

### The Role of the Teacher

If we were to summarize the role of the philosophy teacher in a single function, we would say that it is to introduce the students to the art of questioning, the founding act and the genesis of the history of philosophizing. Philosophy is a process of reflection, a processing of thought, before being a culture, which is only the product, the matter or the means. (Although we can just as cavalierly say the opposite, by reversing the end and the means.) As with any art, this process is the result of an attitude, it is based on it. In absolute terms, however, as Plato suspected, an attitude cannot be taught, which would lead us to assert that we cannot teach philosophy. At the same time, this attitude can be discovered, we can become aware of it, we can nourish it; so in the same way we would say that the philosophical approach can be taught. The term “attitude” is derived from the same Latin origin as “aptitude”, from “agere” which means “to act”: the disposition and the capacity are intimately related to each other, as well as to the acting, of which they are both conditions. The philosophic fiber must therefore be assumed to be present in the student, in order to have any chance of teaching him philosophy, just as the aesthetic feeling must be there in order to teach painting or music. Here, the Aristotelian *tabula rasa* turns out to be reductive as it presupposes the filling of a void with knowledge, advocated by the conception of philosophy as transmission – a conception widely held in institutions. The presuppositions of the Socratic *maieutics* are different: only the divine spark which nestles in the heart of every human being operates, whether it is a question of kindling or rekindling. But we can also start from the principle that philosophy is above all a sum of knowledge, as long as we undertake this encyclopedic vision and its consequences. Likewise, let us ask ourselves if philosophy is a codified practice, historically dated, geographically connoted, or if it belongs by nature to the human mind, in all its generality. The problem would be the same with regard to its origin. At the same time, can we honestly, with a straight face, claim to be without a father or mother, and believe that we have arisen spontaneously? Little naive beings who would only know the song of birds and wild strawberries, but would be creative and conceptual. Why renounce that which our ancestors bequeathed or imposed on us? Did they not try to teach us to question? Unless for this precise reason they deserve to be consigned to oblivion.



## Nature and Culture

We are therefore obliged to admit the presuppositions we operate on, when we summarize philosophy as the art of questioning. Philosophy is for us inherent in the human being, but depending on the circumstances they will have developed this natural faculty to a higher or lesser degree. Tools which we have inherited will have been produced throughout history, but no more than technical progress turns humans into artists will established philosophical concepts make them philosophers. In that respect, the art of questioning, which embraces the legacies of history – an art which would have no reason to ignore the work of its predecessors – favors the emergence of philosophizing. Because if we have denounced the encyclopedic and bookish temptation of philosophy, we must also caution against another form of *tabula rasa*: that which claims to do without history by promoting – so it says – the emergence of an authentic and personal thought. It seems necessary to us to trace a path between these two perils, in order to direct our own steps, in order to encourage each teacher not to neglect either the capacities of the students, or the heritage of the predecessors. For if it at times seemed necessary to us to condemn philosophical cramming and the great abstract and pontifical discourses, it seems just as urgent to condemn philosophical discourse without philosophy, which tends to glorify a singular or collective idea under the pretext that it is flesh and bones, real and properly alive, and does not owe anything to anybody.

Let us propose the following paradox: the art of philosophy, or the art of questioning, is the art of knowing nothing, or the art of wanting to know. A question which pronounces a speech is not a question. The more the speech pronounces, the less it questions. How many teachers do not claim to ask their students a question, questions so elaborated, so loaded, so heavy, that they stun the student who can only answer yes, paying lip service, out of politeness or because he is impressed by the erudition that has been displayed, or because he has not understood the so-called question. The first criterion of a good question is that it does not want to directly prove or teach anything: it must be aware of its own ignorance, believe in it, advertise it, by all means seek to escape the knowledge from which it emanates. An arrow which has to cut its fletching as much as possible to really strike. The more it refines, the greater its scope, the more it hits its mark.

To practice this art, any interlocutor is good: the spirit blows where it wills, when it wills, as it wills – it is all about listening and knowing how to hear. For this last reason, our artist cannot be ignorant, but only practice the art of ignorance, in order to refine his sense of hearing. He knows how to split himself in two, to throw himself into the abyss, to abstract himself from himself; something his student cannot do, who moreover thinks he knows even if he knows nothing, even

when he does not know. He thinks he knows what he knows, while the philosophy teacher knows that he does not know what he knows. Already because he can never sufficiently know what he knows, all the implications and consequences of which he is always unaware, because he can never experience all its contradictions. On the other hand, because he knows that what he knows is wrong, because it is biased, partial and vague. This opacity hardly worries him, because he knows that absolute speech, totally transparent of itself, does not exist, or cannot be articulated. But at the same time, it compels him to listen, to grant real status to this indefinite multiplicity which constitutes humanity, to always hope for everything from everyone.

However, if our philosopher does not know anything, he must know how to recognize, and in this reduplication of knowledge lies all the difference. We cannot question if we do not recognize anything, if we do not know how to search and to recognize. The questions will be graceless, awkward, devoid of vigor, biased, general, even irrelevant, and they will not really hear what is being answered. To know how to recognize, we must be armed, our eyes and ears experienced. He who has never opened his eyes, he who has failed to learn, is not alert, cannot be alert. Because it is by learning that we learn how to learn. To be alert in the woods, we have to assess the different rustlings in the leaves, the various bird songs, the varieties of edible and non-edible mushrooms. Otherwise, we will not see anything, we will not hear anything except noises, colors, shapes, and only indistinctly. We will not seek to know if we do not recognize the shapes.

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## Standard Questions

Therefore, our philosophy teacher has a dual function: to simultaneously teach knowledge and ignorance; or knowledge and non-knowledge, for those who are troubled by the term ignorance. But if some teachers focus on knowing, others specialize in not-knowing. Both believe that they teach, and both undoubtedly teach, but do they teach to philosophize? And do they philosophize? In absolute terms it does not matter, and we continue on our way. Let us look at what the questioning consists of, and let us see what the role of the philosophy teacher is in this. Let us therefore take a few standard questions, recurring throughout the history of philosophy. Arguably recurrent because they are of the greatest urgency, the greatest banality, and the greatest efficiency. But we still have to be responsive to them.

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## What is it about?

As we have already said, the first condition of action is attitude, cousin of aptitude. It is – as in sports, as in singing – a matter of putting ourselves in a good position, in a good disposition, both to make philosophizing possible and also to work on its foundation. In this first stage, which is indispensable, some students demonstrate serious disabilities which we cannot ignore or overlook as if nothing has occurred. To philosophize it is necessary to settle the mind. If this attitude has to be provoked by the teacher, it is because it is not natural. Indeed, in general, a certain clamor reigns in the mind of man, child or adult, of which the external and verbal manifestation is only a pale reflection. To settle the mind is above all to ask for silence, to insist on it, according to the degree of “violence” required by the nature of the group. Then follows a request to contemplate an idea, to reflect on a question, to meditate on a text; to reflect without expressing anything. “What is it about?” we wonder. Finally, in a third step, we express an idea to ourselves, orally or in writing. We have to be aware of, if it is done orally, that we have to ask permission to speak and we wait our turn. And as soon as someone speaks, there is no reason for anyone else to keep their arm raised. A fourth step, which is a step backwards, can be a request for verification, from the author or the listeners, as to the relevance of the statements made. Are they clear? Do they correspond with the instructions? Are they answering the question? It is not about entering into the problems of agreeing or disagreeing, but only to examine if the statements are adequate on the formal level, in order to verify whether the thought is present. The requirement is to precisely identify the content.

Some examples of questions asked in order to clarify the situation: “Does the answer respond to the question asked or to another question?”; “Do you think your answer is clear to the listeners?”; “Does what has been said satisfy the instructions?”; “Did you answer the question or did you give an example?”. The problems posed here are related to meaning, to coherence, to the nature and the clarity of the statements made. They ask for an identification of what is happening, to verify its nature and its content. This return to our own thoughts, the analysis we make of it, constitutes the first entry into philosophizing.

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## Why?

The second question, the foundation of thought, is “why?”. To ask “why?” is to pose the problem of the finality of an idea, of its legitimacy, its origin, its proofs, its rationality, and so on. It can be used in all its forms, without the need for specification, and the students who use it as a system have understood this perfectly

well: “Why do you say that?”. Since it is a very undifferentiated question, it asks everything and therefore nothing. But it is useful because it introduces students, especially the younger ones, to a dimension beyond or below what is being said. Nothing comes from nothing. The “why” implies genesis, causality, motive, motivation, and working on this dimension accustoms us to automatically justify our words, to argue them, in order to seize their deeper content. It makes us become aware of our thoughts and our being, for which any particular idea is just a pale reflection, or an asperity, from which we can practice the escalation of the mind and the being.

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### **An example or an idea?**

The first tendency of the child, and often of the adult, is to express himself by an example, by a narration, by something concrete: “It is like when ...”; “For example ...”; “Sometimes, there are those who ...”. Plato describes this natural process of the mind, which tends to go from one case to several cases to finally reach a general idea. To ask a child what is the idea underlying his example, to ask whether the case is particular or not, is to ask him to articulate the process of generalization of his intuition, by formalizing it; it is to ask him to go to the stage of abstraction. An idea is not an example, even if they contain and support each other. In the same way, certain ready-made generalities also represent a short-circuit of thought, a concept without intuition, Kant would tell us. No intuition without concept, no concept without intuition, he instructs us.

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### **The same or different?**

To think philosophically is to consider connections. Everything is connected in human thinking, everything is distinct. It is a dialectics of what is the same and what is different to which Plato invites us. Everything which is different is the same, everything which is the same is different: no relation is possible without community and distinction. But then everything depends on the articulation or explanation of this relationship, in the proportionality of community and difference, established within the framework of a context. Everything is in need of this judgment, always questionable and revisable. Because for a real reflection to take place we cannot go on dwelling forever, unless we do it consciously. Neither is there a question of repeating without being aware of repeating. What is the relationship between an idea and the one which precedes it? To construct, to interact, ideas must be aware of each other in order to be able to take responsibility for each other. Is the content identical? What is the nature of difference, of contradiction?

What I am going to say or what I just said, what does it say about what has already been said? What concepts are the issues or the similarities based on? These are the questions which must accompany any new formulation of an idea. Questions which can only be dealt with in relation to a specific context. With two possible hurdles: either distinctions are always possible, the trap of nuance ad infinitum, or everything is connected, united, starting from the opposite with its opposite, by a sort of fusional drive.

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## Essential or accidental?

This is a powerful distinction proposed by Aristotle. To think is to go through what comes to mind, preferably before saying it. Without doing this, we certainly express ourselves, we say what comes into our head, but we do not think, or only in a very wide and vague sense. Above all, it is a matter of distinguishing what comes to mind, according to the degree of preeminence, importance, efficiency, beauty, truth, etc. To ask if an idea is essential or accidental is an invitation to make an axiology, or to explain it, because every thought operates from a hierarchy and a classification of priorities, however unconscious or unspeakable it may be. The essential is also invariant, which means that an entity, a thing, an idea, or a being, possesses such and such a quality; not in an incidental way, but in a fundamental way, which relates to its essence. Does a thing remain what it is without its predicate, or does it become something else? Fruit grows on trees, but can a fruit not grow on a tree? Is such a quality or predicate granted an entity really indispensable? Is it also valuable for a radically different entity? So many questions which make us reflect on the nature of things, ideas, and beings; on their definitions, their differences, and their respective values.

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## What is the problem?

Once an idea has emerged we can question its degree of universality. To do this, we have to think about the exception, an exception which must be accepted because it can both invalidate and confirm the rule. It invalidates it because it removes its degree of absoluteness; it confirms it because it determines its limits. This treatment characterizes the scientific approach, as claimed by Popper, according to which the fallibility of a proposition establishes scientificity and protects it from the religious scheme, which is based on incontestable propositions. Everything that has to do with reason is debatable: absolute speech is an act of faith. Knowing the limits of generality comes down to seizing its profound reality, and above all not to fear objection, but to desire it. So for any proposed idea let us im-

mediately ask ourselves where the flaw is, based on the premise that it necessarily exists and must be identified. Moreover, the emergence of any singularity allows us access to another degree of universality, to new hypotheses.

## Giving an Example

At first, the teacher in a way monopolizes the questioning function, in order to set an example, in order to set the tone, to inspire rigor, but he quickly invites the students to undertake this task. Little by little, the students learn, some faster, others more slowly. The teacher assumes the role of the stranger, like the one depicted by Plato in his late dialogues, whose sole surname is the Stranger. The stranger is the one who does not take anything for granted, the one who does not accept any custom, the one who does not know the agreement and does not acknowledge it. This way, the student gets used to becoming a stranger to himself, a stranger to the group, avoiding a protective fusion, recognition, or some agreement. He is not there to reassure, either the others or himself, he leaves that to the psychologist or to the parents. He is there to disturb, to provoke this uneasiness which is inherent in thinking, the living substance of thinking, as Leibniz says.

But to induce philosophizing we have to philosophize. The teacher who wants his students to philosophize cannot claim any special status here, free from exigency and reflection. Therefore he must philosophize and also become the stranger. If he does not get used to love, desire, and produce what does not belong to him, how can he generate philosophizing in his class? So it is hard to understand why he does not in the least look at what our famous deceased have said. Obviously, their words are not always easy to read or to understand and not all of them are exciting. Even more so since we can all have our favorite subjects. But if ignorance becomes a posture, a search for justification, which claims to philosophize spontaneously, ready to marvel at infantile or adolescent speech as a substitute for thought, then fraud is not far away. *Sapere aude!* the teacher cries out like Kant to his students, without putting this imperative into practice. Dare to know! he says, but his actions shall betray him. What energy does he transmit if he is content to let his words be disconnected or only vaguely associative? Admittedly, from time to time a stroke of genius may occur, by some mysterious chance, but no mastery emerges, consciousness is hardly called upon. If no rigor is used in the treatment of the thought, the teacher necessarily opposes the ideas of the students to the knowledge ingrained in the class; in mathematics, for example, where it is a question of accounting for the result by a process. It will indeed have created a pleasant venue for interaction, useful perhaps, but without giving everyone access to the universality of their comments. Because only the approach is validating, without which

it remains an opinion. But an approach cannot be a matter of chance. The approach demystifies, it liberates insofar as the mind deliberates with full knowledge of the facts. And in order to deliberate – if the human mind will never be reducible to definite processes, as in mathematics – there are processes that we had better understand. Why not take advantage of the past? If it is fun to try to recreate mathematics, it is just as fun to do it by building on what has already been done.

We can reflect indefinitely on the required procedures, on their subtleties and complexities, on the multiple rules of discussion, on the psychological and affective dimensions of the matter, even if philosophizing is first and foremost an art of questioning, which like all art uses techniques and knowledges which condition the emergence of creativity and genius. Attitude and aptitude are certainly conditions for action. But why ignore what is, what is given?

If we like problems, nothing is strange to us. This is when we become the stranger, because habit does not like problems, above all it values certainty and what is obvious. To love problems, for their contribution to truth, for their beauty, for their *mise en abyme* of the being, for their aporetic dimension, is to love the difficulty, the strangeness, the question. To do this we have to educate the emotions: to overcome the urgency of the expression, the rigidity of the opinion, the dread of the problem, in order to let the mind no longer wallow in immediacy, to question the subject on the basis of what emerges from the world, instead of on the basis of nothing, of arbitrary and fixed rules, or some academic reading grid.

Who are you? Socrates asks us. Do you exist? Nagarjuna asks us. Do you know what you say? Pascal asks us. Where do you get this evidence from? Descartes asks us. How do you know that? Kant asks us. Can you think the opposite? Hegel asks us. What material conditions make you say this! Marx asks us. Who speaks when you speak? Nietzsche asks us. What desire drives you? Freud asks us. Who do you want to be? Sartre asks us. Why not let yourself be challenged? And who do we pretend to be talking to when we do not want to hear these questions? Unless we prefer to only chat among ourselves.

Philosophical discussions in primary and secondary school have met with some success in recent years, in various forms, and in particular among teachers who often lack real philosophical training. An observation which is hardly a problem in itself – and may even represent a certain advantage in view of the traditional and heavy conception of philosophy – except that it raises the problem of the nature of this discussion. In what way is a discussion philosophical? What makes a discussion philosophical? It is not so much the label which interests us here but the content issues raised by the very form of the discussion. Because the particular problem we are met with in this type of exercise is precisely to perceive the content not as content, but as form. A relatively new situation for many teachers.

### Work on Opinion

Let us begin with the hypothesis that to philosophize is to wrest the opinion from itself by becoming aware of it, by analyzing it, by problematizing it, by putting it to the test. In other words, the philosophical exercise comes down to working on the idea, kneading it like clay, taking it out of its status of petrified obviousness, shaking its foundations for a moment. In general, as a consequence, an idea will be transformed. Or it will not be transformed, but it will no longer be exactly identical to itself, because it will have lived; it will in any case have changed to the extent that it has been worked on, to the extent that it will have heard what it did not know, to the extent that it will have been confronted with what it is not. Because philosophizing above all represents a demand, a labor, a transformation and not a simple discours; strictly speaking, the latter only represents the finished product, or what is apparently finished, what often only reaches an illusory rigidity. Taking the idea out of its protective gangue, that of unformulated intuition, shaky statement, or ready-made formulation, we now glimpse its manifold interpretations and implicit consequences, its unacknowledged presuppositions. This is what characterizes the essence of philosophizing, what distinguishes the activity of the philosopher from that of the historian of philosophy, for example.

In this sense, setting up a discussion where everyone speaks in turn already represents a conquest with regard to philosophizing. To listen to a discourse on a given subject different from our own, to confront it by listening and by speaking, including through feelings of aggression which this strange speech risks inflicting on us. Merely avoiding to interrupt the speech of the other already signifies an important form of acceptance, a form of asceticism which is not always easy to impose



on ourselves. We only need to observe with what naturalness children or adults instinctively and incessantly cut themselves off from speaking, and with what ease some people abusively monopolize the same speech.

That said, it is nevertheless possible to use others to philosophize, to philosophize through dialogue, including during a halting conversation where ideas loudly and confusedly clash together, ideas intertwined with conviction and passion. But in this case there is a concern, unless we have a rare and great mastery of ourselves, that the philosophizing will only take place after the discussion, once the heat of the action has faded, in the calm of the solitary meditation, by reviewing and rethinking the different things that was said or that could have been said. However, it is a pity and a little tardy to philosophize only in retrospect, once the tumult has abated, rather than philosophizing during the discussion, in the present, where we should be more able to do so. All the more so since it is not easy to silence the flows of passion connected to the various tethers and implications of the ego once they have been violently called upon, if they have not completely blocked every perspective of reflection.

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## The Setup of the Speech

For these reasons, insofar as philosophizing requires a certain framework, artificial or formal, in order to function, it is primarily a question of proposing rules and to nominate one or more supervisors or arbitrators who will guarantee the proper functioning of these rules. As we have mentioned, the rule which to us seems the most indispensable is “one at a time”, determined either by a chronological entry, or by decision of the arbitrator, or by another procedure. It lets us avoid the shouting match and protects against the tension which is linked to rush. Above all, it allows for breathing, an act necessary for thinking, which in order to philosophize must have time to abstract itself from words, to free itself from the immediate need and desire to react and to speak. A certain dramatization must therefore be performed, a dramatization of language which makes it possible to single out each statement. A rule which has proven to be effective is that which proposes that speech is pronounced for everyone or for no one, and not in private, on impulse. It protects the group from all these private chats which creates a sort of cacophony, a background noise which hinders listening and distracts. It also prevents the verbal energy from diffusing and exhausting itself in numerous small interjections and side remarks, which all too often serve as nervous release rather than real thought.

Dramatization allows for objectivization, the capacity to become a distant spectator, open to analysis and capable of metadiscourse. The sacralization of speech

performed in this way makes it possible to get out of a consumerist vision where speech can be completely trivialized, sold off all the more easily as it is free and everyone can produce it without any effort. We will then start weighing our words, more cautiously choosing the ideas we wish to express, and the terms we want to use. A self-awareness is established, mindful of its own words, eager to place itself in a critical position in regard to itself, capable of grasping the issues, implications and consequences of the discourse it unwinds. Then, thanks to perspectives which are not ours, by the principle of opposition, a mirroring effect takes place, which can make us aware of our own presuppositions, of what we have left unsaid and of our contradictions.

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## The Dimension of the Game

This alienation, the loss of self and others which is demanded by the exercise, with its numerous hardships, reveals both the difficulty of dialogue, the confusion of our thinking and the intellectual rigidity connected to this confusion. The difficulty to philosophize quite often manifests itself through these three symptoms, in varying proportions. It is therefore important for the facilitator to perceive, as best as he can, to what extent he can demand rigor from this or that person. Some people will have to be pushed in order to work harder on the problem, others will need help and encouragement, by somewhat erasing their functional imperfections. The exercise has a grueling aspect; therefore it is important to add a playful dimension and if possible use humor, which will serve as an “epidural” during delivery. Without the play aspect, the intellectual and psychological pressure put on listening and speaking can be too difficult to live with. The fear of judgment, of the exterior gaze and of criticism, will be eased by the dedramatization of the issues. Indeed, already by explaining that contrary to usual discussions, it is neither a question of being right nor of having the last word but of practicing this gymnastics, just like any sport or board game.

The other way of presenting the exercise uses the analogy of a group of scientists constituting a community of reflection. For this reason, every hypothesis should be tested by the classmates, slowly, conscientiously and patiently. One after the other, each concept must be studied and worked on through questions from the group, in order to test its operation and its validity, in order to verify its tolerance threshold. From this point of view, we are doing ourselves and others a service by accepting and encouraging this questioning, without fear of not being nice or of losing face. The difference is no longer between those who through speech contradict themselves and those who do not contradict themselves, but between those who contradict themselves without knowing it and those who contradict themselves and

know it. The whole idea is therefore to make the incoherences and the flaws visible through questions, in order to develop thinking. To do this, it is important to convey the idea that the perfect discourse does not exist, no more in the teacher than in the student, as frustrating as this starting point is.

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## What are We Looking For?

The common difficulty for any teacher who wishes to enter into this type of exercise is to understand its nature and its purpose, somewhat inconsistent with his usual practice, the aim of which is mainly to transmit pre-established content. If a discussion is taking place, it either leads to acceptable conclusions, as in the case of the class council, or it only serves to express ourselves and its only issue is freedom of speech. But philosophical practice is founded on specific competencies, which we define as follows: identify, problematize and conceptualize. To identify means to deepen the meaning of what is said, by us or by others, to establish the nature, implications and consequences of the words spoken. To problematize means to provide objections, questions, various interpretations which makes it possible to show the limits of the initial propositions and to enrich them. To conceptualize means to produce terms capable of identifying or solving problems, enabling the articulation of new propositions. In such a framework, we are not far from the familiar Hegelian pattern: thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

In that respect, the aim is not so much for the teacher to arrive at a particular conclusion or other but to implement this type of competencies, according to the level of the group, and not to try to embellish the results or to activate the process, whether out of anxiety or out of complacency. He must take the time – that is setting aside certain moments of the classroom activity for this exercise – to make sure that a thought appears, sometimes with difficulty, in order for it to see itself and work on itself. He will experience difficulties himself but rather than seeing them as handicaps they will allow him to better understand the student's difficulties. As a result, the teacher is part of the exercise, a situation which perhaps is odd, even unpleasant, in which he can nevertheless take pleasure as long as he accepts to play the game. To philosophize is above all to see the thought, to allow it to develop, by becoming aware of the issues which arise and are created through words. It is about going for a walk, observing and naming, and not racing against the clock.

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## Typology of the Class Discussion

In order to better determine what we mean by philosophical discussion, let us briefly trace a sort of typology of the discussion. Let us define some broad categories of discussion in order to specify the nature of the one we are seeking to bring forth. Not that these other types of discussions are not interesting, but rather because each of them plays a different role, fulfills a different function from the one we want to deal with. Every exercise has specific demands, every exercise makes it possible to accomplish specific tasks. It is a question of being clear about these demands and these tasks, because in this delimitation it holds its own truth. This delimitation allows it to perform what it can perform, and at the same time stops it from claiming to perform what it cannot perform. And since the time of the discussion is part of the instructions guiding the work of the elementary school teacher, it is useful to know what we are dealing with even before the discussion starts and the rules are proposed.

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### The “What’s new?”

This exercise, known to elementary school teachers, which resembles thematic or therapeutic discussion groups, consists of having the students speak in turn in order to relate what has happened to them or what preoccupies them, with no other restriction than speaking one at a time and clearly enough to be understood by the classmates. The stakes involved in this method are, on the one hand, existential: it allows students to share their own existence with others, the things they are confronted with, the worries they have. Knowing that for some children, this moment of discussion in class is the only one where they can safely share their happiness, their troubles and socialize their own existence. On the other hand, it is one of verbal expression: finding the words and articulating sentences to voice what we care about. To talk, without worrying about what is necessarily right, good or true, only to be heard by others.

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### Class council

The main purpose of this discussion is to bring to light difficulties, to solve problems, particularly concerning the social functioning of the class. It can also be used by a work group in a company in order to address a common problem. This format primarily concerns practical and ethical problems for which it would be preferable to find a solution, even if it is not always possible. Decisions are made, democratically, that are expected to engage the whole class, which presupposes

that the group reaches a sort of agreement where the majority prevails over the majority since it is a question of closing the discussion. A discussion in which the teacher will more or less shape the content, depending on the situation. This type of exchange can work as an initiation into an exercise of citizenship since it places the student in a position of responsible actor. It also naturally leads to working on oral expression and accounting for general problems raised by specific situations, therefore working on the relationship between an example and an idea, although we tend to emphasize the practical side of things.

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## Debate of opinions

This relatively free layout looks like the “What’s new?”, apart from the fact that it requires us to deal with a particular subject – an additional demand which is not insignificant – and it lends itself to a certain argumentation. It all depends on the degree of alertness and intervention of the teacher, or the students, in order to redirect the discussion and not to get sidetracked. Another determining parameter: to what extent the teacher intervenes to change course with regard to the content, as well as asking for clarifications or justifications. It seems to us that if he hazards this in a tireless manner, or in any other attempt to formalize thinking, the discussion takes on a different nature by its rigor. At a minimum, the student learns to patiently await his turn to speak, to articulate his thoughts in order to express himself and to try to be understood by others. A peacefulness all the more necessary as this type of discussion is very suitable for the “yes, but ...” or the “I do not agree”, which shows the opposition as well as a pressing concern, more or less conscious, of the speaker to call attention to himself. Here, sincerity, conviction and passion, feelings in general, play a rather pronounced role due to the spontaneity of the interventions, accompanied by an absence of formal demands which favors the flux of ideas more than rigor. As a consequence, the discussion can easily get stuck in a game of ping-pong between two or more persons who cling on to their respective argument without necessarily listening to or understanding each other, although we can see how these exchanges are an integral part of the exercise, with the hope that the stakes will become clearer and clearer. It should be added that the debate of opinions is often founded on egalitarian and relativistic presuppositions.

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## Sharing opinions

This type of discussion is somewhat copied from the American model of “brainstorming”. It is very naturally practiced in education, in particular in its prescriptive or teleological form: that of an expected goal. This form of discussion is rather

fusional: the class is seen as a totality, there is little attempt to single out speech, and the fact that two or more students speak at the same time is not necessarily a problem. It is above all a matter of making ideas emerge, or scraps of ideas, or even mere words. The layout can be open-ended: ideas are taken as they come, written on the board or not: the ideas that are chosen are those which are approved, even expected, by the teacher, who selects them as they appear. The development of ideas is generally done by the teacher, at once or later on, unless another type of discussion or a following written exercise allows the students to produce this analysis at a later stage. The main quality of this layout is its dynamism and its vivacity, and the main defect is that it is not really a question of articulating ideas or arguing but of throwing out intuitions or elements of knowledge. Here, it is either a matter of pronouncing a list of ideas, finding the right answers (or answer), or just getting the class “involved” in the teaching.

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## Discussion exercises

Such discussions are designed to put into practice certain course elements: vocabulary, science, grammar or other exercises. Their purpose is to implement specific lessons, particularly to make the student reflect on that lesson and to check the degree to which he has appropriated its content. These exercises will generally be carried out in small groups and their object will often be to produce some writing, in the form of a resume or an analysis. If the form of the discussion, which is not determined, is to be established by the students themselves, in a more or less random manner, its result must nevertheless correspond with the specific expectations of the teacher, which will be evaluated according to the degree of understanding of the initial lesson. However, the demand for form is not without importance since it requires knowing how to articulate and to justify ideas, to synthesize, and so on.

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## Argumentative debate

This model is traditionally more often used in Anglo-Saxon countries. It also corresponds to the ancient form of rhetoric, the art of discussion which was once considered an essential prelude to philosophizing. It is above all a question of learning how to argue in favor of a particular thesis in order to defend it against another thesis. For this purpose it is sometimes necessary to first learn the different forms of argumentation, the use of which is then a matter of showing, even of identifying, as well as learning to recognize errors of argumentation. But it can also be done in a largely intuitive and informal way. A certain decentring is required here, because it is not always a question of defending a thesis we agree with a priori. This kind of

exercise, a high school specialty, more difficult to use in elementary school, would better serve middle or high school students.

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## Formal discussion

The formal discussion, the category to which the philosophical discussion as we understand it belongs, is above all characterized by its slowness. It generally operates in a gap since the forms, enforced by the rules of the game, have as their main goal the installation of formal mechanisms which are supposed to enable the articulation of a metareflection which to us seems essential for philosophizing. It invites the participants not only to speak and act but to watch themselves speak and act, to decenter and to distance themselves from themselves in order to become aware and to analyze their speech and their own behavior as well as that of their neighbors. Quite naturally, this is also possible in other forms of discussion but in the present setting this aspect is somewhat “forced”. It is therefore a matter of proposing, or rather of imposing rules (which can in any event be discussed), of putting them in place, which in itself is a sometimes very demanding exercise since a certain asceticism is de facto introduced, contrary to, for example, the spontaneism or the naturalism of the debate of opinions. Even if the teacher usually sets out the rules in advance, the students can also facilitate the discussion and make their own rules, knowing that they must be observed by everyone for the game to work. These rules can be very diverse and they will direct the nature of the metadiscussion: either on content analyses, or on the production of syntheses, or on the appearance of problems, or on deliberation, or on conceptualization, and so on. If these rules, with their complexity and their gravity, can create some discussion – a requirement of form and never of content – and invite a more abstract functioning, they can have the tendency to initially favor the speech of the students most skilled at handling abstractions, unless some other rules compensate for the elitist tendency of the former. However, the more timid students can occasionally find themselves more at ease in these rather square speaking spaces with their reserved or protected moments.

Therefore any discussion exercise, necessarily specific, will tend to favor certain functions in a particular way and because of that certain categories of students more than others, at least initially. For that reason, none of these types of discussion can claim any sort of hegemony or omnipotence: each of them represents a method to be used, alternately with the others, depending on the goal. Besides, it can be productive to use various functions in order to give the students, who will learn to distinguish them, the opportunity to use the different statutes of speech and verbal exchange. These different types can anyway sometimes be intertwined

without it causing any real problem in itself. The summaries or definitions that we have drawn up above are not intended to be exclusive or exhaustive.



## Playing the Game

For any game, for any practice, as for any exercise, rules must be put in place, rules which implicate specific demands and constraints, rules which for this reason call for particular skills. A game is not just an outlet: it sets up a challenge through rules. Rules that need to be articulated, proposed, defined, made understood, used, imposed, without forgetting to continuously revise them. Indeed, rules are only worth what they are worth, accomplish only what they accomplish, nothing more. Therefore, depending on the circumstances, the individuals or the demands of the moment, depending on fatigue and many other parameters, the rules will preferably be reviewed, renewed, adapted, rectified, softened, abandoned, etc. Furthermore, the rules can – or should – be an integral part of the discussion: they will from time to time be the subject of a debate, a debate on the debate, an essential element of the reflexive and dialectical perspective which we favor here. Because not only do the rules vary, but from one “facilitator” to another, whether teacher or student, similar rules can take a different turn, by the rigor of their application, by the emphasis given to certain aspects rather than others.

Let us not forget that rules have content: they direct the functioning of the student and his thoughts in one way rather than another, they try to alleviate one difficulty rather than another. Therefore, if students have difficulties expressing themselves, out of shyness, because of a difficult class context or some language impediment, the focus will naturally be more on the simple operation of articulating ideas than on the capacity for abstraction or explanation. Confirmation will be privileged over questioning and in fact the teacher will by default reserve the role of questioning for himself. The same goes for conceptualization or problematization: depending on the situation the teacher will himself have to carry out the work on evaluating the singular speech to a degree which he considers appropriate. Sometimes he will have to work mainly on the vocabulary or on the logical arrangement of the sentence, when the words and the sentences suffer from too serious deficiencies in their use or in their understanding. Occasionally, the implementation of elementary principles of behavior, such as taking turns in speaking, will constitute the main part of the work, especially at the start of the year. But if it is a question of taking the children as they are, where they are, it is not likely to cause a problem in itself unless we want to accelerate the maneuver too quickly, for reasons of personal or administrative expectations, expectations which will easily parasitize the functioning of the workshop.

However, let us not forget that these basic rules, rather than being perceived as a duty and a mere disciplinary formalism, can very well be presented as a game and can benefit from it. If these formal requirements meet with a certain resistance at the beginning it gradually fades away, in proportion to the capacity to assimilate and put the obligations into practice, in accordance with the aptitude of finding pleasure in playing with these constraints. As in chess or cards, it is a question of passing through the dry stage where we have to appropriate the game data in order to be able to actually play. For the majority of children, such a constraint never presents a huge problem in itself even if the rules represent a certain challenge: more than adults, they are motivated by the instinct to play, they do not believe too much in what they do, their functioning is not yet too overinvested in a desire of appearance and various existential fears: they still know how to trust. What would cause a real problem would be a set of inappropriate rules, aiming for skills too unfamiliar for the students in question. It is a matter of maintaining a permanent tension between what is demanding and what is impossible: a step forward, not a step too far. It is the famous principle of Lev Vygotsky called the “zone of proximal development”. In this sense, the making and the utilization of operating rules as a primary teaching tool is already an art in itself to which the teacher will not necessarily be prepared, initiated or even inclined. An art which can never be reduced to a recipe, but which necessarily results from the continuity of a practice.

In order to facilitate this appropriation of the operating rules it is important to insist on their playful and debatable dimension. They are playful in the sense that they do not constitute a kind of truth or absolute good: they only represent a way to play. They are debatable in the sense that they have a reason to exist, and just as many reasons not to exist, which is to say to be removed or replaced with other rules, something it is possible to debate in all serenity. It is from this perspective we can speak of knowing and understanding the rules because they are no longer the product of any supreme authority, that of a master with mysterious powers, but the product of reason, of a reason or a contractual and contestable, even arbitrary, arrangement. As a consequence they can be the object of reflection instead of just asking for participation or provoking a refusal. What is a game? A collective (or individual) exercise which allows everyone to confront others and themselves through any procedure implementing specific skills. The law is no longer an end in itself, it is no longer the “*dura lex sed lex*” (the law is harsh but it is the law), which derives its substance and legitimacy from its harshness, but a simple means of existing because it offers to being a possibility of doing and being. Such an outlook invites generosity rather than the punitive fierceness of mere discipline.

Playing the game refers to another issue: the construction of knowledge. Indeed, if knowledge is not constituted a priori, where does it come from? How does

it emerge? Playing the game already implies that knowledge is a practice, a know-how, and not a set of theoretical knowledge established a priori, which it is then a matter of reproducing. Knowledge is the result of know-how, rather than being perceived as the precondition for know-how. We forget too quickly that knowledge is born from thought. Admittedly, any implementation presupposes some knowledge, if only that of a minimum amount of language in the exercise which concerns us, but rather than worrying about the students formally acquiring these preconditions – which can by the way be done at other times – let us throw them into the exercise. This dynamic wager will allow everyone, teachers as well as students, to first evaluate each other's competencies and weaknesses, and secondly to determine what to do next.

What is at issue here is a journey. The required procedures invite the group to summon what they know, to use this knowledge, to see its limits, to identify the needs, and as the case may be, to solve the problems and obstacles that arise by mobilizing new ideas and new concepts. Even if the participant is left with the mere perception of the problem the job would be done, which consists in creating a need for knowledge, in bringing fresh air for thinking. This state of mind will induce additional motivation and provide insights for the teacher which can then explain some important principle based on concrete experience. This genesis of knowledge, a knowledge asserting and demonstrating its necessity in a substantial way, should on the one hand help the students who experience the work in class and the learning as an immense chore where they have to take in strange things, but also those who succeed precisely because they have understood the system and know how to reproduce that which is instilled in them, sometimes to the expense of a vivid and authentic thought. To play, without excluding rigor – because that would no longer be a game but a recess – is to make the thought operational and dynamic, to give it back its breath.

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## The Game Master

If in the ideal of the absolute the function of the master hardly needs to be embodied by a particular person – the group will be self-sufficient as soon as everyone assumes responsibility – the same cannot be said for everyday life, particularly if the group is large and if the game presents some important issues or specific difficulties. However, let us be frank, the more the role of the master can be reduced, the more the game can be thought of as a success. Without, however, succumbing for practical reasons to the temptation of a minimal game – soft and easy – even if it is also possible to turn towards other operational choices, as long as we clarify the nature, the implications and the consequences of these options.

Every banquet, like every vessel, needs a captain, Plato recommends. While navigation, a complex task, is carried out by several people, it is still a matter of appointing one person who ultimately, as events dictate, will make the final decisions which seem right to him, at the risk of error and injustice. Knowing that it is not a power of divine right but only a tacit agreement established for practical reasons. This role can therefore be allotted to several people in turn. A political role which, again according to Plato, consists in weaving diversity into a single work. And if the teacher, more familiar with the practice he tries to introduce, initially assumes this function, it is advisable that he periodically delegates it to the students depending on the circumstances. The difficulties this poses will then form an integral part of the exercise, the two reefs of philosophical practice being authoritarianism and demagoguery.

What is the role of the master here, given that he is no longer charged with “telling the truth”? First of all he is a legislator: he establishes the law, articulates it, periodically recalls its terms, even modifies its articles. As we have already said, the rules are subject to debate, but it is about delimiting the place of the debate, specifying its appropriate moment, and deciding when it should stop, so that the exercise is not a permanent debate on the debate, a trap into which it is easy to fall. Even if we ask the group, at the end of the game or the start of it, if an endorsement is granted to the person in question. There are different ways of setting up such a process: what seems most efficient to us is to give full powers to the assigned person during the game, and then to reserve some time for discussion at the end of the game to review the work accomplished.

The game master is also an arbitrator, a judicial function, to the extent that he must ensure that the rules in question are respected, whether they are his own or established beforehand. Anyway, it seems preferable to refer any decision to the group, via a show of hands for example. His role as arbitrator is then to raise the problems he sees, to solicit the opinions of a few people, then make a decision, direct or indirect. Arbitration should not be understood here as a side activity but as an intrinsic part of the exercise, since the elaboration of a judgment, the formulation of arguments, lies at the very heart of the philosophical activity. The most interesting questions during a discussion will often emerge in these arbitration debates, often delicate ones, which is not surprising since they require thinking about form, that of logic and the relations of meaning, in other words to reflect at the level of metadiscussion and not that of a change of opinions. It is therefore a matter of going beyond the level of agreeing or disagreeing on content, which mainly refer to subjectivity, however well argued. To think about compliance with the rules is to work on the requirement of truth, which is never anything other than a compliance with something, however arbitrary it may be: another idea, a principle, logic,

efficiency, etc.

The third hat of the game master is to be a facilitator, an executive function. Quite often, the role of the executive is perceived only through his discretionary power, as a prerogative which is abused unscrupulously, and which instills mistrust before any other feeling; instead of its opposite, confidence, without which no group can function in a peaceful and serene manner. Moreover, his authority is arbitrary, since no one asks for the opinion of everyone, or it counts for so little that any individual contribution is rather ignored or considered negligible. In our exercise, it is about establishing a relationship of mutual confidence between the facilitator for the moment, whether it is the teacher, another adult or a student, and those who participate in the game. Because if the game cannot be played without him, he cannot chair the session without them, without each of the participants. Not for merely formal reasons, but because if the least participant sets out to interrupt the game with unwanted behavior, he can. Just as the least participant who puts forward a promising idea can make the group move forward. Let us not forget that it is not the facilitator who provided the ideas but the participants, which puts him in a relationship of psychological and cognitive dependence, which is besides quite destabilizing for some teachers who have a hard time trusting their students.

Therefore, power should no longer be a bad word, an object of fear, nor should it be incontestable. It is an art of responsibility, a practice to be practiced like any other. This practice refers to the functioning of the city-state, to the separation of tasks. It teaches us to trust others, as well as ourselves, and thereby revalue the individual through this treaty between peers. It also teaches us to accept the arbitrary dimension of life in society, and of existence in general: not as a factor to suffer, inducing passivity and resentment, but as one of the constitutive aspects of establishing a group. It is a matter of taking distance and to adjust it over time, insofar as we are aware of the general problem it presents. This ability to accept the arbitrary requires an alert awareness, it involves a distancing from ourselves, a capacity to minimize ourselves in favor of the group, and learning to mourn our own claims and desires. Such an operation includes an undeniable risk-taking, especially for those who normally hold power a priori, but also for those who have to exercise it momentarily. The alternation of the chair and the moments reserved for a debate on the debate, where each one evaluates their own performance and that of the others, forge the strength of the treaty precisely because it is open to criticism and revocable. At any moment, obviously, even if it is generally agreed to let the chair of the session finish his term unless there is a major difficulty. The exercise of citizenship also involves the protection of that which sets up the game. This means, among other things, guaranteeing that the one who has to ensure the successful completion of the game can work peacefully. For some participants, for

whom mistrust and reactivity are a way of being, such a perspective implies a psychological and identity reversal which is quite astounding, but nevertheless relieving. We can call this “learning the principle of responsibility”.

## Asking Permission to Speak

Most students know about the rule which consists in asking permission to speak by raising their hand beforehand, but it is not certain if they practice this rigorously and especially whether they understand its meaning. In general, the two most common conceptions, relatively unconscious, are on the one hand that which bestows the teacher the discretionary power to grant or refuse the right to speak and on the other hand that which conceives this act as a ritual – more or less mandatory – which automatically grants the right to speak: like a gesture of politeness which would guarantee the fulfillment of a demand, or legitimize an act, similar to “please” or “excuse me”. The first case is more rarely found in elementary school, it is established later; the second is respected to very different degrees: in many classes we see students who start to speak as soon as they raise their hand without waiting for any permission.

Again, we would like to insist on the idea of understanding the rules and on their questionable nature: an understanding and a discussion which neither excludes the possibility of imposing these rules, nor considering their arbitrary aspect. The problem this poses is “Why do we speak?”. Is it because the word comes rushing from within and must come out at all costs – in other words expressing ourselves as we express the juice of a lemon? Some discussions can play this role, which establishes a place in the classroom for free and unconstrained speech. But if it is a question of philosophizing, that is “thinking the thought”, then other purposes operate. To begin with, and this is not the least of the criteria, to listen. Indeed, what point is there to talk in this hullabaloo, while others are talking or no one is listening? The idea would be to speak when we have ensured maximal listening, in order to maximize the impact of our words and guarantee the best feedback possible. But what about the teacher? What example does he set? Has he, out of weariness, out of despondency or deafness, become used to speaking in emptiness or in chaos? Or does he consider it reasonable – perhaps not by his speech but by his behavior – that if his authoritative words require silence, that of the student could somehow emerge in the noise?

Let us present some of the issues at stake. First, as we have said, raising our hand before we speak is about making sure that listening is activated before we say anything, instead of just letting out words. Speaking when someone else is speaking is not an option. Second, it is about the status of the student and the mutual

respect which actively contributes to the definition of this status. No more than anyone should cut off the teacher should they interrupt a student who elaborates his thought, even if it seems to emerge slowly, out of place or incomprehensible: the mistake or the incomprehension are integral parts of the learning process, they cannot be a vector for the devaluation of the individual. All the more so as the student can rectify his comment little by little during the intervention. Unless it is excessively long or an utterance which definitely gets lost in its own confusion.

Asking a student to listen to his neighbor is to in return guarantee him that he will also be listened to. What is more, let us not forget that if the teacher can still follow his train of thought when he is interrupted by a student, the student will have a harder time keeping his concentration if someone else is speaking. This is all the more the case with the timid or disorganized student. Besides, in order to assure a greater listening as well as the manifestation of this listening it is preferable to ask the students not to raise their hands while a friend is speaking: this is equivalent to asking him to hurry up or to shut up. In any case, we do not listen better with our arms in the air ...

Third: making the students get used to articulating their own thoughts, to perceive their limits and thereby becoming aware of their difficulties. In this respect, the common practice for teachers, which consists in consistently finishing a student's sentences themselves or reformulating their comments in an abusive manner, is potentially harmful. Of course, it is not always possible, depending on the context, to take the time to let everyone express themselves, to the point that the natural reflex becomes to speak for the student, instead of the student, but we can easily see the limits of this type of behavior. It is therefore important to set aside certain moments of class life for this "waste of time", moments which we call philosophical discussions because we give the student time to think his own thoughts, including failures, mistakes and incomprehension, because that is the reality of his thinking, a reality it would be inappropriate to erase. Especially since the student gets used to this artificial and unrequested help, out of convenience. This in no way prevents the teacher, as we will see later, from actively helping a student by proposing ideas he cannot articulate, but it is preferable if other students play this role.

Fourth, the interest of this hand-rising ritual concerns the student's capacity to distance himself from himself, to shift in time, not to be impulsive or automatic. Very often, the student who lets out his words as soon as he "feels" the urge does not take time to construct his speech and often does not remember what he has just said: it will be enough to ask him to repeat himself in order to see it. Unless it is because he does not dare, out of fear, out of timidity, to take up this speech again in the ears of everyone. Repeating ourselves often comes at a price because

the doubt and the shame naturally impose themselves on us. Who has never had the experience of the student who shouts ideas in the clamor of the classroom, ideas he does not dare repeat once everyone listens attentively to what he has to say.

Which brings us to the fifth point: the singularization of speech. Dare to speak in a singular way as an individual addressing his peers, to the whole of the “city”, with all the dimensions of the risk taking this implies. This is a practice which is not natural for everyone and which requires some work, some experience which the teacher has to foster. Through forms, it is nothing less than learning to assume an explicit and articulated singularity, to assume the temporary power it represents by taking the risk of listening, of the look of others and the image of ourselves it casts back at us. It is to take the risk of existing openly and wholly to the world.

The easiest way of asking permission to speak is the commonly used one of raising a hand or a finger. But there are other techniques of inviting the student to distance himself from his own words, to teach him to hold on and to wait, to postpone his gesture and await an opportune occasion, to shape his idea as best as possible before voicing it, to get out of the immediate and to decenter himself in order to take the whole group into account while separating from it. A talking stick can be used, or even a microphone which circulates in the group, and no one can speak who does not have it. Or the one who has just spoken can invite someone else to speak by giving his name. What is important, as we have said, is to restore the meaning of the gesture, as a means of establishing a relationship with the community, to return its symbolic value, and extracting the rule from the gangue reduced by simple authority, in order to make it fully play its educative role.

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## Staying on One Idea

This rule – on the cognitive level undoubtedly one of the most fundamental – requires constantly looking at a given issue, to stay and to concentrate on a precise idea in order to discuss it, to deepen it, to analyze it, so as to illustrate and problematize it. Key to any intellectual exercise, both its Ariadne’s thread and its substance, the issue as an object of reflection must constantly be present in everyone’s mind. This is not always obvious insofar as any discussion, any reflection, will draw our gaze towards byways, associative connections – digressions more or less legitimate and useful – or even towards issues of metareflection, which it is a matter of evaluating without abandoning the main subject. This task is all the more difficult since our discussion exercises are carried out with multiple and overlapping voices; a multiplicity and overlapping whose interlacing gives rise to innumerable occasions to drift away and get lost in parallel tracks, bushy paths and dead-ends without return. Listening to others, although we recommend it or enforce it as a



rule, constantly tempts us to forget about the subject to be dealt with and makes us react and pick up on the various speeches we hear. To characterize the general problem posed here as a thought, let us again take the idea of Plato, which instructs us to simultaneously grasp the whole and the part; each particular idea taken individually can trap thinking in an inadequate partiality. Following a subject therefore implies sometimes contradictory actions and functions. Let us look at some of them before seeing later to what extent this conflicting diversity plays a role in the construction of thinking.

First of all it is about being able to contemplate an idea before trying to find its use, and especially before asking whether we agree with it or not. This last reaction in particular, often similar to a simple reflex, embodies the first obstacle to understanding many speeches and texts. Since assuming this position, or reaction, in general precedes the operative speed of comprehension, the latter is often distorted by the former. Therefore, following a subject is first and foremost, according to the Cartesian injunction, to suspend our judgment, momentarily withholding our approval or refusal, keeping subjectivity away, in order to welcome the idea with a relatively open mind. It is a question of inviting the participants to first of all avoid any declaration such as “I agree with this sentence” or “This idea is wrong” or “I do not like this idea”. Because it is above all about weighing up the idea, examining it, understanding it.

If it is a question, it is crucial to initially assessing it as a question, without parasitizing it with an automatic answer. Let us beware of this reflex which, like any other thinking reflex, connects two concepts or ideas, displaces them or grafts them on to each other, or even lets them overlap, without taking the time to perceive them separately and observe what they contain within themselves. To answer a question is to reduce it to almost nothing, to remove its interrogative potential, to fix its meaning on a single outcome, more than considering the extent of the problem at hand and the interrogative potential of this question. Since a question by definition poses a problem, since it is a problem, why not invite the participant to contemplate the problem, for himself? An aesthetic moment, like in a museum, where we allow ourselves to be challenged by a piece instead of rushing off to the next one, instead of looking at our watch and wondering what more there is to see before we can leave.

It is not that it is forbidden to answer a question, quite the contrary, and, as we will see later, any more than it is forbidden to object to or agree with an idea. It is only that to us it seems useful to artificially break down the movement in order to seize the moments and to free them from their enchaining, compulsive and systematic character. The competencies needed for such an exercise are diverse and since this is a game, let us justify this formal requirement by explaining that its

dynamics set in and are structured at times when actions, roles and functions differ. Most sports therefore involve various strategies and training partly consists in working separately on the skills, subtleties and techniques which are tied to them.

We are advised to take the time, to contemplate ideas; the ideas being both the object and the aim of our exercise. Let us not forget that at a certain time, before the reign of utility and subjectivity was established, it was highly recommended, in ancient Greece for example, to contemplate ideas, in particular those which seemed to be worth the effort, precisely those which construct the architecture of thought itself, for example the “grand” concepts, the transcendental ones, such as the true, the beautiful and the good. Transcendental concepts, as Kant explains, refer to that which conditions and allows thinking to be constituted.

But the rule which requires contemplating ideas is difficult to implement. Because if the minds of the students are somewhat rebellious to this slowing down the movement of the mind, what about the teacher? Can he manage to do it himself? Is he not used to moving the discussion forward at all costs? For the sake of efficiency. For fear of boring or frustrating the students. For insecurity about the value of the ideas in question, because he expects specific ideas which alone interest him. For phobia of the void. For simple impatience or a way of being. Resting the thought, breathing, interrupting the ongoing process, artificially installing gaps in the discussion: so many ordinary and understandable obstacles which restrain the teacher. Still, when we think of all these children and adults who live in the feverishness of the world, in the permanent jumping from one thing to the next and the anxiety of saving time – if we do not learn at school to take the time to think, to give value to ideas in themselves, when and by what happy or miraculous accident will we learn this?

In a more active way, staying on an idea is to explain it without added comments, to reformulate it, to ask to recall it by formulating it, to repeat it like a mantra in order to let it penetrate the mind. If a participant wants to question or object to an idea, first ask him to repeat the idea which he wants to work on. If a participant wants to answer a question, ask him to repeat the question he claims he has an answer to. Especially when he has already answered and when we see by his response that, quite visibly, he hardly remembers the question. If a listener thinks that he has understood his friend’s idea, ask him to check what he understands with the author of the idea even if the latter does not know if he expressed himself poorly or if nobody listened to him. In other words, before going any further, check if the starting or anchor point is clear and present. These simple requests are often an exercise in themselves, which makes everyone become conscious of the bad habits we keep in our thinking hygiene: we want to say something but we do not know what we are talking about or what we are responding to.

Let us not forget, however, that if the game consists in staying on an idea to take the time to appraise it, it is also a movement since it invites the participants to go through different steps. And it is the capacity to follow these steps, to meet certain requirements and know how to change roles, a role which then is put to the test.

## Reclaiming the Problem

We have already brought up the concept of the problem, but it seems to us that we should revive it as a principle in itself, constitutive of the philosophical exercise. It is about reclaiming the problem, to consider it as an integral part of teaching and of learning, more than an impediment, a regrettable obstacle that should be eliminated at all costs, if not to hide it. The difficulty lies in the bad press the problem itself attracts: the problem as a problem. “There are no problems”, the teacher says with words, with actions, with silences. He has his own conscience. For the student there is another one. Sometimes the worst of problems: when the student does not understand and does not even know how to express the nature of the problem. If he knew, the problem would already begin to disappear. For now he only feels pain and says “I don’t like this subject”, unless he says “I don’t like this teacher”. A reflex which could not be more appropriate, a defense of the territorial integrity of being: the other inflicts pain, so it is normal that he is seen as an enemy. The less the student is capable of expressing the problem, the greater the pain, the stronger the reaction, whether through confrontation or absence.

Faced with this, what use is there of talking? In any dialogue, talking is above all to problematize, to change perspectives. To problematize is not only to invent a problem, it is also to articulate a problem already present; an articulation which does not necessarily solve the problem, but at least identifies and deals with it. A problem does not necessarily have to be solved, although it can be. A problem must above all be observed, seen, handled, must become substantial. As a practice, the painting is always a problem for the painter, like mathematics for a mathematician, like philosophy for a philosopher. The most catastrophic misconception is the one which suggests that it is not, which suggests that the teacher is a magician, in the traditional meaning of the term, who has special powers, rather than showing that he is an illusionist, someone who simply knows how to pull the strings because he sees how they intertwine and are organized.

But in order to do this, we must above all reclaim the concept of the problem. “It is not a problem!”, “I don’t have a problem!”. Pride or concern for peace forces us to deny the very idea of a problem. The problem is what prevents us from acting, it is an obstacle, a brake, a speed reducer. But what if its substance and its interest were to be found precisely in this apparently perverse effect? Because are we not always

tempted to reduce a subject and its learning to a set of data, to a few various operations, to as many quantifiable, verifiable and assessable pedagogical elements? Nevertheless, what about the spirit, among other things that of the matter which is taught? Of course, the spirit is filtered through the different activities proposed, but why should we abandon it to its sad fate, that of an aleatory, accidental and secondary factor, which is hardly a concern in itself? All the more since this intuitive understanding of the subject matter is not given to all students. If some are prepared to receive it for reasons and circumstances which are hardly within the domain of the teacher, others, who stumble over the strangeness of the way, just about enter into its field of action. For that to happen, the subject matter again has to remain a problem for the teacher himself and not neatly stored knowledge, classified as some household items. An arrangement which the struggling student would disarrange.

The difficulties of the student serve a very specific purpose: to rethink the matter being taught, its nature, its efficiency, its truth and its interest. If all this is self-evident, the difficulties become a simple impediment we have to get rid of as soon as possible in order to move forward. The syllabus then becomes the alibi par excellence, the refuge of fear and insecurity. We have all these things to learn, how would we have time to work on the spirit? The spirit of the subject we study and the spirit of the thinking subject. We have to focus on the matter. We too quickly forget the lesson of the Ancients and we find ourselves with a soulless matter, reduced to learning and performance. Useful of course, but so simplistic.

And so it is first of all a question of being able to say: "I have a difficulty", "I have a problem with this specific task", which can also be articulated as "I don't know", "I cannot answer", or simply "I don't understand". These words, which by their relative absence of content or response may appear to signify nothing or bring nothing to the discussion, this simple admission of a difficulty, which can be likened to a loophole or a ritual form of politeness or something similar, carry rather profound implications. Already, these words candidly present the existence of the problem, which opens the door to what will follow. By recognizing the productive status inbedded in this, we extract the problem from its gangue of culpability and bad conscience which in general forbids those who suffer from the impenetrability of some knowledge or practice from speaking. Instead, this "painful" acknowledgment now becomes an instrument of reflection, since the problem of one becomes the problem of everyone. Firstly for a good reason: it is mentioned. Secondly, because it may very well be that this singular problem is shared by others who, for their part, were not aware of it or could not admit or recognize it. But there is also the problem of those who think they have no difficulty with the problem at hand, and who will have to publicly check their capacity of dealing with it. Because once the problem

of one becomes the problem of everyone, each person is invited to deal with it by an apparently harmless sentence pronounced by the author of the problem: “I don’t understand and I want help”. From there, those who think they are capable of articulating or dealing with the problem will explain it, in turn or by some selection procedure, until whoever expressed a difficulty is satisfied, or by concluding after a few fruitless attempts that temporarily a resolution is impossible.

This process is indeed slow, which obliges us to remain on a specific and reduced aspect of the road, perhaps even a related aspect, but there is no question of pretending, of going ahead as if nothing has happened, despite the “lack of time”. And if we in the slightest accept the idea that the problem to be dealt with prevents the procedure from “moving on”, in other words implying that there is something better to do, then all the work on reclaiming the problem and the confession of ignorance will be reduced to nothing. This does not mean that we should get stuck with one single difficulty during an entire session either; a “safe-guarding” procedure, such as the one which proposes to limit any attempt to solve a problem to three consecutive trials, allows us to pull out from a tricky business without having ignored it.

In that respect there would not be, on the one hand, the problems worthy of the name, nicely intellectualized, baptized with the pompous name of “problematic”, and on the other hand the “beastly” problems, which arise from lack, from ignorance and from misunderstanding. Such a distinction would encourage the denial of the real, profound and existential dimension of the problem – shameful – to only express the problems resulting from the rantings of sophisticated minds. The teacher himself would not dare have any more problems, even undisclosed ones, and why should he then throw himself into risky proceedings where he can neither predict the traps nor the outcome of the exercise? An exercise like that of common reflection, taken in all its rigor, imposes a certain minimal humility on everyone, and in any case an ability of openly admitting difficulties and errors, a refusal of omnipotence, and an acceptance of the dependence on others. This way ideas may live.

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## Articulating Choices

As we have partially explained, the workshop starts off with a risk taking, on the part of the student and on the part of the facilitator, a risk taking of choice and of judgment which continues throughout the exercise. By reflecting on his choices, by articulating them, while knowing that he has to argue them, even justify them, in order to deepen their content and verify their subject matter, the student takes a risk which should not be underestimated. From time to time, some will not make

it. A risk of saying what he thinks, a risk of speaking in front of his classmates, a risk of speaking in front of his teacher, a risk of not being able to justify his choice, a fear of “doing wrong”, etc. For the teacher, the risk taking is to hear choices and arguments which to him may sound absurd, disturbing or even false without showing disapproval or concern, while continuing the process of questioning, with this student or another. Some teachers also admit their impatience with this kind of situation, revealing a certain anxiety: they prefer to “correct”.

Usually the workshop begins with a question. A question which provokes thinking, judging, not relying so much on specific knowledge which would allow some authority to judge the answer as being good or bad, right or wrong. It is about producing a thought, and not to come up with a true or a correct answer: we only ask for clarity and relevance. A requirement which might surprise the student who is not used to this type of request. Because if the requirement for truth is not there, there are others which are no less demanding. Does the answer answer the question? Does it avoid answering? Does it answer another question? Is the answer clear? Is it to a minimum justified by an argument? Already it is a matter of necessarily producing a sentence, more than expressing a simple approval or articulating a single word. It is a matter of constructing a thought and not of checking if a lesson is learned.

The uncertainty which appears in the absence of immediate and guaranteed validation often bothers the most “academic” students. They will have the impression of being handed over to nothingness. They will ask and ask again what they should do, incredulous, having a hard time believing that we are only asking them to think, without expecting any specific answers, validated in advance. When it is a class discussion, these industrious and diligent students will feel abandoned by the teacher, a betrayal depriving them of a reassuring presence, the habitual and comforting guarantee of a qualified judgment. Even the “dunces” will feel uneasy with this type of procedure, which also removes them from their specific status, voluntary or not, into which they have settled. Because each student measures himself against the judgment of the whole class, an unstable and unexpected judgment, unpredictable and unsettling, which they are asked to confront. A confrontation far more perilous than the almost incontestable authority of the teacher, even if the speech appears more freer and spontaneous. So what might seem to be too easy instead turns out to be difficult, for some very difficult.

However, as we have already said, in order to dedramatize the risk taking among the students, the exercise is often presented as a game, like any other, and the playful aspect must be recalled regularly, alternating with the more serious moments. For children who find it difficult to express their opinion it is a matter of being patient, of turning to them from time to time in order for them not to feel excluded,

even though they do not manage to verbalize a lot, or even very little, and to reassure the timid ones by suggesting that they speak later if they feel stuck. The teacher must therefore ensure that everyone can express themselves to a minimum by making sure that the more loquacious ones do not overwhelm the others, which is a recurring danger in any discussion. All the more so since those for whom oral production is more painstaking are not necessarily the least interesting and the least profound.

Answering knowledge questions presupposes a specific learning process: a lesson learned, elements of information stored. To articulate a thought involves the whole being. It is in this sense the discourse no longer refers to simple issues of theoretic and formal knowledge, but instead to a know-how, to the capability to determine an existential position. Because it is the entire thinking which is convoked when it is a question of making a choice. Hence the interest in risking to articulate a choice, conceived as the inaugural act of thinking. It then remains to justify the initial proposition by mobilizing the acquired knowledge, by elaborating the possible arguments and reasonings, by trying to respond to questions and objections at a second stage. Even if it means going back to the initial judgment, an absolutely fundamental decision, because it manifests a certain freedom of thinking and an honest and courageous relation to others, as well as what we may call a quest or a care for truth.

The last important point about judgment: it corresponds to an existential reality since knowledge is generally that which allows us to make choices, day after day. Such a practice of thinking therefore makes it possible to restore the useful reality of teaching, since it no longer only refers to the class, to good and bad grades and the predictable succession of years, but to that which constitutes the relation between a subject and the world around him, the world which he inhabits. It is therefore a matter of working closely on the schizophrenic tendency of double life, of double language, between the school and the street, between the books and the house, between the classroom and the playground, a hiatus which enormously weakens – when it does not outright undermine – the work of the teacher and the educational process in which the child is supposed to participate. Consequently, during the philosophical exercise, the student will be expected to make choices to answer questions, to analyze his own choices and those of his classmates, to justify these choices, to determine the degree of validity of the arguments provided, and even to make judgments on the behavior that governs the speeches, the reactions and the responses of each one. So many crucial decisions which have to be slowly constructed and considered, because not only are they linked to everyday operations, they make its substance and its crucible. And if it is a matter of reflecting, discussing and working more directly on the specific school subject, the adoption

of this subject will be made easier since the student will be invited to implement it, to make it operational, to take a position in relation to it, a practice which prohibits a kind of formal exteriority to the class work. Therefore no one can confine himself to an outside position, since the rule of the game sets as a preliminary that we put ourselves in relation to the subject that is studied. Life is restored to the subject, the subject is restored to life.

## Questioning, Arguing, Deepening

If there is a fundamental principle which we should inculcate in our business, it is the reflex of questioning, questioning the other and questioning ourselves, questioning everything that is uttered. Now, there is a privileged access to questioning: the “why?”, a dynamic and catalyzing element, founder of thinking and of discourse, which brings substance to thinking and to discourse, by demanding that they support and deepen themselves. The “why?”, which is echoed by a “because”, responds to several types of requests: “What makes us say that?”, “By what right do we say that?”, “How do we explain this?”, “Why do we say this?”, “What does this saying mean?”, “What does this saying imply?”. They question both the meaning of the words, the *raison d'être* of their object, the legitimacy of their author, and so on. This multifaceted process, triggered by a powerful interrogative adverb, is an invitation to extract the discourses from its plain and immediate evidence, in order to unravel its mysteries, to illuminate its origin, to sense its implications and consequences. A “magic word” we call it when we speak to the youngest children, in order to let them glimpse the power and the countless possibilities of questioning contained within this “why?”. If there is a term which shows the power of words it is this one, which, when thrown at an interlocutor, often leaves him embarrassed whereas the author of the speech only has to account for a minimum of his own words.

The students get the significance of the “why?” because once they are introduced to this term, when they have to ask a question they rush to use it repeatedly, if not carelessly, as an easy option: “Why did you say that?”. If “How much?”, “When?”, “How?”, “Where?”, “Who?”, “What?”, “Which?” or “Is it?” requires an understanding of the specific circumstances and a formulation of a suitable sentence to be understood, the “Why?” can always be put in a simple way, without any great strain of the imagination – to the point that it will sometimes be useful to temporarily suspend its application, when an abusive systemization seems to hinder the progress of work. Because if the question is easy to ask, it is all the more difficult to answer; besides, those who ask questions must also do some real work, allowing new ideas to emerge by posing specific problems to the interlocutor, and not by finding



a “trick” which can be used in any instant.

The questioning therefore demands that the student justifies his comments, provides arguments, proofs, reasons – so many new propositions which should on principle support the initial propositions and deepen the content. From this perspective, a certain number of classical arguments are held in check which, if not openly pronounced, still act as law, especially in the classroom: the argument from authority, for example. Because in the philosophical exercise it is no longer a question of referring to the teacher, to parents or to any book to establish the value of an idea. Not that these “primary” sources of knowledge are automatically invalidated, far from it – anyway it would be difficult and futile to claim to escape them – but they find their only place in the framework of an intellectual construction, that is to say in a layout of propositions established by the student. In this sense, the latter becomes the author of his own discourse, even if the impression of a certain influence can be obviously felt.

The process in which each participant is engaged through this questioning is called, in Plato, the anagogical principle. It is a matter of tracing the origin of a particular thought upstream in order to verify its content, because it is in this origin we can find the true meaning of an idea, and not in its apparent evidence. Besides, the process of going into the being of the idea restores the vigor of the thought, which allows it to move from the stage of opinion to that of idea. Indeed, the distinction between opinion and idea is nothing more than the work which generates and surrounds it. The same proposition can therefore be considered an opinion or an idea according to the type of reading or analysis that is used, according to the degree of intensity of the interpretation. Finally, this investigation of the causality of an idea over time provides us with a number of adjacent ideas, correlates of the initial idea, which clarify the latter. Certain contradictions or incoherences emerge, which offer themselves to study and criticism. Thereby this confrontation between the different perspectives becomes an occasion, through an effort of coherence which we can liken to a concern for truth, to identify and to rework various postulates which until then lie unconscious in the mind of the author. Confronted with a multiplicity of propositions, the intellect has to discover their founding and causal unity, or at least understand their contradictions.

So the work which initially consists in providing arguments to respond to questions about the justification of an initial proposition quickly becomes a work of deepening. The argumentation can practically be reduced to a simple pretext, that of an exploration or a more detailed examination. This allows us to evaluate the legitimacy of an idea not by an a priori established canon, or by belonging to an official text, but due to its relation to a specific idea maintains with its intellectual environment. But to realize such a project it is necessary to learn how to ask ques-

tions, an exercise which is an art in itself. Because if certain striking questions help the work and bring about a deepening, others on the contrary find the door closed or in no way invite the production of concepts.

The work on questioning oscillates between two perils. On the one hand the question which looks like a lesson, difficult to understand, with a long preamble which often already contains the expected answers: those which leave the interlocutor on the wayside, either by incomprehension or because he senses that nothing is expected from him other than agreement. On the other hand vague questions which do not ask for anything specific: the “Tell me more” or “Can you expand on that?”; not very inspiring and which demand nothing. On this aspect of the work, even more than on other aspects, the teacher will learn from the students, that is to say from multiplicity, because it is difficult to predict which kinds of questions will work better than others in a particular case: it is only through experience, “on the job”, that this practice will improve. Because if it is more easily possible for the teacher to see a blind spot or a contradiction in a given word this does not mean that he will find the words which will hit home with his interlocutor, making him become aware of the internal problem which broods in his speech. This is why the whole class is invited to think about the statements of an “author”, because each one must realize that it is not so much about giving “his” answer which represents the real work, as to ask appropriate questions. Especially since a real question requires not putting forth our own ideas, which implies a double work: becoming aware of the ideas we convey and managing to silence our own concepts and convictions, putting them aside to address someone in order to know what he is thinking without trying to transmit the “right thought” or inferring some content. Internal criticism, Hegel tells us, examines a thesis from the inside, to be distinguished from external criticism, which consists in putting forward arguments and concepts as objections. To question is to give birth, which means that the ideas must emerge in the one who is questioned and not be provided as a turnkey product by the questioner. To question is to create a breathing gap, and not to plug a hole.

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## The Singularity of the Discourse

The singularity of the discourse presupposes a kind of originality which constitutes its specificity. However, we could hardly say that everything we hear in a class discussion is characterized by such originality. As well, without excluding the sometimes unexpected side of some of the least surprising responses, we propose the hypothesis that the first form of singularity is rather that of engagement. Engaging in an idea, taking the options on an idea, is to make it singular, or personal, through the phenomenon of appropriation. Therefore, the student will regularly

have to take sides during the exercise, by producing an idea or by relating to the ideas of others. Not only whether he is agreeing or not, but also on the very nature of the speech on offer, his own or that of another: its coherence, its logic or its accuracy. A bias, which, as we have seen, should as far as possible be able to be explained, argued, justified, etc.

The idea of determining our stand in relation to a given question, whatever its degree of abstraction, implies an act of reflection, an awareness, which requires an effort from the students, from some more than from others. Because it becomes necessary to consciously ask the question of personal choice, which in the early grades is not necessarily a given. For this act to take place, it is primarily a matter of not falling into a first trap: the reflex of repetition, very common in these ages. To say the same thing as everyone else, be they students or the teacher, is a temptation and the easiest solution, the fusional reflex so common in children. To become one with the group, because it is less scary, because we feel less alone or because we have to do like the others. To become one with the teacher, because he is an adult, because he is the one who knows, because he must be right. Later on, this will be transformed into a fear of error, which is the “first error” according to Hegel.

For this reason, during our exercise, it is crucial that the teacher neither shows agreement or disagreement, at the very least on the content, and even on the form, which will in no way prevent him from coming back at other times to a problem that he thinks he has to deal with himself. As regards the relationship between peers, in order to ensure that there is no mechanical repetition, one of the rules of the game is to forbid repetition of what someone else, or even oneself, has already said, at the risk of a symbolic “rejection” or momentary suppression. We sometimes observe that students propose different formulations of the same answer in order to resume an idea already expressed without being penalized by the rule of the game which prohibits repetition, something which in itself is an interesting mechanism. Because it will be a matter for everyone to ask whether this “new” answer is identical or not to the previous one, or if it produced some conceptual novelty. The teacher can at any time ask the class: “Has anyone already said that?”. And for the proposition to be refused, to begin with at least one student must see that it is an answer which is identical to someone else’s: he must explain how these answers are similar and preferably name the author of the initial answer. In case of doubt or dissension, the facilitator can suggest a discussion and call for a vote on the question, a vote during which everyone will have to settle the dispute. Not repeating. Making sure that the answer answers the question. Deciding whether the question is a question, if it is related to the subject it is supposed to answer. Identifying inconsistencies in a proposition. Various rules among others, so many

different requirements which invite everyone to mediate the discussion and to use their judgment. Such an operation has the following advantage: it forces everyone to listen and to remember what the others are saying, since at any moment the student can be called upon to assess the legitimacy of what has been said. Any analysis, any particular or personal reading of the ideas that are raised can influence the discussion one way or another, since speeches are developed in reciprocity and are not impermeable to each other: they validate or invalidate each other, they deepen or problematize among themselves. Which brings us to another aspect of singularization: the principle of responsibility, underlying the exercise.

Any discussion certainly implies some sense of responsibility, if only for the ideas we utter ourselves. But to the extent that we prohibit jumping from subject to subject – where we prevent going from one idea to another following individual inspirations without establishing a link, since the whole group stays on a given idea before moving on to another in order to work on it – everyone becomes implicitly responsible for the ideas of the others. Whether by questioning it, in order to make it say what it has yet said, by making formal judgments on her, or by causing key problems, we assume a big responsibility vis-à-vis the author of the idea as well as the whole class. The fact of decentralizing oneself in order to deal primarily with the ideas of one's neighbor paradoxically offers an increased degree of singularization through the taking of responsibility. To distance oneself from oneself signifies in fact to become responsible, since we are more than ever listening to others, since we respond to others. Nevertheless, we perceive a fracture within this responsibility: the tension between oneself and other people, between the singular and the collective.

Another crucial aspect of the unique nature of the idea: the justification or the explanation. Because if a given idea may have a common and obvious sense, even an apparently objective meaning, it can also find a very particular content in the mind and the words of its author or interpreter. As incongruous as the latter may be, there is no question of simply dismissing it with a wave of the hand. All the more so since some apparently absurd proposals, or those that come with strange twists and turns, will really take shape unexpectedly after some explanation or modification is made. Specific words will also experience such a drift, used in strange senses, when they do not, on occasion, settle completely in opposition to their traditional definition. In these various cases, whether it be paralogism, incomprehension or inadequacy, the role of the teacher is not to “correct” words that are not his, but to trust the author and the group, even if it means drawing everyone's attention and asking for their opinion on one particular thing or another, while avoiding, of course, to project some “good” masterminded thought. He will trust the group, and he will find that a good number of “missed targets” will correct themselves: a much

more gratifying, pedagogical and coherent procedure than if he had corrected them himself, although a much slower one.

Moreover, no one will be able to in any way modify the proposal of another participant without his agreement. Already, because any proposal or idea entered on the board is signed, which instantly singularizes thought. The “we” does not have citizenship here. Any suggestion of modification or explanation by a classmate must therefore be accepted by the author in order to come up on the board. But the group can collectively penalize a proposal which they think is inadequate via a majority vote: for example a proposal which is irrelevant, contradictory or confused. Besides, this is the only role bestowed on the group as a group: to act as jury, in order to approve or sanction a hypothesis or an analysis, since the facilitator does not have this right. It will however be useful to specify that this adjudicatory function is purely pragmatic, explaining that the group can be quite wrong, since one person can be right against all the rest. But let us admit that in class, in general, the group remains relatively pertinent in its judgments, at least sufficiently enough to be used as a referent, if only for practical reasons. Let us still remain open to significant changes to the situation, and for that reason it is advisable to cross out the rejected proposals rather than erasing them.

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## The Substantial Link

We adopt this expression of Leibniz, because it specifies for us precisely what distinguishes the “ordinary” discussion from the philosophical one. For this author, the reality or substance of things does not reside so much in their distinct being as in their relationship to what they are not. What distinguishes an entity rather involves definition, a relatively static analysis of a fixed and isolated object, while seizing an entity in its relation to one or several others calls for problematization, a livelier and more dynamic intellectual posture. Not that the definition is excluded, but because it is subordinated to a set of situations whose moving character modifies and works intensely on the meaning which can no longer be defined a priori. The work on thinking consists therefore in testing the resistance of an idea or a concept by rubbing them against that which initially seems foreign to them, thereby revealing the constitutive limits of their being. To be consistent with ourselves we propose the principle that the relation between the “ordinary” and the “philosophical” discussion consists precisely in the explanation of the relation, a constitutive and determining relation, because the explanation of the relation changes by illuminating and thus modifying the very elements of the relation.

To be more concrete and apparent, let us take as an example the first stage of this relation which we integrate into our practice: the reformulation, used as a veri-

fication tool for listening. How could we claim to be leading any kind of discussion, let alone a philosophical discussion, if the interlocutors hardly listen to each other? All the more so since one of the characteristics of the philosophical exchange consists in the contiguity and the rapprochement between the arguments in order to bring out the essential elements of the architectonics. “Take off your shirt and join the brawl!” Plato commands. Not a fight to see who will win, but to test the ideas and the relationships they have in and among themselves. We can never dispute the presence or the existence of words, only their use and their function, that is to say the occasional link they maintain with other words, and the purpose to which they are theoretically subject.

The reformulation, which refers to the agreement between the present parties concerning the object of their discussion or the nature of their differences, a condition of a real discussion, therefore seems to represent the first stage of the “link” which we are trying to establish as a principle. A link which is both intellectual, as we have just defined it, and psychological: establishing a minimum of empathy with the interlocutor. Indeed, reformulating carefully, by seeking the agreement of our partner on the summary of his proposal, requires not to interpret in a reductionist way, to prevent caricature, and above all compels us to clearly distinguish between the arguments perceived and the various nuances, corrections or objections which arise and which we are about to proceed with in reaction to what we have heard. As for the one who hears his words reformulated, such an exercise forces him to hear what his listener has heard, an experience which is not obvious in itself because hearing our own ideas or words expressed by a mouth other than our own can be a rather painful experience. If only because it makes us reconsider our words in a more distant way, with all the critical dimensions inferred by this duplication. We often feel some irritation towards anyone who acts as a mirror, thereby increasing our anxiety. On the other hand, our listener is not a recording machine: he translates in his own words, he summarizes as well as he can. We must then know how to distinguish the essential from the incidental, to mourn the “scope” of our thinking and everything we would like to say or add, to be able to admit that these strange words correspond well to ours. Such a judgment, which must assess the adequacy between two formulations, is delicate: without some freedom of thought accompanied by rigor it becomes impossible. However, if we play the game, the reformulation will allow us to better get a sense of what our ideas contain, to perceive their weaknesses and limitations.

The substantial link, as we can already see, is also the unity of a discourse, a transcendent unity, not necessarily expressed, which contains the content in a condensed way, the abbreviation or the intention of our thought, a reduced proposition whose form and substance often escape us. Once formulated, this underlying

unity can even surprise or irritate us. It is the unifying or generating principle of our examples, the antecedent cause of the famous “it is like when ...”, so popular among both children and adults. The explicit establishment of this link requires keywords, or concepts, chosen terms which make the discourse operative by extracting the essence of the meaning. To do this it is necessary to work on the art of brevity. Therefore a speaker may be asked to make a simple proposition, a single sentence which he thinks captures the essentials of what he was trying to say through a multitude of sentences, the confusion of which often obscures the meaning rather than manifests it. It is this sentence which goes on the board, which serves as exclusive witness to a given idea. However, let us not be surprised if a student fails to meet this challenge, and if he has to ask his classmates to help him accomplish his task. At times it will be necessary to change some crucial aspects of the initial speech in order to achieve this: from the moment our discourse becomes explicit, we often find ourselves forced to modify its wording.

The substantial link is therefore the unity of a discourse, but it is also the unity of two or more discourses: the condition for the possibility of dialogue. Of course, insofar as speeches are of different origins we can assume that they have a contradictory or conflicting dimension. Contrary to a single speech which is subject to a care for coherence, the multiplicity of authors in no way requires any consensus. Nevertheless, the demand of the discussion still implicates a unity: that of the object. It is therefore first of all a matter of identifying, despite the different forms of expression, the angles of attack of the statement or the diversity of perspectives, some community of meaning without which we find ourselves sunk into absurdity, solipsism and the dialogue of the deaf. At the same time as this community of object, and thanks to it, we discover the conceptual differences, accompanied by the worldviews which underlie them, differences which allow us to assess and pronounce the stakes of the discussion. “Dialectic of the same and the other” Plato suggests: how is the object of the discussion same and different? The simple sentence, a single proposition which always seems so necessary to us, will naturally take the form of a problem. A proposition which raises a problem in the form of a question, a contradiction or a paradox. Here we find the same demand: the art of brevity. But often, in order to put two propositions against each other, we must discover one or more antinomies whose terms are not expressed consciously in the initial propositions. In the same way that we had to excavate a single discourse to grasp its meaning and intention, producing new concepts and a simple proposition, some deepening work has to be done in order to capture and to clearly show what is the opposition between two discourses. Surprisingly, we will from time to time discover that propositions which are thought to be contradictory are hardly that, are instead carelessly paraphrased, arguing exclusively on some se-

mantic point or some other subtlety of little substance, while those who claim to “go in the same direction” preserve an illusion of integration devoid of any justification.

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## To Think about Thinking

In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant distinguishes two types of concepts: empirical concepts, derived from experience, and pure concepts, products derived from reason. So the concept of “man” largely springs from experience, but that of “contradiction” is generated by reason. Because if I can perceive with the sense organs of concrete human beings, I cannot perceive contradictions with those organs; this last concept only refers to an intelligible not a sensitive problem and therefore to a work of analysis and synthesis. It seems to us that the philosophical work must extend to the production of concepts, indeed empirical, but also pure concepts of reason. A process of abstraction we have already addressed. But we want to return to the production of pure concepts through which a thought conscious of itself and its functioning is formed. A thought which periodically can and must abstract itself from itself in order to engage in a process of metareflection.

The most apparent aspect of this process exists at an early stage on the intuitive level, what we will call logical intuition. Because if childhood is characterized by a magical vision of the world, a world where anything can happen without there being anything surprising about it, little by little the mind is initiated into “the order of things”. Through an associative process, prelude to the development of reason, objects, beings and phenomena are linked together. Various links are established, which slowly becomes the structuring of space, time, causality, logic, language, existence, with all the heaviness and rigidity this fixed vision of the world implies of course, but which will also prove to be the necessary condition for the emergence of reason. Reason consists in knowing or recognizing the reality of things, in understanding and therefore in predicting, because if nothing is foreseeable, if nothing is recognizable, our reason becomes obsolete. This explains our astonishment when an event exceeds the borders of our reason and its expectations. The transformation we are talking about is of a mind for which anything is possible, which little by little distinguishes the possible and the impossible as well as the compossible: what is possible in relation to a given condition, the very foundation of logical thinking. “If this, then that”, or “if on the one hand this and on the other this, then that”, the basis of classic syllogism.

The philosophical exercise, for instance through discussion, therefore consists in asking reason to perform a double work on itself. On the one hand to go “to the end” of its questions, its problems, its analyzes. On the other hand watching it-



self working, identifying the mechanisms, both those which operate and produce thinking and those which slow down, redirect or interrupt the thinking process. These two aspects of the work feed each other, since the perception of limits allows for an understanding of the precise nature of a process, and the identification of a process makes it possible to rework or surpass the limits. Therefore the work of metareflection allows thinking to advance. This is precisely the problem raised by the teachers who tell us “I don’t know what to answer the students” or “We are going around in circles, I don’t know how to move the discussion forward”: how to advance thinking. The solution is neither to provide ready-made answers which the students make a dash for, nor to simply propose a way for the group to “solve things”, but to invite everyone to observe their own functioning, their ideas, their contradictions, their slides of meaning, etc., simply by a few simple methodological rules which specify the role and the purpose of each moment of reflection.

The first aspect of this process is to be aware of the nature of our remarks, as of our actions, and for this to know how to categorize these remarks, how to name the form or the purpose of our speech. Are we about to ask a question, to propose a new idea, to respond to an objection or to make one, to justify or to prove an idea, to argue or to problematize, to give an example or to conceptualize, to report on facts or to interpret them? It is about emerging from “I want to say something ... It reminds me of ... I would like to add ...”, or the mere compulsive and recurring “Yes, but ...”. All the expressed wishes to “comment”, “qualify”, “complete”, “start over” or “specify” which, upon examination, do not mean much, are very vague or quite far from what they declare. The type of analysis we propose first of all refers to the intention of the speech which is to be identified, because for its author it is often experienced and perceived exclusively as an “impulse to speak”, something that comes to mind and demands to be released, as soon as possible, opinions which are mainly associative, and whose nature and role we do not know. An ignorance which explains a whole number of difficulties of articulation, stammering, deletion and contradiction. Becoming aware of what we want to say also means working on and smoothing out the speech according to an organizing purpose which enables us to structure our thinking better. Although during the first attempts, categorizing or defining appears to make our speech even more confused. Performing and watching ourselves perform, as a simultaneous act, can initially be seen and suffered as a separating factor, making our task heavier, but more or less quickly, as the capacity to be both “within” and “without” develops, this process eases the task of thinking and expressing by clarifying our understanding.

To speak is to think, Hegel tells us, claiming that it would be illusory to believe that we think without creating this thought by concepts. Intention, sensation, impression, intuition – all of them inadequate, insufficient and deceptive forms of

thinking, a thought not conscious of itself. Of course, this presupposition, like all presuppositions, knows its limits, but it also knows its usefulness. Knowing what we say is to say what we say, to declare our intention, to define the form, to articulate the relation to what is already said. However, as for the whole exercise it is not about working on vocabulary, on the terms “hypothesis”, “objection”, “abstract”, “essential” and so on, although this is not ruled out, at other times. To not know, but to know-how; to not have experience of, but to employ. Our business is above all to help the student train himself to think about his thinking, in other words to specify the nature of his speech. In a way, it is not important what words he uses, which ones will initially be his words, approximate and unusual, or which he will acquire during the practice, more precise or more conventional. What is important is primarily to break the seal of the immediacy which binds him to his words, to make a gap, to put breathing in place, to move from the implicit to the explicit, so that the student can detach from himself and his own thinking can become an object of reflection. Our opinions are truths, Pascal points out, as long as we hear what they express, and the truth of our opinions is not always where we think it is. Let us try to get closer to it.

The philosophical practice or philosophical consultation is an activity which is little known with the exception of the Netherlands, where it is more commonly practiced. The methods vary hugely depending on the practitioners who design and apply them. In this text, we will tackle the conceptions and methods used in the work we have carried out for several years in this field.

### Principles

#### Philosophical naturalism

For some years now, a new wind seems to be blowing across philosophy. In various forms, its steadfast goal is to try to drag philosophy out of its purely academic and scholarly setting, where the historical perspective remains the main conduit. Received and appreciated in different ways, this tendency embodies for some a necessary and vital oxygenation, for others a vulgar and banal betrayal, worthy of a mediocre age. Amongst these few philosophical “novelties”, the idea that philosophy is not restricted to erudition and discourse emerges, but that it is also a practice. Of course, this perspective is not really groundbreaking insofar as it represents a return to original concerns, to this quest for wisdom which coined the very term philosophy; although this dimension has been relatively concealed for several centuries by the “learned” aspect of philosophy.

However, despite the “déjà vu” side of the affair, the profound cultural, psychological, sociological and other changes which separate our age, for example, from classical Greece, radically alter the issue. Perennial philosophy is obliged to hold history to account, its immortality can hardly prevent the finiteness of the societies which formulate its problems and its issues. Therefore, philosophical practice – like philosophical doctrines – must develop articulations which correspond to its place and its time, according to the circumstances which generate this momentary matrix, even if at the end of the day it hardly seems possible to avoid, to exit or to surpass the limited number or core issues which since the dawn of time constitute the matrix of all philosophical reflection, whatever external form the articulations may take.

The philosophical naturalism that we evoke here is at the heart of the debate, as it criticizes the historical and geographical specificity of philosophy. It presupposes that the emergence of philosophy is not a particular event, but that its living substance resides in the heart of man and lines his soul, even if as with all science

or knowledge, certain moments and certain places seem more determining, more specific, more favorable, more crucial than others. As human beings we share a common world – despite the infinity of representations which exposes this unity to serious barrage – and a common condition or nature – again, despite the surrounding cultural and individual relativism – and we should be able to find, at least embryonically, some intellectual archetypes which constitute the structure of “historic” thought, or at least some of its elements. After all, since the strength of an idea lies in its operativity and universality, any key idea should be found in any of us. Is that not, expressed in other terms and perceived from another angle, the very idea of Platonic reminiscence? Philosophical practice then becomes the activity which can awaken anyone to the world of ideas which dwell within us, just like artistic practice awakens anyone to the forms we have inside, each according to his possibilities, even if we are not all of us Kants or Rembrandts.

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## The dual demand

Two particular and common prejudices have to be removed in order to better understand the approach which concerns us here. The first prejudice consists in believing that since the practice of philosophy – and thus the philosophical discussion – is reserved for an expert elite, it would be the same for the philosophical consultation. The second prejudice, contrary to the first – its natural complement – consists in thinking that since philosophy is indeed reserved for an expert elite, the philosophical consultation cannot be philosophical because it is open to everyone. These two prejudices express a single rift; it behooves us to simultaneously show that philosophical practice is open to everyone and that it implies a certain demand which distinguishes it from a mere conversation. What is more, we have to somewhat differentiate our activity from the psychological or psychoanalytic practice with which we cannot help but amalgamate.

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## The first steps

“Why are you here?” This opening question imposes itself as the first and most natural one, the one we should ask anyone, if not ourselves, over and over. It is unfortunate that any teacher in charge of an introductory course in philosophy does not start the academic year with this type of naive question. Through this simple exercise, the students who for years have been acclimatized to the school routine would immediately get this strange subject which questions even the most blatant evidence; the difficulty of really answering such a question, as well as the wide variety of possible answers, would promptly burst open the apparent banality of the

question. Of course, here we must not be content with pretenses of answers which are given out just to avoid thinking. During the consultations a good number of initial answers are of the type: “because I do not know much about philosophy”, “because philosophy interests me and I would like to know more”, or even “because I want to know what a philosopher – or philosophy – has to say about ...”. The questioning must continue without delay in order to reveal the concealed presuppositions behind these attempts at answers, not to say non-answers. This process will not fail to reveal certain ideas of the subject (the person engaged in the consultation) about philosophy or any other topic being discussed, putting him in a necessary position for this practice. Not that it is necessary to know “the foundation” of his thought, contrary to psychoanalysis, but because it is about risking a hypothesis in order to work on it.

This detachment is important for two reasons which touch on the basis of our work. The first is that the truth does not necessarily advance under the pretext of sincerity or a subjective “authenticity”; it can even be radically opposed to it, an opposition modeled on the principle that desire often hinders reason. From this point of view, it is not so important whether the subject adheres to the idea he brings up or not. “I am not sure of what I am saying (or am going to say)” we often hear. But of what would we like to be sure? Is not this uncertainty exactly what allows us to try out our idea when certainty would obstruct such a procedure? The second reason, close to the first one, is that establishing a detachment is necessary for a reflective and composed work, an indispensable condition for the conceptualization we want to bring about. These are two conditions which should in no way prevent the subject from risking specific ideas; on the contrary, he will do so more freely. The scientist will more easily discuss ideas on which he does not inextricably engage his ego, without prohibiting that one idea pleases him or suits him more than others.

“Why are you here?” This is also to ask what the problem is. “What is the question?”, that is, what necessarily motivates the meeting, even if this motivation is not clear to the subject or if he is not very conscious of it at first. It is therefore a question of performing a work of identification. Once the hypothesis is expressed and somewhat developed (directly or through questions) the questioner will propose a reformulation of what he has heard. In general the subject will initially express a certain refusal – or lukewarm response – to the proposed reformulation: “That is not what I said. That is not what I meant.” He will then be offered to analyze what he does not like about the reformulation or to correct his own speech. However, he must first specify whether the reformulation betrayed the speech by changing the nature of its content (which must be said to be possible, since the questioner is not perfect ...) or if it betrayed it by exposing what he did not dare to see and admit in his own speech. Here we see the huge stake that arises in the dialogue with the

other: to the extent that we accept the difficult exercise of “weighing” the words, the listener becomes a merciless mirror which harshly throws back our reflection. The emergence of an echo is always a risk of which scope we are all too ignorant.

When what has initially been expressed does not seem able to reformulate, by confusion or lack of clarity, the questioner can without hesitation ask the subject to repeat what he said or to express it differently. If the explanation is too long or becomes an excuse for letting off steam (the associative or uncontrollable type), the questioner should not hesitate to interrupt: “I am not sure where you are going with this. I do not quite understand the meaning of what you are saying.” He can then suggest the following exercise: “In one sentence, tell me what you think is essential in your speech. If you only had one sentence to tell me about it, what would it be?” The subject will not fail in showing his difficulty with the exercise, especially since he has just demonstrated his handicap in formulating a clear and concise speech. But it is in the recognition of this difficulty that the awareness which is connected to philosophizing also begins.

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## Anagogy and discrimination

Once the starting hypothesis has been clarified to a certain degree – on the nature of the philosophizing which brings the subject to the discussion or on another theme which preoccupies him – it is now time to start the process of anagogical ascent as described in the works of Plato. The essential elements are what we on the one hand will call the “origin” and on the other the “discrimination”. We will begin by asking the subject to account for his hypothesis by requiring that he justifies his choice, either by means of origin: “Why this formulation?”; “What would be the interest of such an idea?” or by means of discrimination: “Which is the most important of the items that are mentioned?” or even “Which is the key word of your sentence?”. This part of the discussion is carried out by combining both means in turn.

The subject will often try to escape this stage of the discussion by taking refuge in the relativism of circumstance or undifferentiated multiplicity. “It depends ... There are many reasons ... Every word or idea is important.” The fact of choosing, forcing a “vectorization” of the thought, first of all allows us to identify the attachments, the “refrains”, the constants, the presuppositions, in order to put them to the test. Because after several stages of ascent (origin and discrimination), a sort of framework appears, making the foundations and the principal articulations of a thought visible. At the same time, through the prioritization assumed by the subject, a dramatization of terms and concepts takes place which lets the words emerge from their undifferentiated totality, from the “mass” effect which erases the singu-

larities. By separating the ideas from each other, the subject becomes aware of the conceptual operators by which he discriminates.

Of course, the questioner has a key role here, which consists in underlining what has just been said, so as not to let the choices and their implication go unnoticed. He can even insist by asking the subject if he fully accepts the choices he has just made. He should, however, avoid commenting even if it means asking certain complementary questions if he senses any problems or inconsistencies in what has just been said. It is all about getting the subject to freely assess the implications of his own positions, to see what his thought harbors and hence the thought itself. This slowly eradicates the illusion sustained by feelings of obviousness and neutrality, a necessary propaedeutic for the development of a critical perspective, that of opinion in general and that of his own in particular.

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## Thinking the unthinkable

Once a particular anchor, problem or given problem is identified, the moment has come to take the opposite view. It is the exercise we will call “thinking the unthinkable”. Irrespective of the anchor or the particular theme the subject will have identified as central to his reflection, we will ask him to formulate and develop the contrary hypothesis: “If you were to give one criticism of your hypothesis, what would it be? Which is the most consistent objection that you know or could imagine to the thesis you hold so dear? Which are the limits of your idea?” Whether love, freedom, happiness, the body or whatever may constitute the subject’s foundation or prime reference, in most cases he will feel incapable of making such an intellectual turnaround. Thinking of such an “impossibility” will have the effect of plunging into an abyss. Sometimes it is a cry from the heart: “But I don’t want to!” or “It is not possible!”

This moment of tension serves mainly as a way of raising awareness about the psychological and conceptual conditioning of the subject. By inviting him to think the unthinkable, we invite him to analyze, to compare and above all to deliberate, rather than taking this or that hypothesis of intellectual and existential functioning for granted as something irrefutable. He then realizes the rigidities which formed his thinking without him even noticing. “But then we cannot believe anything!” he blurts out. Yes, but at least during the exercise, for a very short hour, think about whether the opposite hypothesis, whether the opposite “belief” does not hold water just as well. Oddly enough, to the great surprise of the subject, once he has risked this opposite hypothesis he realizes that it has much more meaning than he first thought, and in any case it sheds light on his initial hypothesis in an interesting way and he succeeds in better understanding its nature and its limits. This expe-

rience makes us see and touch the liberating dimension of thinking, insofar as it allows us to question the ideas about which we unconsciously become rigid, to distance ourselves from ourselves, to analyze our thinking patterns – their form and substance – and to conceptualize our own existential issues.

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## Going to the “first floor”

By way of conclusion, the subject will be asked to recapitulate important parts of the discussion in order to review and summarize strong or significant moments. This will be achieved in the form of a feedback on the whole exercise: “What happened here?” This final part of the discussion is also called “going to the first floor”: a conceptual analysis in contrast to the experience of the “ground floor”. From this elevated perspective, the challenge is to see ourselves act, to analyze the progress of the exercise, to measure the stakes, to leave the hubbub of the action and the thread of the narrative, in order to capture the essential elements of the consultation, the inflection points of the dialogue. The subject is engaged in a metadiscourse about the trial and error of his thinking. This moment is crucial, because it is the place of awareness of the dual functioning (inside/outside) of the human spirit, intrinsically linked to philosophical practice. It enables the emergence of the infinite perspective which gives the subject access to a dialectical vision of his own being, to the autonomy of his thinking.

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## Is it really philosophical?

What are we trying to accomplish through these exercises? How are they philosophical? In what way is the philosophical consultation different from the psychoanalytic consultation? As we have already mentioned, three particular criteria specify the practice in question: identification, criticism and conceptualization. (Let us mention another important criterion: distancing, which we will not hold up as the fourth element however, since it is implicitly contained in the other three.) In a certain way, this triple requirement captures rather well what is required in essay writing. In this one, starting from a set subject, the student must express some ideas, test them and formulate one or more general problems, with or without the help of established authors. The only important difference concern the choice of the topic: in the consultation the subject chooses his own object of study – in fact, he himself is the subject and the object of study – which increases the existential range of reflection, perhaps making the philosophical treatment of the subject more delicate.

The objection to the “psychologizing” side of the exercise should not be dis-



missed too quickly. On the one hand because there is a great tendency for the subject – faced with a single interlocutor who devotes himself to listen to him – to pour his heart out without any restraint on his feelings, especially if he already has some experience of psychological discussions. He will also feel frustrated in seeing himself interrupted, in having to make critical judgments on his own ideas, in having to distinguish between his different propositions, and so on. So many obligations which do, in fact, form part of the “game”, of its demands and its tests. On the other hand because for various reasons, philosophy tends to ignore individual subjectivity, to dedicate itself above all to the abstract universal, to disembodied notions. A kind of extreme propriety, even puritanism, makes the professional philosophers fear opinion to the point of wanting to ignore it, rather than in this opinion seeing the inevitable point of departure for any philosophizing; whether this opinion is that of ordinary people or of the specialist, the latter finding himself no less a victim of this “sickly” and fatal opinion.

Therefore our exercise firstly consists in identifying, through the subject’s opinions, the hidden presuppositions on the basis of which he functions. These will make it possible to define and dig into the starting point(s). Secondly it is a matter of taking the opposite view of these presuppositions, in order to transform indisputable postulates into simple hypotheses. Thirdly, articulating the problems thus generated through identified and formulated concepts. In this last step – or earlier if it feels useful – the questioner will be able to use the “classical” problems, attributable to an author, to valorize or to better identify such-and-such an issue which appears during the discussion.

Of course it is doubtful that a single individual would remake the entire history of philosophy on his own, any more than mathematics or language. Moreover, why should we ignore the past? We will always be dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants. But should we therefore not risk gymnastics and be content with watching and admiring the athletes just because we have short legs or are disabled? Should we be content with going to the Louvre museum and not put our own hands to the clay just because our mental functions do not have the agility of those inspired beings? Would it be disrespectful to the “greats” to want to imitate them? Would that not be honoring them, at least as much as admiring and quoting them? At the end of the day, do most of them not urge us to think for ourselves?

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## Difficulties

Our methodology is mainly inspired by Socratic maieutics where the philosopher questions his interlocutor, invites him to identify the issues in his speech, to conceptualize it by distinguishing the key words in order to apply them, to prob-

lematize it through a critical perspective, to universalize the implications. Let us specify by comparison that this practice has the distinctive feature of inviting the subject to move away from a simple feeling in order to allow him to perform a rational analysis of his speech and himself, a sine qua non condition for deliberating on existential and cognitive issues which it is first of all a question of articulating. The detachment from oneself that such an activity presupposes, the unnaturalness of which requires the assistance of a specialist, poses a certain number of difficulties which we will try to analyze here.

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## Frustrations

Beyond the interest in the philosophical exercise, a negative feeling regularly, at least momentarily, predominates in the subject and is most frequently articulated – in philosophical consultations as well as during workshops of group reflection – as an expression of frustration. First, the frustration of interruption: since the philosophical discussion is not the place for letting off steam or for conviviality, a long speech that is not understood, or one that ignores the interlocutor, must be interrupted; if it does not directly feed the dialogue it does not serve the occasion and it has no place in the context of the exercise. Second, the frustration of harshness: here it is more a matter of analyzing speech than of uttering it, and anything we say can be used “against us”. Third, the frustration of slowness: no longer a question of provoking accumulations and streams of words, we must fear neither the silence nor stopping on a given word in order to fully apprehend its substance, in the double sense of the term apprehend: seize and fear. Fourth, the frustration of betrayal, also in both senses of the term: the betrayal of our own speech which reveals what we do not want to say or know, and the betrayal of our speech which does not say what we want to say. Fifth, the frustration of being: not being what we want to be, not being what we believe we are, being deprived of the illusory truths that we, consciously or not, have entertained about ourselves, our existence and our intellect, sometimes for a very long time.

This multiple frustration, sometimes distressing, is not always clearly expressed by the subject. If he is slightly emotional, susceptible or not inclined to analysis, he will not hesitate to cry censorship, oppression: “You stop me from speaking”, while long, unutilized silences, unoccupied by any words, periodically punctuate the very speech which has such difficulty finding itself. Or even: “You are trying to make me say what you want”, while for each question the subject can answer whatever he wants, at the only risk of giving rise to new questions. Initially, frustration is often expressed as a reproach. However, by being verbalized it can become an object for itself; it lets the subject which expresses it become aware of himself as

an external character. On that basis he becomes capable of reflecting, of analyzing his own being through testing, of better understanding his own intellectual functioning, and he can then act upon himself, both on his being and on his thinking. Admittedly, passing through the moment – or some moments – with a psychological tone is difficult to avoid. We should not linger on it, however, because now it is a matter of rapidly moving on to the next philosophical stage, by means of the critical perspective as well as attempting to define a problem and its issues.

Our working hypothesis consists precisely in identifying certain elements of subjectivity, bits and pieces we could call emotional opinions, in order to take the opposite view and experience a thought which is “other”. Without this, how could we learn how to voluntarily and consciously come out of conditioning and pre-determination? How to emerge from the pathology of pure sensation? Besides, the subject may not have in him the capacity to do this work or even the possibility of considering it, for lack of distance, for lack of autonomy, because of insecurity or due to some strong anxiety, in which case we may not be able to work with him. Just as the practice of a sport requires some minimal physical dispositions, the philosophical practice, with its difficulties and demands, calls for some minimal psychological dispositions, below which we cannot work.

The exercise must be practiced with a minimum of serenity, with various necessary preconditions for this serenity. Too much fragility or susceptibility would prevent the process from taking place. As our work is defined, the cause of a deficit in this area does not fall within our remit, but that of a psychologist or a psychiatrist. By restricting ourselves to our function we could not get to the root of the problem, we could only notice and draw the consequences. If the subject does not seem to be able to do the exercise even if he feels the need to reflect upon himself, we will encourage him to instead seek consultation of a psychological kind or, at a pinch, other kinds of philosophical practices, more “flowing”. To conclude, for our part, and as long as it stays limited, there is no reason to avoid the psychological passage – subjectivity does not have to be a scarecrow – even if a certain philosophical approach, rather academic, sees this individual reality as an obstruction to philosophizing. The formal and cautious philosopher fears that by rubbing up against it, the distancing which is necessary for philosophical activity will be lost when we decide to let it emerge.

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## Speech as pretext

One of the aspects of our practice which is a problem for the subject is the relationship to speech that we try to set up. Indeed, on the one hand we ask him to sacralize his words, since we allow ourselves to carefully weigh up – together –

the slightest term used; since we give ourselves permission to dig into from within – together – the expressions used and the arguments put forward, to the point of sometimes making them unrecognizable to their author, from time to time making him cry scandal when he sees how his words have been manipulated. And on the other hand we ask him to desacralize his words, since the entire exercise is made up of only words, and no matter the sincerity or truth of his claims, it is simply a question of playing with ideas without necessarily respecting what is being said. Only coherence concerns us, the echoes the words throw back at each other, the mental silhouette which slowly and imperceptibly emerges. We simultaneously ask the subject to play a simple game which involves a distancing from what is understood as real, and at the same time play with words in greatest earnestness, with the greatest care, with more effort than he usually puts in constructing and analyzing his speech.

Here truth moves forward wearing a mask. It is no longer the truth of intention, it is no longer sincerity and authenticity, it is an imperative. An imperative which compels the subject to make choices, to handle the contradictions revealed by working on the muddled speech, even if it means making a radical reversal of the battle lines, even if it means to be abruptly dislodged, even if it means refusing to see and to decide, even if it means to be silent in front of the many cracks which make us envision the deepest of abysses, the fractures of the self, the emptiness of being. No other quality is needed here for the questioner, and little by little for the subject, except that of a police officer, a detective who tracks down the slightest inconsistencies in the speech and the behavior, who asks for a full account of each act, each place and each moment.

Of course, we can make mistakes in the change of direction of the discussion, which is the prerogative of the questioner, the undeniable power which is his and which he must assume, including his indisputable lack of neutrality despite all of his efforts in that respect. Of course, the subject can also “lose his way” in the analysis and the ideas he presents, influenced by the questions he suffers, blinded by the convictions he wants to defend, guided by the prejudices he has already chosen and which he would perhaps be incapable of contemplating: “overinterpretations”, “misinterpretations” or “underinterpretations” are thriving. No matter these errors, apparent errors or alleged errors. What matters for the subject is to stay alert, to observe, to analyze and to become aware: how he deals with problems, how he reacts, what ideas emerge, his relation to himself and the exercise – all of this must become a pretext for analysis and conceptualization. In other words, making mistakes no longer makes sense. It is above all a matter of playing the game, of practicing gymnastics. The only thing that matters is seeing and not seeing, awareness and unawareness. There are no more good and bad answers, but there is “seeing

the answers”, and if there is deceit, it is only in the lack of fidelity of the speech to itself, no longer in the relation to some distant and pre-registered truth on a background of a starry sky or in some subconscious lowland. Nevertheless, this fidelity is a truth no doubt more terrible than the other, more unappeasable one: disobedience is no longer possible, with all the legitimacy of this disobedience. There can only be blindness.

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## **Pain and epidural**

The subject quickly becomes aware of what is at stake. This can give rise to a sort of panic. For this reason it is important to introduce different types of “epidurals” during the birthing process. First, and most important, most difficult and most delicate, is the indispensable finesse of the questioner, who must be capable of deciding when it is appropriate to push an interrogation and when it is time to move on, to “slide”, when it is time to pronounce or propose rather than question, when it is time to alternate between fierceness and generosity. This is a judgment which is not always easy to make, because we let ourselves so easily be carried away by the heat of the action, by our own wishes: those of following through to the end, those of arriving at a determined place, those related to fatigue, those linked to despair, as well as many other personal inclinations.

Second, humor, laughter, linked to the playful dimension of the exercise. They induce a kind of “letting go” which allows the individual to free himself from himself, to escape his existential drama and observe without pain the pettiness of certain positions to which he sometimes clings with a touch of foolishness, if not in the most obvious contradiction with himself. Laughter releases tensions which could otherwise completely disable the subject in this very corrosive practice.

Third, the splitting in two, which allows the subject to get out of himself, to consider himself as a third person. When the analysis of his speech is going through a perilous moment, when the judgment comes up against issues too heavy to bear, it is useful and interesting to transpose the studied case to a third person, to invite the subject to watch a film, to imagine a fiction, to hear his story in the form of a fable. “Suppose you read a story where it is said that ...”; “Suppose you meet someone, and the only thing you know about him is that ...”. This simple narrative effect allows the subject to forget or to put his intentions into perspective, as well as his desires, his wishes, his illusions and disillusion, in order to only work on the speech, as it appears during the discussion, letting it bring about its own revelations without permanently erasing it by burdensome suspicions or patent accusations of insufficiency and treason.

Fourth, conceptualization, abstraction. By universalizing that which tends to

be exclusively perceived as a dilemma or a purely personal issue, by problematizing it, by making it dialectical, the pain is progressively reduced as the intellectual activity is put in motion. The philosophical activity itself is a sophrology, a “consolation”, as envisioned by the ancients like Boethius, Seneca, Epicurus or more recently Montaigne; a balm which allows us to better consider the suffering intrinsically linked to human existence, ours in particular.

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## Exercises

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### Making links

Some additional exercises are very useful in the thinking process, for example the exercise of the link. It allows the speech to get out of its “stream of consciousness” aspect, which functions purely by free associations, by abandoning the joints and hinges of thinking to the obscurity of the unconscious. The link is a concept all the more fundamental in that it profoundly touches the being, because it connects different aspects, different registers. “The substantial link”, Leibniz tells us. “What is the link between what you are saying here and what you are saying there?”. Apart from the contradictions which will be made visible by this questioning, there are also the ruptures and the leaps which signal the knots, the blind spots, whose conscious articulation lets us work closely on the subject’s mind through his speech. This exercise is one of the forms of the “anagogical” approach which enables a return to the unity, to determine the attachment, to bring to light the point from which the subject’s thought emerges, even if it means later on criticizing this unity, even if it means modifying this attachment. It enables the establishment of a kind of conceptual map which defines a thought pattern.

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### True speech

Another exercise: that of “true speech”. It is practiced when a contradiction has been revealed, insofar as the subject accepts the term “contradictory” as an attribute of his thought, which is not always the case: some subjects refuse to consider it and deny on principle the mere possibility of a contradiction in their speech. By asking which is the true speech – even if at the generally staggering moments at which they are pronounced, they are both uttered with an equal amount of sincerity – we invite the subject to justify two different positions which are both his, to evaluate their respective value, to compare their relative merits, to consider the matter in order to finally decide in favor of one of the two perspective, a decision which

will make him aware of his own functioning, of the fracture which animates it. It is not absolutely necessary to decide but it is advisable to encourage the subject to take the risk, because it is quite rare, if not almost impossible, to encounter a real absence of preference between two distinct views, with the epistemological consequences that derive from it. The notions of “complementarity” or “distinction”, which are frequently appealed to in common parlance, although they possess their share of the truth, often serve to erase the real issues, to some extent conflicting and tragic, of any singular thought. The subject can also try to explain the reason for a speech which is not “true”. It is often related to expectations, moral or intellectual, which he thinks he sees in society, or even to a specific desire which he considers illegitimate; speech is in this sense quite revealing of a perception of the world and of a relation to authority or to reason.

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## Order

Another exercise is that of “order”. When we ask the subject to give reasons, explanations or examples for a specific comment, we ask him to order the things he has listed, especially the first element of the list, which we will connect to the following ones. Using the idea that the first element is the most obvious, the clearest, the safest and therefore the most important to his mind, we will ask him to make this choice, which is generally unconscious. The subject often rebels against this exercise and refuses to make such a choice, renouncing his offspring born in spite of himself. By agreeing to perform this exercise – whether he complies with it explicitly, implicitly or not at all – he will be held accountable for the presuppositions contained in a specific choice. At worst, as with most consultation exercises, it will make him used to decode any proposition in order to grasp its epistemological content and catch a glimpse of the concepts conveyed therein, even if he dissociates himself from the idea.

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## Universal and singular

On the whole, what do we ask of the subject who wants to question himself, who wishes to philosophize on the basis of and concerning his existence, to think about himself? He must learn how to read, how to read himself; that is learn to transpose his thoughts and learn to transpose himself through himself: a duplication and an alienation which necessitate the loss of himself by a passage to the infinite, by a leap into pure possibility. The difficulty of this exercise is that it will always be a question of erasing something, of forgetting, of momentarily blinding the body or the soul, the reason or the will, the desire or the morals, the pride or the placidity.

To do this, we must silence the additional discourse, the circumstantial discourse, the discourse which fills up space or is a mere appearance of a discourse: either the speech accepts its responsibility, its implications or its content, or it learns to be silent. A speech which is not ready to handle its own being, in all its width, a speech which is not willing to become aware of itself, no longer presenting itself in the light, in this game where only awareness has the right of citizenship, at least theoretically and provisionally. Obviously, some people will not want to play the game since it is considered too painful, and speaking here is too loaded.

By making the subject choose his words, by returning the image he displays by the tool of reformulation, it is a matter of installing a procedure where the speech will be as revealing as possible; this is what happens through the process of universalization of the particular idea. Of course, it is possible and sometimes helpful to travel along paths already taken, for example by citing authors, but then the rule is to adopt the content as if it were exclusively our own. Albeit authors can be used to legitimize a fearful position or to belittle a painful position. Besides, what are we trying to do if not find in each singular discourse, however awkward it may be, the important issues, stamped and codified by illustrious predecessors. How do each of them relate absolute and relative, monism and dualism, body and soul, analytic and poetic, finite and infinite, and so on. This is risking a sense of betrayal, since we can hardly stand seeing our speech treated this way, even by ourselves. A feeling of pain and of dispossession, like someone seeing his body being operated on, even if all physical pain had been obliterated. Sometimes, suspecting the consequences of a question, the subject will try to avoid answering by all means. If the questioner perseveres in roundabout ways, eventually a kind of answer will no doubt emerge, but only when the issue has disappeared beyond the horizon and when the subject, reassured by this disappearance, will no longer make the link with the initial point. If the questioner recapitulates the steps in order to reestablish Ariadne's thread in the discussion, the subject can then agree or not agree to see, as the case may be. A crucial moment, although the refusal to see can sometimes be verbal only: the path cannot have failed to have made any imprint on the mind of the subject. By a sheer defense mechanism he will sometimes try to verbally make any clarification or explanation work impossible. But he will nevertheless be affected by his future reflections.

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## Accepting the pathology

Concluding on the difficulties of the philosophical consultation, let us say that the main ordeal lies in the acceptance of the idea of a pathology, taken in its philosophical sense. Indeed, any singular existential posture, a choice which is made



more or less consciously over the years, can for many reasons ignore a certain number of logics and ideas. Basically, these pathologies are not infinite in number, even if their specific articulation differs enormously. But for anyone who suffers from them, it is difficult to comprehend that the ideas on which he bases his existence are reduced to simple, almost foreseeable consequences of a chronic weakness in his capacity for reflection and deliberation. Still, the “thinking for oneself” which is advocated by many philosophers, is that not an art which can be worked on and acquired rather than an innate, given talent which would not be self reflective? It is simply a matter of accepting that human existence is itself a problem, crippled by dysfunctions which nonetheless constitute its substance and its dynamic.

## The Philosophical Requirement

What qualifies a discussion as philosophical? Are they not the same characteristics which allows a dissertation to be described as being of a philosophical nature? And as any philosophy teacher knows, even if he sometimes tends to forget it, it is not enough for the writing or the discussion to take place within the framework of a philosophy course to be considered philosophical since the context is not sufficient in itself to confirm or rule out a philosophical content. The most brilliant teachers will not, only by their presence or by mere contact, guarantee the substantiality or the quality of the intellectual production of their students. Consequently, regardless of the place, a series of underworked opinions, a list of clichés, a set of unsubstantial and unsubstantiated declarations which inconsistently jump from subject to subject, do not in any way constitute a philosophical whole, whether it is oral or in writing.

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### An overloaded qualifier

Everyone will therefore use their own specific criteria to determine the value or the philosophical content of a statement or an exchange. These definitions will be of an intuitive or formalized nature, explicit or implicit, arbitrary or justified. But before putting forward any hypothesis a first caution is needed. The philosophical qualifier, we believe, is very loaded. For one reason: it seems to mean anything and everything. No doubt because the term philosophy is used in very different meanings, ranging from everyday speeches, general ones, without any real content, on the affairs of the world and of man, to elaborations on learned doctrines, more or less appropriate displays of erudition, by way of production of rare abstractions. Faced with such a situation, which cannot be more vague, everyone will try to trump the value of his own position, denouncing and vilifying any other particular or general perspective, the more foolhardy of the philosophical zealots not hesitating to resort to invectives and excommunication.

Nothing prevents anyone from trying, all the same, to establish what defines and constitutes the philosophical path or content. But before that, to avoid overloading this task cognitively and emotionally, it seems important to us to affirm and reaffirm this truism: philosophy does not have a monopoly on intellectual and educational interest. In other words, a practice, a lesson or a knowledge, even if it is not considered philosophical, can very well be of great interest. We say this in

order to clarify that, by qualifying an exercise or a lesson as unphilosophical, before trumpeting the goods as deception and reporting an abuse of trust, we should ask ourselves how this activity can be of use. Even if we have the greatest love and respect for the philosophical “object”, we can believe that a life of the mind exists above and below philosophy. And if for a given perspective the term can be deemed inappropriate, loose or indeterminate, we will not feel obliged to declare it anathema. What is more, by accepting the problematization of the term and its conceptual plurality, we will offer a greater opportunity to the philosophical exercise than if we give ourselves the role of cautious and rigid guardian of the temple. Although without prohibiting rigor, quite the contrary, since it will be about engaging in a promising and fruitful dialogue, forcing us to rethink the foundation of the discipline.

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## Philosophy and utility

To substantiate our proposition and make it more palpable, let us take an example which is close to our heart: the discussion, whether it is called dialogue, debate or something else. Be it in a school setting, formalized or not, the discussion may or may not be philosophical. Will it suffice that this discussion deals with the great themes of life, such as love, death or thinking, to qualify it as philosophical? In the particular perspective of this text we will say no. However, first and foremost, as we have said, in absolute terms it does not matter whether this discussion is considered philosophical or not. Exclusion from philosophy for lack of erudition or for excess of erudition, exclusion for lack of democracy or for excess of democracy, exclusion for lack of abstraction or for excess of abstraction, exclusion for acceptance of a doctrine or for refusal of a doctrine. We will refuse both the romanticism of the teacher who thinks that he has to minimize his role, even virtually disappear, and the clericalism of the indispensable professor who is so certain of his science.

In these postures dwells a spot of dogma and honor which hardly suits our business: we have no copyright, trademark or private property to defend. Do we see any use in such an exercise? This is the first meaningful question to ask. It is true that in our society, as undoubtedly everywhere and always, those who wish to ask the great existential questions experience a certain difficulty in finding attentive and honest interlocutors. In general, people prefer to avoid these types of questions, being very, or too, busy with their “useful” occupations, not caring much about taking the time to squarely contemplate certain problems. Therefore, simply settling down and calmly conversing, or even roughly confronting world visions, seems like a good and useful thing to us, not to mention that profound intuitions and valiant arguments can also spring up from this type of exchange. But to change the world,

is that to philosophize?

Also, as we periodically observe, those who engage in such discussions are easily content with spewing out banalities, without caring in the slightest about rigor or depth. We will therefore straight away refuse to qualify such an exercise as philosophical, however sympathetic it may be. This is a judgment with limited consequences, which in no way constitutes a catastrophe. And if someone wishes to use this term in order to assure some status for their needs, we will not hold it against them: it is part of the game. Lady Philosophy has seen much more than this and she will not die. The “death of philosophy” is a dramatic concept which is totally foreign to us, if not to express the xenophobia of those who aspire to frame philosophy in such a way that they become its only – or almost only – promoter, defender, heir or possessor. And anyway, despite the attempts at delimitation and exclusion, or thanks to them, a debate will follow which again and again will try to raise the problem in order to never release the beneficial and necessary tension for the full exercise of thinking. Besides, we can always ask ourselves if the fact that an exercise is philosophical immediately indicates any utility, any interest.

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## The architecture of thought

Now that this caution has been delivered, let us try to propose a framework for philosophizing. We will have minimized, so we hope, the flow of untimely or extreme reactions, from the “aristocrats” as well as from the “democrats”. But really, to philosophize we must take risks! We therefore propose, not so much a definitional and restrictive framework as an operational and dynamic structure, the principle of antinomies. Indeed, whether in Eastern philosophy, at the heart of the great myths coming from the four corners of the world, in the reflection on daily life or in the history of Western classical philosophy from its beginning in Greece, oppositions seem to regulate thinking. Starting with good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust, these axes articulate the points of tension around and from which the great principles are formulated. They make up the founding oppositions, they express multiple judgments and axiologies, they make it possible to extract thinking from the simple, inchoative magma of opinion and ideas. Strangely enough, contrary to what we may think, through these categorizing and simplifying formalisms, thinking goes from the opacity and thickness of a bunch of ideas to an architecture favoring transparency and self awareness. Just as Gothic architecture, which, by artificially putting up exterior buttresses at specific points, gives it a lighter and slender outlook, more structured and less massive than its Roman predecessor. Likewise, our postulate is suggesting that thinking is not an accumulation or a clutter of opinions relatively foreign to each other, ignoring and con-

tradicting each other, but a geometry with its echoes and coherences, an architecture with its cornerstones and its keystones, a music with its harmonies, rife with events.

Even if this is not always conscious – fortunately, since it would be too busy – each singular or collective intellectual functioning produces a certain number of concepts and conceptual polarities which somehow serve to organize the life of the mind, despite the immensity and the plurality of its requests, perceptions, sensations, intuitions or established opinions, picked up here and there. Pleasure and pain, me and others, being and appearing; they represent so many of these polarities that no one can ignore without getting lost or going crazy. It is only at the cost of an immense work on oneself, psychologically and intellectually, that some great wisdoms or revolutionary schemes can claim, as proposed ideal or divine revelation, to ignore such evidence. If thinking mainly operates reactively, producing formulations bit by bit, mechanically, in order to please itself or its neighbor, it nevertheless operates in the crucible of categories, codified forms and specific axes.

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## A naive reading

If some of these antinomies, particularly those we encounter in life – usually of a practical, empirical, perceptible and moral nature – strike us with their banality, others seem more abstruse. But in both cases it is a matter of highlighting and clarifying these antinomies: the most common ones suffering from prejudices in which they are inappropriately dressed up, the rarest ones, on the contrary, acting like scarecrows we do not dare approach freely and dispassionately. However, for all intents and purposes we will start from the hypothesis that any important or founding antinomy, incidentally like any vectoring concept, must necessarily refer to a common intuition which can essentially be understood immediately by the common mind. In other words, at the risk of shocking sensible souls, we maintain that any antinomy, any fundamental concept is a little banal and obvious, at least taken generally. We therefore advise readers unfamiliar with the official philosophical lexicon not to run for a dictionary as soon as he meets one of these terms. In general it is best to let intuition speak: it will make the words speak, either for themselves or via the sentences which surround and produce them. Of course, neologisms or other crudely fashioned barbarisms will resist any comprehension from time to time, and it is not a question for us to prohibit the use of a philosophical dictionary, but we encourage the reader to enter into these reference works only after a first reading, preliminary and naive, has been properly attempted. We must be wary of learned oeuvres which, like preambles, footnotes and sundry appendices, sometimes succeed in making up the main part of a work, stifling the original piece and

hindering the reading rather than facilitating it. There is a classic error in philosophy which particularly afflicts the “good students” endowed with some rudimentary philosophical culture: impressed by his teachers which have without a doubt done more than enough to dazzle the student, he affects to do things “well”, applies and entangles himself in details rather than freely and peacefully reading what is provided for him without worrying about making mistakes and omitting some fine nuances. Let us invite the reader to a dense reading, broadly outlined, which at the risk of momentary errors will in time be able to realize the gaps and the misinterpretations which hinder him, without trying to check at each step what everyone has concocted and concluded on the subject: the trap of scholarship, which only after a long and patient process succeeds in getting rid of itself and its heaviness, only to discover that simplicity is not necessarily a defect, quite the contrary.

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## The stakes

Let us take a particular case: being and appearing. More than one expert on the subject wants to show us through a variety of subtleties how the Kantian antinomy “noumenon and phenomenon” is much more sophisticated, subtle and erudite than general antinomies as we have formulated them. But it looks to us that – apart from someone who purports to write a doctoral thesis on the subject and intends to impress his peers or receive a diploma – these sophistications, nuances and subtleties are of little interest. Provided, that is, that they still have any substance other than purely lexical and occasional. We may have, from time to time, observed some quintessential abstractor at work, who might impress us at first but who in the end strikes us with the vanity or the foolishness of his undertaking. How many theses do not plunge themselves into minute speculation to claim originality and novelty, and which reach unprecedented levels only by the exact disproportion between their lack of substance and the amount of their writing.

Each human being will necessarily have experienced the gap between being and appearing. If nothing else because they are disappointed in their fellow man, because they have had the wool pulled over their eyes, because they tried to mix oil with vinegar, or simply because their vision is impaired. How many disagreements have this simple difference as their basis, between being and appearing, or between various appearances determined by different perspectives. And it is precisely the identification of these perspectives or these particular relations to the thing that sums up the articulation of the philosophical stakes. It is Plato’s anagogical principle which requires that we take a particular idea back a step, to its origin, to the vision of the world which generated it, in order to seize the founding reality of this idea in its cause. It is in this sense the antinomies we present seem to us to closely

capture the philosophical approach.

At this point we will be told that philosophical discussions, whether with children, adolescents or uninitiated adults, mainly seek to answer questions about the meaning of life, the difficulty of human relationships or moral duty, which seems to put us very far from the abstract antinomies we propose. But to this we will respond that philosophizing does not consist of a simple exchange of opinions and arguments, since it also requires a work of analysis and of reflection on that which in itself only constitutes the source material for philosophizing. The philosophical requirement is to deepen and articulate the stakes of these different perspectives, differences which very naturally, when taken forward, will produce the classical antinomies which we have tried to list. Therefore, the task of the teacher, like that of his students, comes down to staying with the different ideas that are put forth, to contemplate before producing other *ad infinitum*, in order to extract their deep meaning and to clarify internal discrepancies. It is no longer a question of being content with a simple “I don’t agree” or “I have another idea”, it is instead a matter of relating these ideas to each other, which would otherwise only be opinions. Of course, the production of arguments comes with the added value of attributing reason to opinion, already moving us away from sincerity as the sole justification. However, we must still compare these reasons in order to clarify their content, to bring them to light, in other words to conceptualize them, and then to report on the multiplicity of perspectives, that is to say to problematize.

It is a question of making judgments, to qualify our statements, to deepen and become aware of our own thinking and that of our interlocutors. Otherwise the exercise will be interesting, certainly not insignificant, in that it offers an exchange of ideas and a space for expressing ourselves, but it is less than certain that, if deprived of comparison and qualification of different ideas, it could claim to have the status of a philosophical exercise. The same applies to an essay in a philosophy class, with the only difference that within the framework of a defined curriculum, with grades and authors, we can expect to see some references or standardized ideas appear here and there, which is not necessarily the case if it is a writing or discussion outside of an established course dedicated to philosophy.

As a conclusion to our preamble, let us take a specific case. Suppose that we are visiting a painter’s studio and wish to show our appreciation of his work. Among others, two possibilities are available to us here: “Your painting is very beautiful” or “I like your painting very much”. For one reason or another which has to do with sensibility or with more or less conscious personal choices, each will prefer one of the formulations. Nevertheless, for the painter, unless he aspires to be a philosopher, and for all intents and pleasant purposes, all he cares about is your approval or admiration irrespective of which terms we choose. The same goes for the author

of these words if he only wanted to express what was on his heart.

But what interests us philosophically here is to determine the stakes involved in such a choice. Stakes which can only be articulated if we first consider what other ways of expressing ourselves are available to us, and if we take time to consider this choice. It is therefore a question of conceptualizing, problematizing and deepening in order to philosophize. Hence, in the first case, when we appeal to beauty, we transmit a more objective and universal vision of the world, where the transcendent is present. In the second case, which is about liking, we are more in the subjective and particular realm, and reality is based on the singular. So what might just represent a simple phrase of appreciation for ordinary people, for the philosopher it can represent an articulation of a whole world vision. But we have to train our eyes and know the stakes in order to recognize them. It is in this that listing classical antinomies seems useful to us in facilitating philosophical practice.

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## List of Antinomies and Triptychs

Let us now try to make a comprehensive list of the antinomies which we think are important and recurrent. We have identified thirty-seven. This list is made up of twenty-eight pairs of opposites and nine conceptual triptychs, since it seemed that while the binary structure was often obvious, a ternary structure was sometimes called for, fulfilling the same functions of conceptual constraint. First here is the list, then a short summary of the issues, preceded by an example of a problem statement:

One and Many -- Being and Appearing -- Essence and Existence -- Same and Different -- Me and Others -- Continuous and Discrete -- Whole and Part -- Abstract and Concrete -- Body and Mind -- Nature and Culture -- Reason and Senses -- Reason and Intuition -- Reason and Passion -- Temporal and Eternal -- Finite and Infinite -- Objective and Subjective -- Absolute and Relative -- Freedom and Determinism -- Active and Passive -- Actual and Virtual -- Matter and Form -- Cause and Effect -- Space and Place -- Force and Form -- Quantity and Quality -- Narration and Discourse -- Analysis and Synthesis -- Logic and Dialectics -- Affirmation, Proof and Problem Formulation -- Possible, Probable and Necessary -- Induction, Deduction and Abduction -- Opinion, Idea and Truth -- Singularity, Totality and Transcendence -- Good, Beautiful and True -- Being, Doing and Thinking -- Anthropology, Epistemology and Metaphysics -- Psychological, Moral and Judicial



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## One and Many

\* Problem: Is a dice an entity in itself or a multiplicity of sides?

A first and foundational problem: every entity is at the same time one and many. Therefore, the individual is one, he has a unique identity, a determination and a specificity which distinguish him from other individuals, but he is also many. First of all because he is a compound being, in body and mind. Even if some object to this distinction, his body is in itself divisible into parts, more or less essential for its survival. The same goes for his mind, or his conscience, torn between different inclinations such as reason, instinct or emotions. It is the same with any material object, which we can perceive as an entity or as an assemblage. We can also understand the multiplicity of an entity through the plurality of its functions and relations, which also take part in the definition of its being. For human beings, we can distinguish their place, their history, their social role, their activities, as well as other parameters that constitute them. The same is true not only for beings but also for things and for words, whose identity is multiplied with circumstances. So an apple consists of skin, pulp, seed, a stem, sepals, just as a word consists of vowels and consonants or different sounds. In another way, we can think that the apple on an apple tree, in the ditch, in the market stall or on the plate are different components of the same reality of the “apple”. And a word, depending on the sentence which it is part of, can have its meaning changed considerably, because of the polysemy which defines it.

Nevertheless, multiplicity is a trap, just like unity. In fact, through the multiplicity of cases, circumstantial or otherwise, through the whole and totality, one form of unity or another must emerge, however hypothetical, problematic and indefinable it may be, without which entity is no longer an entity but pure multiplicity. Taken as an indeterminate multiplicity, the term is no longer a term since it does not refer to any unity, to any community, and therefore not to any entity. Without any invariance, without community, without unity, a thing is no longer one but many. But without multiplicity, without community, without different parts or attributes, a thing is imperceptible and non-existent: it can only be pure transcendence. That is why we must try to determine unity through multiplicity, just as multiplicity through unity.

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## Being and Appearing

\* Problem: Do we love a person or what we perceive of them?

This problem is easily linked to the previous one because being, or essence, the thing in itself, can be seen as the founding unity of an entity, an interiority whose

external appearance is only its biased and incomplete manifestation. From this rigorous perspective, intrinsic reality, the truth about things and the world, would be hardly accessible, even inaccessible. Appearance, what is perceived as the intermediary between two entities, between an entity and the world which surrounds it, can be conceived as that which obscures the essence. But conversely it can also be thought of as what constitutes its expression or its manifestation, since this is how the thing reveals itself to the world, through the phenomenon it embodies, the only “tangible” reality. Because of this impossibility to perceive the thing in itself, appearance can be considered by some people as the only reality, affirming that it alone efficiently acts on the exterior, that it alone is knowable: it is the relation and the living substance. The idea of an interior reality without expression or any connection to the world would then only have a contrived interest, it would be an empty concept devoid of substance. Only the perception of a thing, its captivity or its instrumentalization would constitute its reality.

The demand made by the concept of being is that of an invariant which postulates certain particular and specific characteristics that can always be attributed to the entity in question, to the thing in itself, irrespective of its metamorphoses and the diversity of its relations. This invariant then represents a link between different possible states, beyond various accidents produced by chance, a link which embodies the very substance of this entity. Being in itself – noumenon – would in a way be opposed to transformation or becoming – phenomenon. The latter can be considered a “loss of being” by the degeneration of its “original purity”, or as a gain of being, by the increase of its power and its engagement with the world.

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## Essence and Existence

\* Problem: Are we what we want to be?

The opposition between essence and existence is a similar problem to that of being and appearing, although formulated in a more anthropological way, that is to say in its consequences for the human being. The crucial problem raised by this antinomy is on the one hand of knowing whether there is such a thing as human nature, human essence, therefore collective. If this is the case, then each of us would be defined and bound by this nature, established a priori. This nature can moreover be determined in very different ways: it can be biological, and we will speak of instincts; it can be spiritual, and we will speak of the soul; it can be psychological, and we will speak of intelligence; if it is intellectual, we will speak of reason; if it is social, we will speak of society, only to name a few examples. In the same way, we can consider each human being to be defined a priori in a somewhat unchangeable and determined way, irrespective of the nature of this determination: genetic,

cultural or something else, taken as a kind of fatality.

This essentialist vision differs from the existentialist vision, which is at the same time singular, changeable and defined a posteriori. This perspective makes claims about a free identity, modifiable by the subject itself, and identity which, without being free from all influence and contingency, is deliberately developed over time. As a consequence, through all his actions or thoughts, the individual becomes absolutely responsible for his existence, for his being, not being able to find comfort or excuse in any predetermination.

Beyond man there is also the opposition between physical objects and objects of reason, with the following problem: is that which is created by reason less real than that which exists physically? Hence, does a character from a novel or the theory of relativity exist any less than my next-door neighbor?

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## Same and Different

\* Problem: Can we compare everything?

This is one of the most subtle antinomies, extremely ancient and dialectical: strangely, the same is different, just as what is different is the same. Indeed, that which is the same, in order to be the same, must be different, without which no comparison would be possible: strictly speaking, we cannot compare a thing to itself. The expression “the same as ...” clearly shows this paradox of difference: at the same time similar and dissimilar. And it is the same with different: the expression “different from ...” also implies a comparison, a form of connection, therefore a kind of similarity without which the comparison would hardly be possible and the difference could not be expressed.

Like only knows like, without which no connection would be conceivable. Antinomies, like all opposites, present a good example of this relationship: pairs of terms which oppose each other precisely because they deal with the same thing. Moreover, it is not logically possible to put two entities which do not share some parameter or attribute – if only the strangeness – in the same sentence. Everything that relates to being is both different to and the same as what is. Only being itself can, as an absolute, be considered non-different, because it is not different from anything else, since it is “absolutely” and nothing is foreign to it, and similarly it is not the same as itself since it is absolutely identical to itself: it is itself. When we ask about anything: “Is it the same thing?”, it is because something has changed: the place or the time, the circumstances, the appearance, some attribute, that we can ask ourselves that question. So everything is in this sense both the same as and different from itself. But we can also consider each thing or being from the angle of its irreducibility, from its absolute singularity and consider that in this sense it

is the “same” as nothing else, that it escapes all classification, all categorization.

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## Me and Others

\* Problem: Can what is human be foreign to us?

This antinomy is a particular case of the previous one, and its implementation in the anthropological method is undoubtedly its most frequent occurrence. Others are others because they resemble me, otherwise they would not have such a specific relationship to my being: they are my neighbors, even distant ones, but never complete strangers. Now, am I the center of the world, the anchor, the navel, since everything starts with me? Or am I just one among others, an immense other, more real, more vast than my tiny self, this microscopic fragment of others? Particular moralities permanently oscillate within this polarity. My perceptions, my feelings, my thoughts make me say “I”, but who am I without the others who begot me, the others who allow me to exist, to think and to act? Beyond the evidence and moral connotations which will be defended by diverse people, should I determine my actions according to myself: egocentrism, or others: altruism? Furthermore, does the self belong to itself or to some self which transcends it? Are “others” a person, a particular community or all of humanity? How do I choose between the good of my family and that of everyone, when they often contradict each other? Anyway, is it possible, if only for practical reasons which do not lay claim to any radical autonomy, to avoid simultaneously thinking about me and others, an antinomy which lies at the very heart of the primary existential conflicts?

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## Continuous and Discrete

\* Problem: Do points make up a line?

What is the world? Is it made up of distinct and separate entities, more or less linked to each other, incidentally or necessary, or organized like a woven network, with things or beings only contiguous elements of this order, inseparable from what surrounds them, positioned in a continuous space and time? Elementary physics has already raised this problem by asking whether the nature of matter is to be wave or particle, the characteristics of the first being continuous, the second discrete. Both models seem to work, in a complementary way of course, but also contradictory, with various scientific and epistemological implications.

The same applies to anthropology where some will see man as an element of society, determined mainly by this society as well as the movements and methods which drives it, while others will choose the alternative perspective, which sees

each society as an aggregate of disparate individuals who act deliberately. Yet again, various philosophical, political and social consequences will follow from these choices, by comparatively giving more value to either the whole of humanity or a given society, like the former, or to the individual, like the latter. Is it the individuals who make up society, or society who makes the individuals? If we are tempted to answer affirmatively to both questions simultaneously, the particular perspectives will differ in their presuppositions and the priority they afford one or the other of these entities.

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## Whole and Part

\* Problem: Is the whole the sum of its parts?

Do the parts make up the whole, or does the whole generate the parts? Do the qualities of the whole belong to the parts, or are they distinct from them? Are the qualities of the whole the sum of the qualities of the parts, or do they exceed them? In short, is the whole reducible to the entirety of its parts or not? We can even wonder whether a whole is reducible to parts, which is a problem for space for example, in itself deprived of distinct parts, which raises the problem of the discrete and the continuous. The same goes for time, elastic and elusive. Then can we say that a living being is made up of parts when the separation of the constituent parts of the living being render it no longer alive?

If we know that a pile of sand is made up of grains of sand, how many grains does it take, at a minimum, to make a pile? Here we have two incommensurable entities: the grain, discrete by nature, and the pile, continuous by nature, which cannot, from this point of view, hold the same qualities even if they necessitate one another. By extending this problem it is possible to ask if the universe possesses certain qualities which do not belong to its parts, such as eternity, just as we can ask if any part of the universe possesses qualities which the universe does not have, such as life. But it is also a question of whether totality is content, of the same nature as that which it contains, or if it is a container, which is then distinguished from it. This makes a huge difference, because it is not evident that the whole contains itself. In the same way, the set of verbs, called “verbs”, is not a verb: the verb is not a verb.

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## Abstract and Concrete

\* Problem: Is the self a concrete reality?

Abstract is what is not perceptible by the senses, therefore what concerns the men-

tal processes. Is the abstract then less real than the concrete? On this point perspectives clash, with empiricists, pragmatists and other materialists on the one side, who deprive reality of anything which cannot be the object of sensible experience. On the other side are idealists and realists who in various ways grant a substantial reality to ideas, sometimes more than to sense perceptions, which for them are sources of illusions and errors. The common modern trend among philosophers is to grant each of these areas a specific reality, which would in principle eventually resolve the contradictions; a postulate of the experimental approach which predominates in the scientific field.

Be that as it may, the question of primacy remains. Do abstractions proceed from an operation of the mind based on perception of concrete things, or does the mind create the emergence of the concrete through its own operations? What is the degree of autonomy of the mind relative to matter? Abstractions sometimes refer to a sort of absence of concrete reality, but can it not represent the access to a deeper level of reality? If the concrete derives its origin from the aggregation of the parts which constitute any material object, cannot the mind have direct access to the unity or the essence of these things? In contrast, we can ask whether the mind is not confined to articulate the qualities or predicate of a thing without being able to grasp the whole thing, while the concrete thing is entirely present.

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## Body and Mind

\* Problem: Do we think with our brain or with our mind?

The particular problem raised by the opposition between abstract and concrete leads us to oppose the body and the mind in man, as components of his being. Because if for some we do not seem able to separate one from the other, man being endowed with a double nature, we still cannot get rid of the conceptual dichotomy presented to us. This hardly prevents us, in accordance with theories, from denying the reality of the body or of the mind. Perhaps we are, after all, only body or only mind.

In any event, without claiming to conclude on the reality of these entities, what is it that opposes body to mind? The body is a compound, while the mind seems relatively indivisible. The body is material, it is part of space and time, while the mind is spiritual and cannot be localized. The body is finite, determined, while the mind seems comparatively infinite and indeterminate. The body is mortal, while the mind can be considered immortal. Depending on what parameters we choose and what criteria we use, one will seem more or less real in its being than the other, more or less reliable than the other in terms of the knowledge it produces. Each one will therefore establish a personal hierarchy of his being, conscious or not, deliberate or not, by combining these two different archetypes, and by articulating this

complementary and conflicting polarity.

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## Nature and Culture

\* Problem: Is human nature natural?

In the same vein, nature opposes culture just as the acquired opposes the innate. Is the human being what it is by definition, a priori, or is it established by historical choices, conscious or unconscious? Is culture, mainly if not essentially human, at odds with nature, or is it just its more sophisticated expression? Are human beings part of the evolution of the earth, or do they represent a discontinuity, an accident, even a natural disaster? Do reason, consciousness or mind emanate from life, or do they belong to another reality, transcending material or living reality?

Nature is opposed to culture as to an artifice. It represents any reality in the world which does not owe its existence to invention and human labor. In this sense it embodies the cosmos, insofar as we discover a determinism in it, an order, or at least some coherence, and it is opposed to freedom, because nature expresses what in a singular being escapes its free will. Culture, on the contrary, refers to what is created by man in his historical and social setting. It is constituted through a set of rules or norms collectively instituted by a society, a people or the whole of humanity. Even more uniquely, it is the process of intellectual formation, responsible for the judgments and preferences which specifies the individual and his identity.

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## Reason and Senses

\* Problem: Are the senses aware of themselves?

Body and mind are both producers of knowledge and thinking: they inform the being and they guide it. The knowledge of the body mainly comes from the five sensory organs: the ear for hearing, the nose for smelling, the eye for seeing, the skin for touching and the tongue for tasting. Internal sensations however, particularly different forms of pain or pleasure, can be related to other information systems. But on the whole, sense knowledge is immediate, both that which is momentary and the tangible relation to matter in one form or another. It is from this intuition of immediacy that this type of knowledge brings about the feeling of certainty which often follows it: the body hardly doubts, the perception triggers the reflex, especially concerning pain or deficit, which requires an immediate reaction.

In contrast to this functioning we have reason, which is a process that proceeds from temporality; reflection is not immediate, because it passes through a certain number of operations in order to arrive at its conclusions, although, over time im-

mediate intuitions are forged. It often starts from the sensible in order to construct its knowledge. The process in question operates deliberately, even if various interactions can “parasitize” it, such as those of the unconscious, of educational or social conditioning, or of the body. On those grounds, because there are permanent choices between the intervention of the will, a return of the thought to itself, and the confrontation with its own limits and with what is other than itself, reason is subject to doubt. This weakness is accompanied by a considerable force which guarantees it a certain autonomy: it is capable of silencing everything around it, including the world and the sensory perceptions.

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## Reason and Intuition

\* Problem: Does intuition come from reason?

If reason is based on sensory knowledge and confronts it, a similar dialectical link opposes it to intuition. Intuition is based on the sensitive, in that it operates in the immediacy and generates certainties. It comes from an prereflexive thought, produced by experience, desire, education, social pressure, various influences which intertwine indistinctly. If intuition seems to interfere with reason since it short circuits and prevents it from deliberating, relegating to an unconscious process what should be freely and overtly analyzed in order to be able to decide in full awareness, it also plays a positive role, even indispensable to the rational process. Indeed, if reason had to infinitely rethink every element that constitutes its thought process, it would become ineffective and could never achieve its ends. Intuition, by taking certain pieces of knowledge for granted, gives reason a base from which to operate. This by no means prevents it from on occasion going back to one of these “acquired” ideas.

Intuition, an immediate vision of things, works as a sort of act of faith, a faith which, moreover, easily lays claim to the heart rather than reason. Reason only intervenes at a second step, as rationalization a posteriori. In this regard, intuition is a producer of opinions: ready-made, superficial ideas, unaware of their own origin, which hardly question themselves and often result from hearsay.

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## Reason and Passion

\* Problem: Do passions have reasons?

The third fundamental antinomy involving reason: the opposition to passion, as dialectical as the first two antinomies, regarding senses and intuition. If reason is a voluntary action, as its name indicates, passion is passive, suffered. However,



it is at the heart of the will, because it cannot claim to spring from pure rationality. Reason is often called upon to serve one passion or another, which constitutes the driving force, the soul and the aim of the reason in question. Even an alleged commitment to pure rationality cannot endure without one passion – the desire for rationality.

So passion is the basis for reason, it is a necessary cause of it, but it constantly collides with this reason: reason tempers passion, regulates it, models it, submits it to critical testing, while passion inhibits or annihilates the processes of reason, animates or transforms them. Nevertheless, passion can be considered a reason beyond reason: when a desire moves us but we do not know its origin or reasons, a desire we have not chosen, a desire which nonetheless seems to be the bearer of truth. Love, survival instinct and an act of faith are three classical examples of such a passion. They allow access to the very heart of being, which ties in with the theme of intuition. If reason is seeking truth, if it is controlled in its process, it is also often cold and calculating, while passion sweeps us away, and in this it can claim to embody life, impulsive and dynamic, faced with the rigidity of rigor. Moreover, passion knows how to be as implacable and coherent as reason, authenticity being a primary form of truth.

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## Temporal and Eternal

\* Problem: Does the moment escape time?

Some realities fall within time, others escape it, as we have already seen with for example essence and existence. That which escapes time qualifies as eternal, although this concept can cover different modalities. The first important distinction is between what does not exist and what always exists. If a concept can be characterized as eternal, it is because it is abstract and ignores time. If the universe can be characterized as eternal, it is because it is a concrete entity which seems unable not to exist, which knows time but transcends it. The idea of a single god, the first cause of everything that is, oscillates between these two poles. For some it is an abstract concept, non-existing, for others the primary existences, the absolute model of all existence. Whatever it is, that which is temporal tends towards the material and the concrete, that which is timeless tends towards the concept and the abstract. Because even if the universe seems concrete to us, what is invariant in it is elusive.

For these reasons, the temporal – subject to contingency and to change, fragile, imperfect and mortal, closer to our way of being – seems alive, while the eternal – decidedly more distant – can seem dead, if not unreal, to us. Or, by a reversal of polarities, a typical phenomenon of philosophical thought, this timelessness can on the contrary capture the idea of perfection, the expression of a superexistence,

the manifestation of the primary truth or the unconditional being.

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## Finite and Infinite

\* Problem: Can we think of the infinite?

In the same way that the whole is both one and multiple, the whole is both finite and infinite. But in any case, the finite and the infinite appear in different ways. Therefore, if an entity is finite in time because it has a beginning and an end, it can be considered infinitely divisible into parts, or even infinite in the chain of causes it gives rise to, by the simple fact of its existence: had it existed differently, the world would have been changed. At the same time, everything which is perceptible, everything which is nameable, everything which is comprehensible, is necessarily finite in one sense or another, without which we would have no access to it: we can only understand by virtue of the finite. Some approaches, qualified as negative or apophatic, conclude that for what concerns real infinity, like a unique god, it is only possible to affirm what it is not, because it knows no bounds, no limits – a process applicable, moreover, to all things. As a consequence, the infinite takes the form of the indeterminate and the unthinkable; the finite takes the form of determination and the thinkable. What is measurable is comparable and finite; what is infinite is incomparable and immeasurable. This can be understood quantitatively but also qualitatively, by comparing the attributes of the various entities, even by determining different orders of infinitude: for example the infinity of prime numbers compared to the infinity of integers.

The question remains as to whether the finite is comparable to the infinite, as a simple antinomy, or whether the one ignores the other. Because if what is infinite can be considered perfect in opposition to the finite, we can also affirm that the finite is more complete. Unless we consider that the terms of the finite have no meaning in the infinite, and vice versa: they unjustifiably project one reality onto another, incompatible one.

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## Objective and Subjective

\* Problem: Is objectivity a particular form of subjectivity?

That which belongs to the object itself, in its own reality, outside of the mind which thinks it, is objective. However, this reality is certainly problematic to think about, since it is theoretically placed outside of the mind which thinks it. This can naturally lead to the conclusion that this reality is not accessible to us, or even that it does not exist at all, since all knowledge is an encounter between a subject and an

object, and anything that cannot be encountered, by being unknowable and unverifiable, cannot be postulated. Still, we call that which is devoid of prejudice or bias objective. But who can claim to be free from any subjective involvement? Nevertheless, when this term is used with the meaning of “real” or “scientific”, certain approaches or procedures, even certain attitudes, can allow or guarantee a relative objectivity and produce some certainties, if only temporarily.

In contrast, that which is subjective belongs to the subject, generally representing a human, as a person gifted with sensations, feelings, or as a reasoning mind; an adjective which qualifies the knowledge or the perception of an object, reduced or modified by the nature of the subject. In opposition to objective, this term generally means biased or partial, when it does not take on the pejorative meaning of illusory or unfounded. But the subjective also reflects the specific reality of a subject which assumes responsibility and refuses to profess a factitious and dishonest objectivity, a subject which produces his own truth.

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## Absolute and Relative

\* Problem: Is the absolute a relative concept?

The absolute is the characteristic of what is deprived of limits, what does not depend on anything but itself, what is permanent, what is not determined by its relation to what is external to it. It easily becomes synonymous with the ideal, representing a perfect and autonomous entity, such as God, since the qualities mentioned express a sort of ultimate and maximal being. In contrast, the relative is the status of a thing or an idea which can exist or be thought of only on the condition of its being related, linked, to something else than itself. The thing or the idea thus subordinated to what it is not, does not have any existence or absolute value in itself, because its existence is conditioned on what is other than it. However, it is tempting to conclude that the absolute does not exist, since existence necessarily implies a relationship. The question is whether this non-existence is the expression of an unconditioned, superior and ultimate reality, or of a simple conception of the mind, empty because it is deprived of any real content.

Nonetheless, purely conceptually, the absolute allows us to consider an entity freed from any contingency, from any exterior interference, a knowledge of the thing in itself which we will oppose to that of random phenomena where the entity in question ruptures, since it is completely changed according to the circumstances.

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## Freedom and Determinism

\* Problem: Are we condemned to be free?

Anthropologically speaking, the attraction for the absolute is manifested, among other things, by the desire for freedom, or the pretense of freedom. The human being likes to think of himself as autonomous, he believes that he determines himself by making his own laws, individually or collectively: he is almighty. Perhaps he is indeed freer than other species, but is still easy to show the different forms of determinism that play upon him, consciously or not. His biological nature, his personal history, his culture, his context; they are all factors that influence his way of being and his existential choices, proof of the heteronomy which restricts his singular nature.

Freedom can just as well be articulated as simple consciousness, the capacity to realize how our will is determined by our nature and our environment, like freedom of reason, which allows us to reflect on the implications and motives of our actions, to understand the state of the world, to maintain a steady and calm attitude in the face of adversity, without necessarily being able to intervene in the course of events. The free fall of an object is not about following a desired trajectory, but simply not to collide with another object, not to be slowed down in its course. In these different senses, freedom and determinism do not radically oppose each other anymore, as is the case with free will, where our simple will reserve the right to choose what will happen, to agree with or to refuse what is presented to us. And we can affirm that all freedom is combined with one form or another of necessity.

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## Active and Passive

\* Problem: Is receiving passive?

That which produces an action is active; that which undergoes this action is passive. This distinction is both material and moral, but it is a distinction which, like all distinctions, is a little artificial. Physics explains to us that any action in return receives a reaction, a reaction without which there could be no action. Indeed, how do we act on something which does not react? An action is always an interaction, both a meeting of two natures, two entities, and a meeting of two actions which make up a dynamic, conflicting and complementary couple. Active is that which seems to cause the encounter, that which seems to be animated by the purpose of an interaction. But in any dynamic, that which comes first chronologically does not always come first ontologically. What provokes the action will not necessarily be what mainly determines the outcome. The efficient cause does not necessarily coincide with the final cause.

That which is apparently passive can have, if only by its force of inertia, a greater power than that which moves. Resistance is a form of action, regulating and ordering things. This is the case with great principles, invisible and often unidentified, powers that reign over beings and things, constituting the fabric of reality which transcends, limits, authorizes and structures singular and manifest actions.

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## Actual and Virtual

\* Problem: Can we imagine the actual deprived of any virtuality?

What is actual is that which presents itself to us, that which is immediat, tangible and perceptible, that which acts directly on things. In contrast, what is virtual is that which seems absent, distant, a reality which is sometimes restricted to simple possibility: that which can be, that which is without materiality. In that respect ideas are virtual, such as when we say that “it is only an idea” – like everything which is abstract – while material, concrete objects are more rooted in the actual. But the same is true when there is a distance in space and time. That which is far away, that which is waiting, is declared virtual, because the realization or the encounter only seem possible: a mere power or existence and not real existence.

The problem is to know what constitutes reality. Gravity for instance, the attraction between solid bodies, as a universal principle – is it less real than the stars it moves? Are the various laws of physics only real when they are manifest in front of our eyes? Does the cause exist any less than the effect? Do the architect’s plans, without which the building could not be constructed, lack reality? Is it the truth or the good which acts upon the world? Or do we, unwittingly, by our world vision, impose the primacy of materiality and sensory perception? The technology which is increasingly being developed in our computers shows us the reality of the virtual both in its beneficial and useful as well as its harmful and illusory effects.

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## Matter and Form

\* Problem: Where do forms come from, if not from matter?

Man has always tried to give form to what surrounds him, to everything which is considered as matter, more or less raw. Giving form to satisfy his needs, whether physiological, utilitarian or aesthetic. To transform matter is to produce what is not from what is; it is to make, to create. In this sense, the world itself is a creator, since there is hardly any matter without form, any more than there is form without matter in nature.

The form is formative, it is a dynamic, a principle which generates and an-

imates, while matter is what resists, bringing substance, body or weight to the form. Form and matter are two archetypes which can hardly be understood independently of each other. Ideas provide an approximation of pure form. Resistance, time and space characterize matter. Form is what distinguishes an entity from another, by its outline, its appearance, its effects, its attributes. It is of a discrete and luminous nature. Matter is indistinct, it falls within the realm of continuity, obscurity, interiority and inaccessibility. And yet, material objects often speak to us more directly than pure forms. But is it because of their materiality or the potentiality of their form: for example their use, their exchange value, or the obstacle they represent?

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## Cause and Effect

✱ Problem: Are we bad because we hit our neighbor, or is it the other way around?

Theoretically, the cause comes before the effect, and this chronology, which is irreversible, produces temporality, the rhythm of the world and knowledge. But it is perhaps a truncated vision of reality, like the paradox of the chicken and the egg. Because if in a limited way one thing surely leads to another, let us not forget that this process occurs in a context where everything interacts, where nothing happens by itself. Is not everything simultaneously cause and effect? The idea of a first cause, the driving force of everything that exists, is a difficult concept which refers to God or to an aporia. Because how can that which causes everything cause that which is not? Why would God create something other than himself? If there is a first principle which creates all the others, necessarily in its image, from where does that come which is different? We are therefore forced to grant a real status to the effect: that of “cause”, even if it is a second cause. Strangely enough, every effect is also a cause in itself, original and singular, alone capable of accounting for the diversity of the world, an indispensable and inescapable cause of that which is. Where, then, does this second cause come from? Is it its own cause? In its way, it would therefore be the first cause.

In isolation, it is possible, useful and essential to mechanically formulate the chain of causes and effects for the purpose of analysis and understanding, but it is important not to fall into the trap of reductionism. For if it is possible to distinguish between the orders of causes, according to their relative importance, it is hardly possible to isolate the cause from its effects, since the latter seem to constitute their causal nature.

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## Space and Place

\* Problem: Can a place be outside of space?

In order to be able to live and to think, we must situate ourselves in a place, make a place. The place is first and foremost determination; the one we inhabit, the one which allows us to experience and to recognize, a recognition without which nothing is possible: without determination life would be unlivable and we would go crazy. What would happen if each day, objects and beings were different from the day before? If everything was unpredictable? Of course, for a given time, and within certain limits, we can appreciate the unexpected or the uncanny, however, we cannot adapt to it permanently. So here we are, rooted in a place, vast as it is, in which we try to work out our existence and to give it meaning. Within a place, things are circumscribed and true to themselves. But it would be illusory to ignore that which surpasses or transcends the place: space. Otherwise we would elevate the place to an absolute, from all points of view: geographically, historically, scientifically, culturally, and so on. Let us not forget that if the place is an existential, even ontological, imperative, space, as unlimited as it is, is also that which constitutes the place. On the one hand, space is the setting for the place; on the other hand, it is that which acts on the place. And for us, inhabitants of the place, it is by transgression of the place that the place is developed, without which it would be set in its being and we in ours. If space symbolizes indetermination, ignorance, incongruousness, it is also the infinite from which alone the truth of the place can be perceived, and we are forced to simultaneously live inside and outside of it.

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## Force and Form

\* Problem: Can a force be without form?

This antinomy refers among other things to that between masculine and feminine, which, in general, in our modern West, is mainly perceived as a social, anthropological or biological reality, one of gender difference. But this is not necessarily the case: we wish to glimpse the metaphysical or epistemological dimension provided by this pair of opposites. This is, among other things, expressed in the Chinese antinomy of yin and yang. Force, the quality of being strong, is a principle of power or action. It is power, energy, capacity; it easily resorts to constraint, to defiance of the law, to a disregard of the other, but it also serves to impose respect for the law or for the other. It transforms, that is to say it disrupts the form. The latter, on the contrary, is all in outline, in contact, in exteriority. This is the way things are developed, ways which must be respected, a principle of continuity which informs, determines and limits; it channels raw matter and brute force, giving con-

sistency and life to aesthetic things. If the force is essentially dynamic, the form does not fear slowness or the static. The form acts without acting, steadily, by its simple presence, while the tension imposed by the force, which mainly acts by jolts and discontinuously, cannot last. Force comes from a specific will and an intended plan, from a particular goal which is implemented for a purpose, while form rather expresses a way of being, which cannot pretend that things are other than what they are.

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## Quantity and Quality

\* Problem: Does everything that exists exist in a determined quantity?

Quantity is measurable, comparable and countable; it obeys mathematical principles, it can be increased or decreased. Quantity is often experienced as accidental: it does not belong to the order of things but to their contingency. This is contrary to quality, expressed by its attributes, which more seems to be of the essence of things. Quality is ownership, it belongs solely to its object, while quantity, which postulates a “how much”, is plural and extrinsic. If quantities are variables, qualities are far less so. On the other hand, qualities are hard to compare and to measure: the nature of things is not really part of “more and less”, even if it is not ignorant about it. Quality is part of duration, despite the relative modifications it is subject to; it absorbs the differences itself, while quantity becomes something else than itself at the least transformation. As a result of its non-measurable and intrinsic aspect, quality is more elusive and subjective. It rejects technique and knowledge, particularly since it is difficult to change. At the same time, more rooted in being, quality opposes what is not, rejects what opposes it, is antinomic. Quantity, on its part, is rooted in plurality, changeable and contingent by its plasticity, opposed to nothing.

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## Narration and Discourse

\* Problem: To describe, is it to explain?

Narration describes, establishes a sequence of events, plays out in the concrete, respects a chronological order, while abstract discourse, articulated on a sequence of ideas, privileges the ontological order. If both care about meaning, the first meaning is that of a story, while the second is that of an explanation. Although we can also maintain that there is a story which describes and another story which interprets: the first claims to report the bare facts, the other claims to report on causal phenomena; two sequences which are not immediately grafted onto each other.



The elements of the narrative are given externally. They are objective, the narrative depicts, even if the choice of what is proposed by the words is tainted with subjectivity; a choice which also influences the way of describing and which sometimes denies its bias by presenting itself as an observation. Discourse requires a clearer contribution from the producer. It requires arguments, proofs and analyses, it is by definition contestable, possible to oppose to another discourse. Discourse does not pride itself on objectivity and reality, even if it can claim the status of truth: it is interpretation. If human life presents itself as narration, the need for discourse seems just as constitutive of being, even if it is apparently more random, more abstract, less immediate and less substantial.

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## Analysis and Synthesis

\* Problem: Should we draw conclusions based on analysis or synthesis?

Analysis is an intellectual or material procedure which consists in breaking down a whole in order to separate its constitutive elements. Synthesis is an intellectual or material procedure which puts together, or reunites, what is at first separate. According to the different tendencies, the temptation is great to associate or to dissociate. But in the same way as everything is both one and many, everything is both united and separate. Everything that is, can and must be conceived in itself; everything that is, can and must be conceived through relation. The difficulty is to see the simultaneity of the two procedures, because the immediacy of things seems on the one hand to oppose analysis as well as synthesis, and on the other hand analysis and synthesis are opposed to each other.

To analyze is to tear apart the thought or the discourse into tiny fragments without knowing beforehand when it is time to stop the process, to the point that the initial entity becomes unrecognizable. To synthesize is to combine elements, to the point where these elements disappear, drowned in the totality which absorbs them. To analyze is to distinguish elements in order to bring out conceptual issues; to synthesize is to implement complementarity in order to create unifying concepts.

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## Logic and Dialectics

\* Problem: Does dialectics free us from logic?

Logic allows us to establish and to verify the coherency of a reasoning, its absence of contradiction. It determines the conditions of validity of reasoning, its coherence, a crucial tool of logic, a science which as its object has judgments by which we dis-

tinguish truth from falsehood. Logic is based on two fundamental principles. The principle of contradiction, or the principle of non-contradiction, which determines that we cannot simultaneously affirm a thing and its opposite under the same conditions. Its corollary, the principle of identity, determines that a thing is what it is, and not what it is not. Therefore, faced with two contradictory propositions, one must be true and the other false.

Dialectics does not a priori refuse the presuppositions of logic, but it does not set them up as absolute rules. Besides, dialectics does not acknowledge any rule a priori, even if it uses them and is structured around them; the very principle of its functioning is precisely to be able to always return to the rules which constitute it. Consequently, it represents a thought process which takes charge of seemingly contradictory propositions, and is based on these contradictions in order to bring out new propositions. These new propositions moreover make it possible to reduce, resolve or explain the initial contradictions. Therefore, for dialectics, any entity is what it is not, because it is constituted by what it is not. This leads us to the scandalous proposition that being is not and that non-being is. Of course, the work on dialectics is to produce articulations which found this type of reversals, which also requires coherence and logic.

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## Affirmation, Proof and Problem Formulation

\* Problem: Should a particular form of discourse be favored?

If philosophy lives on questions, particular philosophical thought is affirming. If doubt allows the thought to be deepened, it is also destined to favor the emergence of new propositions; sometimes in a peremptory way, but above all in an argumentative way. Nevertheless, the formulation of these various propositions: judgment, production of concepts or analysis, is already a job in itself whatever its status: as postulate, certainty or hypothesis. However, a good part of the philosophical work is also to justify propositions put forward in that way. To prove can be to make a case by some logical process, it can be to produce a body of ideas which converge in the same direction, and it can also be to give examples, preferably analyzed ones, which show the veracity of the initial propositions. Unlike affirmation, a proposition which is satisfied with itself, proof is part of a relation or a process. From this point of view, like a proposition which proclaims its autonomy, the legitimacy of the link in question can be subject to challenge.

The third form of discourse is problem formulation. It is no longer about affirming or proving but of considering what is simply possible, at the limit of the impossible, without making a choice. Both because the proposition in question is a simple hypothesis, but above all since another proposition can replace it in or-

der to play the same role: for example two or more different answers to the same question. A problem formulation is therefore a formulation of a series of opposing hypotheses linked together by the same object, or a group of questions likely to reveal a fundamental problem. It represents the overall difficulty and the stakes of a certain reflection. The paradox, which in fact contains a contradiction giving rise to a substantive problem, is a privileged form of problem formulation.

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## Possible, Probable and Necessary

\* Problem: Is reality possible, probable or necessary?

What is possible is what is not impossible or proven to be so. What is possible is neither obvious nor certain: it is sometimes close to the impossible and it is perhaps by a simple failure that it is not eliminated as a possibility. It often seems unimaginable to us, it reaches the limits of our thinking. The possible is a singular case from which we cannot derive any generality. In opposition to this, the probable looks familiar to us, more obvious, more acceptable, more plausible, therefore more general. It establishes itself as a sort of empiric certainty, or it becomes so through common sense reasoning. What is probable is what has a fair chance of existing, although the possible can sometimes turn out to be probable by a procedure of reflection, which shakes up thinking. However, the probable still remains contingent: it ignores the implacable nature of necessity, which mainly establishes itself through a logical approach of the type “if this, then that ...”, that is to say in a conditional form. The necessary does not directly concern the existence of material, concrete or temporal entities: nothing exists by necessity, with the possible exception of God or the universe, or some other absolute entity. But the necessary deals with relations between things and their predicates. For example: “Man necessarily lives since he breathes”.

These three determinations qualify the various propositions according to their degree of certainty for thinking, but they also involve the nature of the discourse. The possible falls within the merely considered hypothesis: “It is possible that I win at roulette if I pick a number”. The probable comes under what frequently happens or what should normally happen without overloading the range of possibilities: “It is probable that I win at roulette if I pick the majority of numbers”. The necessary, meanwhile, is an analytical, formal or logical approach generally connecting various predicates, a categorical judgment which excludes the exception: “It is necessary that I win at roulette if my number comes up.”

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## Induction, Deduction and Abduction

\* Problem: What can we be sure of?

By what process are ideas generated? Induction takes for granted that which is witnessed by sensory perceptions and experience, and from this it infers what must happen in general or what will happen in the future. A phenomenon which repeats itself should continue to repeat itself: “Until now the sun has risen every morning, so it will do so tomorrow as well”. Induction can make an absolute prediction, a certainty, but that it will occur it is not necessarily the case. Deduction is a logical approach which from two propositions draws a third, such as the classical syllogism: “Men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal”. In general, it is about combining a universal and a particular. Even so, a specific logical approach can take the premises from which it draws its conclusion as incontestable, but it can also simply affirm that the conclusion is true on the condition that the premises are valid. Theoretically, the elementary form is “if this, then that”, but very often the “if” is forgotten in favor of a “this, then that”, and the initial proposition or propositions are unconditionally affirmed.

If induction is produced by experience and deduction is produced by analysis or synthesis, abduction is an intuition, an invention, produced by creative reason in order to deal with a given problem. It is an approach which consists in producing a hypothesis which can clarify an apparent contradiction or solve a problem. For instance, the principle of universal gravitation lets us partially solve the problem of the relative movements of planets. The hypothesis has to produce a new concept which enables another type of relation between phenomena which contradict each other or are missing an explicit link. Any hypothesis will lead to a number of new deductions, which will form the framework of a new thinking pattern. If induction is founded on repetition of phenomena, then deduction is based on the coherence of reason, and abduction, or creation of hypotheses, on a dialectical relationship between the world and reason, although these distinctions are largely relative.

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## Opinion, Idea and Truth

\* Problem: Can an opinion be true?

On everything that is, in any case on everything that seems to be, we have opinions to which we hang on more or less, to which we attribute more or less certainty. We are more or less aware of the nature of these opinions, of their content, their functioning and especially of their origin. In other words, opinion seems to embody thought in what is most base and elementary. This does not mean that an opinion is necessarily false, only that it is not very profound and little aware of itself. As

opposed to this, the idea is the fruit of proper work. Work on production, work on analysis or work on examination. The idea is either aware of its origin, or it is aware of its content, its implications or its consequences, or it is aware of its limits, of the questions that can be asked of it and the objections which can be raised against it. Therefore the idea rests on a real procedure, while opinion comes from hearsay and approximation, although anyone can use these terms as they please.

If opinion is primary, if an idea is the result of labor, truth comes from a relation to a certitude, from compliance with a referent. In the most general way, what is true is that which complies with reality, often defined as material of physical nature, a reality verifiable by sensory experience. From this perspective, ideas are true if they correspond to observable objects or phenomena. But there is a second type of compliance: that of reason, human, singular or collective. What comes from a reasoning which seems convincing to whoever analyzes it or to a majority is considered true. There is a third type of compliance: that of individual reality. What is authentic is considered true, that which seems coherent in a given being, within a given vision, without systematically claiming some universal reality. A true being, a true theater play, a true masterpiece, are all expressions which refer to a particular truth. What does not comply with any referent in these three cases is declared false.

So truth can just as well be an opinion or an idea, even if we can think that the idea rather than the opinion tends towards truth, since it is more worked on and aware of its own genesis. Whatever the case may be, truth determines the nature and the presence of the relationship which links opinions to ideas, and what is false is characterized by the absence or the fragility of this relationship. The latter would be an incoherence, a lack, which explains why it is difficult to define in itself.

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## Singularity, Totality and Transcendence

✱ Problem: Can we do without transcendence in order to comprehend a singularity or a totality?

Singular is that which is taken as an entity in itself: an object, an idea, a phenomenon, even a reasoning or a category of things. Still, the importance of every singularity, however singular it may be, is that it can be distinguished from and opposed to another singularity or several other singularities of a comparable nature. In this sense, these singularities will share some form of community. They will have something in common, a common nature, a common foundation, but they will also have some particular characteristics, small or important, which will distinguish them from each other, which will oppose them to each other: they will distinguish themselves both from each other and from the generality. From this perspective,

these singularities of the same type could be grouped together into one species, even a subspecies, as well as into types grouping several species together; different terms expressing a totality which the determined singularities do not necessarily exhaust. All of these terms are relative; they depend on a point of departure and the general classification we are trying to establish. The main thing is that what is singular can belong to a totality and be distinguished from it by its specificity.

A thing is singular because it is different, a difference which is necessarily articulated within a community. A human being is singular because he accomplishes things which the majority of humans do not accomplish. But what is singular for man is not necessarily so for the zebra or the albatros. In other words, no singularity without a totality of reference.

In general, we will define transcendence as the essential characteristic of a totality or its unity, as what makes the community of a group of singularities possible. In essence, this characteristic can be perceived as a reality in itself from a metaphysical perspective, as a tool of the mind from an epistemological perspective, or as a mere attribute from a materialistic perspective. So the quality of humanity is both what conditions the singular human and what makes it possible to perceive humanity as a whole. Humanity, as transcendence, is of another order than man: it surpasses him while constituting him, it escapes him while defining his horizon. It presupposes an essence which defines existence. However, if this quality cannot be regarded in itself, as extrinsic to the singularities which it engenders, animates or determines, it could be called immanence, the horizontal form of transcendence. So we can ask ourselves if being is of transcendent nature, if it is in itself, or if it is nothing but a predicate of what is: an immanence. But the state, an entity in its own right, seems to transcend the totality of society made up of individuals.

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## Good, Beautiful and True

\* Problem: Can we think outside of the good, the beautiful and the true?

These three normative concepts, founders of axiology, sometimes described as transcendental, make it possible to distinguish existential and philosophical attitudes and to reflect on the world. They refer to three significant archetypes of functioning: the ethical, aesthetic and scientific. What is useful is defined as “good”, that which meets a need, that which eases and disperses a pain: it is that which causes both desire and satisfaction. Good therefore symbolizes the fullness of being, in opposition to what is considered partial, flawed and defective, even harmful: evil. The appeal of good encourages us to act, to question our own actions, their purpose and their methods, in order to reach well-being, happiness, whatever its form or nature. Are our actions just, legitimate, efficient, good or appropriate? Morality,

of an ethical, hedonistic, utilitarian or other nature is therefore a determination or a rationalization of our behavior for the purpose of a better being, or a pursuit of happiness, plenitude and a total good.

The beautiful instead characterizes the harmony between the parts of a whole, the perfection of an ensemble or the originality of singular forms, in opposition to the ugly, which is chaotic, imperfect or banal. The beautiful appeal to perception, sensory or intellectual. It encourages contemplation and admiration more than action, even if an act or an idea, like all things, can be characterized as beautiful. The beautiful generates a disinterested, gratuitous pleasure, since it is satisfied with itself. In general, the sensibility which gives access to the beautiful is considered more subjective than the sensibility which gives access to what is good; more immediate, less reasoned, although the beautiful can still qualify for the universality and the fullness of being.

If the good refers to action and the beautiful to contemplation, the true springs from intelligence and knowledge. It requires understanding, observation, analysis and comparison; it is based on the coherence of the world and of reason, the absence of which produces what is false. This activity has no other goal than itself, it requires us to always go further, because truth is never obtained in its entirety. What is true is an adequacy, between speech and its reality, between a particular idea and the reason which brings it forth, between an appearance and the being which underlies it. Because the true presupposes the false, implying a non-conformity of some entity to another entity, considered ontologically superior. More centered on the reality of the world, more aware of the human drama, it bets less bluntly on happiness than its two counterparts.

We notice that these three concepts each in their own way the unity of being or being itself. This has often made it possible to set them up as absolutes, to personalize them, to deify and assimilate all three into one supreme being, their opposites simply signifying a lack, a deprivation or a termination of being.

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## Being, Doing and Thinking

\* Problem: What is the primary reality of man?

Existence, or the essence of things, can be comprehended in three modalities. First, for the human being, what does his identity consist of? Is it enough for him to exist or is it mainly to think, because that is where his uniqueness resides, or is it rather to act on the world, to complete himself as a concrete and historical being? What is the foundation of man? The fact of being born a human, a species of animal or some particular category of existence, which implies that every human is human, from the outset, genetically. A second possibility: only homo sapiens is human as a

result of thinking, because the origin of mankind, signaling a break with the animal world, goes back to the first traces of intelligence. A third case in point: homo faber, which places the identity of man and his origin in his ability to act on the world, for example by the production and use of tools, assumed to be particularly human features.

Beyond a simple anthropological and historical problem, this distinction refers to the world vision which animates all our existence. For us to exist, is it enough to be, by pursuing, as the days go by, the initial impulsion of our coming into the world? By assuming existence, for what it is, in what it has to offer, in its limitations, in its generous plenitude – an attitude which can create both a certain naive and immediate happiness and a corrosive cynicism towards any human enterprise. Do we above all have to think to exist? Either by identifying with reason, learning, knowledge, artistic creation or culture, the only things capable of providing a sense of dignity to life – an attitude likely to lift the soul towards the spiritual and the ideal, or to adopt a sardonic or bitter view of life, the world and human actions, even to completely ignore these realities. Do we have to tackle the world head-on, the physical world or the human world, a world on which we must act so that our lives are worth the cost? The human being is then defined by his actions, his capacity for accomplishment, by his work, a cause of transformations on the environment – an attitude which can emphasize the totality of the human being in order to make every effort to fulfill this task, as well as it can despise and brutalize man simply for reasons of productivity, efficiency and immediacy.

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## **Anthropology, Epistemology and Metaphysics**

\* Problem: Is there one perspective which should dominate the others?

These three terms tie in with both the major divisions of philosophy and the world-visions they convey. For anthropology, philosophy is exclusively a human affair; man not only as a thinking subject but also as an object, singular or collective, has primacy there. Everything is thought out with historical man in mind, both as biological, intellectual, psychological, political and social being: it postulates a human primacy. Epistemology is above all concerned with knowledge and the conditions for this knowledge, independently of the subject. Of a formal nature, it more naturally prides itself with scientificity and certitude: the subject becomes an observer who witnesses, an experimenter who verifies. It distrusts all subjectivity, since it claims to have access to a tangible and material reality capable of confirming its procedures and affirmations.

Metaphysics claims to go beyond human and cosmic nature, to the extent that this reality is created or conditioned by another reality, which “surpasses” it, a pri-



mary reality which can be considered ideal, or of some kind of nature transcending both mind and matter. Matter and man, worldly knowledge, are then nothing but derealized remnants of being, of an unconditional or similar presence: its vision is rather symbolic.

While it is true that these three fields of philosophy cover adjoining and related realities which can without difficulty interpellate or juxtapose each other, they also tend to generate world visions that, through specific options which animate them, function in the opposition and exclusivity of postulates and their consequences. Thus most particular philosophies or world visions will naturally belong to one of these perspectives, articulating the different fields and their relationships according to the given perspective, de facto establishing a hierarchy of thought and of being.

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## Psychological, Moral and Judicial

\* Problem: What determines human actions?

There are different ways by which a human being determines his thoughts or his actions, different methods by which they can be evaluated or analyzed. The first is psychological, that is to say the genesis is the instincts, impulses and needs of the individual, whether they are primary or taught. This determination can be affective but also intellectual to the extent that in man, thought or reason sometimes becomes a psychological necessity. This is what we can call subjectivity.

The second determination is moral. That means that the motivations rather refer to a set of rules or principles, written or tacit ones, supposed to serve as a regulating ideal in order to determine a priori the behavior of each and every one, even his thoughts. This moral quite often complies with a given culture since it constitutes the individual from an early age, but it can also be more personal, insofar as the individual frees himself from his context or revolts against it. It can also be in line with subjectivity, either because it is integrated with it or it is in conflict with it. In general, there is always a certain psychological tension, or dilemma, between the immediacy of psychological needs and the intellectual construction which is embodied in morality. Nevertheless, we can also understand morality as a feeling, which does not prevent it from coming into conflict with other feelings, more primary ones, and more related to immediate satisfaction of pleasure. Good and bad are the concepts mostly used in this domain, whatever the nature of this good and bad.

The third determination is judicial. It most often refers to written rules or laws which necessarily implies a sanction in case of transgression, even if we can also refer to a “natural law”, “law of the jungle”, “reality principle”, “principle of least

action” or some other principle. The judicial domain does not provide advice or recommendations, it enacts and constrains, whereas in the moral domain the distinction is not always so clear. The judicial domain is hardly concerned with subjectivity, except for certain extreme cases such as alienation which in general renders the individual non-accountable according to statutory law. Fear comes to play an important role, because the constraint is maintained, even brutal. This coercion can even be considered alienating by its total negation of the subject, or considered as servitude, but its advantage is to limit the aberrations of subjectivity which morality addresses in a weaker or more ambiguous way. The arbitrary dimension of the law also results in the very problematic tension between legality and legitimacy, insofar as certain legal codes can be considered immoral.

This list is the result of an analysis of common difficulties of reflection and discussion. It was carried out as part of a development of a collection of publications for introduction into philosophy: *L'apprenti philosophe* (The Philosopher's Apprentice) published by Nathan. It can serve as a complementary tool for philosophical practice, a help to better identify the requirements for the construction of thought.

The different obstacles or solutions mentioned here are sometimes close to each other. They overlap during a discussion and can therefore be replaced or combined in the same place.

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### Obstacles

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#### Slide of meaning

A transformation of a proposition or an idea, taking place surreptitiously and imperceptibly, by the transformation of this or that idea or proposition to a closely related formulation, but of substantially different meaning.

- Example: to transform the proposition “everyone has their opinions” to the proposition “we are entitled to our opinions”. The second proposition implies a notion of legitimacy of opinion which the first one does not necessarily contain.

(See [Haste](#), [Emotional outburst](#))

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#### Indetermination of the relative

A refusal to answer, to explain an idea or to test its meaning, by invoking the indefinite multiplicity of possible subjective points of view, frequently brought about by “it depends”, “according to”, “it is more complicated than that” ...

- Example: to the question “is truth a useful concept?”, only provide the answer that it depends on each and everyone and on the point of view from where we are.

(See [Undifferentiated concept](#))

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## False evidence

The act of considering a cliché, a banal proposition as indisputable, out of hand justified by its apparent obviousness, which in fact comes from prejudice, preconceived ideas or absence of thinking.

- Example: taking the following proposition for granted: “there is not one truth but many”. We could then ask why we use the same term of truth as a significant common word, as a concept.

(See [Dogmatic certainty](#), [Alibi of the number](#), [Emotional outburst](#), [Received opinion](#))

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## Dogmatic certainty

A mindset which judges a particular idea as unquestionable and is content with stating it quickly, even to repeat it, without trying to justify it, without digging into its presuppositions and consequences, without putting it to the test, nor considering a contrary hypothesis. A flaw in thinking which stops any possibility of problematization.

- Example: when someone declares that “ignorance opposes knowledge” without considering how “conscious ignorance makes it possible to learn”.

(See [Emotional outburst](#), [False evidence](#), [Received opinion](#), [Reductive idea](#))

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## Alibi of the number

The claim of an alleged multiplicity, the mentioning of which is supposed to prove beyond doubt a proposition expressed beforehand.

- Example: “everyone agrees: we are entitled to our own opinions”. The number in general does not prove anything in itself, unless it is strictly specified or explicit.

(See [Dogmatic certainty](#), [False evidence](#), [Received opinion](#))

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## Received opinion

The act of accepting an idea or a proposition for the only reason that it would be validated by the authority of tradition, out of habit, by the social setting, by an expert, recognized or not, or by the evidence of some “eternal nature”.

- Example: stating the proposition “to each his own truth” and justifying it by the following expressions: “history proves to us that ...”, since Antiquity men have

known that ...”, “philosopher so-and-so says that ...” or even “society is founded on the idea that ...”, by way of explanation.

(See [Alibi of the number](#), [Dogmatic certainty](#), [Emotional outburst](#), [False evidence](#), [Reductive idea](#), [Haste](#))

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## Haste

An attitude which consists in formulating a hasty, even vague answer, without first making the effort of identifying the various factors that may play a part in the resolution of the question at hand. It results in a risk of confusion and misinterpretation.

- Example: to the question “is truth a necessary concept?” answer “to each his own truth” without taking the time to determine if truth is a necessity since we do not see how stating a multiplicity of perspectives would answer the question.

(See [Slide of meaning](#), [Dogmatic certainty](#), [Emotional outburst](#))

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## Emotional outburst

A moment of agitation when our convictions lead us to refuse the analysis and the examination of our statement in order to continue our discourse without considering other possible meanings.

- Example: when I support the idea that “our opinions belong to us”, and get carried away in my speech, I do not reply to the following objection: “the opinion ignores its origin, it is alien to itself”. Either because I refuse to reply to objections made to me or because I do not take the time to formulate such objections myself.

(See [Dogmatic certainty](#), [Undifferentiated concept](#), [Reductive idea](#), [False evidence](#))

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## Unexplained example

Improper use of an example which consists in considering its mere formulation in narrative form, or even its simple mention sufficient enough to justify an idea or a thesis, without providing the analysis which would help showing the interest and the significance of the example in question.

- Example: when I want to defend the idea that “we invent knowledge” I bring up the name of Einstein as an example without any other form of explanation.

(See [Undifferentiated concept](#), [False evidence](#), [Reductive idea](#))

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## Undifferentiated concept

Imprecise and truncated use of a concept, which results in creating a proposition that is not taken all the way, either in the exploration of its implicit presuppositions or in the analysis or its various possible consequences. Therefore, the adopted position does assume its full argumentative logic.

- Example: “there is no knowledge without reason”. But here, does the term reason refer to the idea of cause, to the idea of reasoning, to the idea of meaning, to the idea of knowledge? The proposal varies enormously according to various expected interpretations, producing different meanings which can be radically opposed to each other.

(See [Dogmatic certainty](#), [Haste](#))

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## Reductive idea

The act of arbitrarily choosing and defending a single point of view, which turns out to be incapable of taking into account all the information of a question or a concept, consequently removing it from its real stakes. The justification of a particular idea, but the absence of a critical position.

- Example: to the question “should we defend our opinions?”, answer yes and only work on the development of this point of view without raising the issue of how this position restricts thinking.

(See [Dogmatic certainty](#), [Emotional outburst](#), [False evidence](#), [Received opinion](#))

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## Paralyzing uncertainty

A mindset which is inhibited in the progression of its reflection, because two or more contradictory options are presented to it, without any of them being successful in initially winning its support, and without it daring to risk an analysis of the present theses or to articulate a problem.

- Example: first announcing the idea that “we should defend our opinions”, later announcing that “intelligence is being able to change our opinion”, then simply saying that we hesitate between these two propositions, just to conclude that the problem is difficult and we cannot come to a decision.

(See [Undifferentiated concept](#), [Difficulty to problematize](#))

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## Illusion of synthesis

A refusal to consider two or more elements of an idea separately by sustaining them in an artificial unity, which prevents an adequate evaluation of the conflicting dimension and the formulation of a problem which takes charge of these diverse aspects. A superficial resolution of a contradiction.

- Example: the proposition “in everyone, opinions and feelings go well together”. Here it is a question of explaining how both can match, but also how they can contradict each other.

(See [Difficulty to problematize](#), [Loss of unity](#))

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## Loss of unity

Forgetting the link between different constituent parts of a remark in favor of a fragmented and pointillistic approach and to the detriment of taking into consideration the overall unity of the statement. A breach of coherence in the development of ideas.

- Example: to answer the question “do we have the right to say what we think is true?” by dealing with the legal and intellectual aspect, or even creating a problem for this matter, only to then tackle the moral angle of the question without caring about making a link between this new aspect and the work already done.

(See [Difficulty to problematize](#), [Illusion of synthesis](#), [Reductive idea](#))

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## Paralogism

A transgression, during an argumentation, of the basic rules of logic without awareness or justification of this transgression.

- Example: to affirm that “a truth which is valid for an individual is valid for everyone” without showing or justifying why in this case the singular automatically becomes universal, an operation which in itself is contrary to the laws of logic.

(See [False evidence](#))

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## Difficulty to problematize

The failure of reflection which, when it encounters two or more contradictory propositions on a given subject, hesitates or refuses to connect them. It then oscillates between them, or even simply welds them together, without trying to deal

with them and truly link them by producing a problem.

- Example: two propositions are stated in two separate moments: “everyone has the right to express their opinions” and “certain opinions should be banned from being expressed”. They are stated one after the other or together, and we simply conclude that it is impossible to come to a decision without connecting them, among other things in the form of a problem, which allows us to verify on which notion the opposition between the two propositions hinges.

Then we could propose the following formulation: “we can express our opinions insofar as they do not break the law or the moral obligation not to harm others”.

(See [Illusion of synthesis](#), [Reductive idea](#))

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## Resolutions

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### Suspension of judgment

Temporarily putting aside any bias, in order to state and study the various possibilities of understanding an argument or a problem.

- Example: even if we think that “everyone has the right to express their opinions”, suspend your conviction in order to study and to problematize this question.

(See [Critical position](#), [Thinking the unthinkable](#))

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### Completing an idea

Studying and taking charge of the important elements of an argument, recognizing its presuppositions or its consequences, explaining its different meanings or nuances.

- Example: if we state the idea that “knowledge liberates man”, showing the different meanings of “knowledge”, as part of the senses, of reason, of awareness or of convention, or choose one of these meanings, specifying it and explaining its consequences.

(See [Functional synthesis](#), [Introducing an operative concept](#))

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### Critical position

Submitting questions or objections to an argument in order to analyze and check its limits, which makes it possible to specify its content, to deepen the un-



derstanding of its presuppositions and its consequences, and to raise a problem.

- Example: if it is stated that “truth is a necessary concept”, object that truth can represent a negation of the singular, a negation of the real, a negation of subjectivity, and respond to these objections.

(See [Suspension of judgment](#), [Thinking the unthinkable](#))

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## Thinking the unthinkable

Imagining and formulating a hypothesis, analyzing its implications and consequences, even if our a priori convictions and our initial reasoning seem to refuse this possibility. Accepting a hypothesis which forces itself on us through demonstration, even if intuitively it seems unacceptable to us.

- Example: if the starting hypothesis is the idea that “knowledge liberates man”, try to justify the opposite position: “knowledge is an obstacle to existence”.

(See [Suspension of judgment](#), [Critical position](#))

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## Analyzed example

First quote or invent, then explain an example by putting a problem or a concept in a context, in order to study it, explaining it or checking its validity.

- Example: if we want to defend the idea that “truth is a dangerous concept”, we can refer to the example of religious fundamentalism and show how truth serves as justification for the imposition of a ready-made ideology to the detriment of thinking and individual freedom.

(See [Completing an idea](#), [Introducing an operative concept](#))

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## Introducing an operative concept

Introducing a new notion or idea to a thought which allows us to articulate a problem or to clarify how to deal with a question. The role of the concept is to avoid all meaningless relativism, like “it depends”, to clarify hypotheses, and to make links between ideas.

- Example: to justify the idea that “knowledge liberates man”, introduce the concept or “awareness” and explain it.

(See [Completing an idea](#), [Functional synthesis](#))

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## Functional synthesis

Making a concise link between two or more separate or contradictory proposals on the same subject, in order to articulate a synthesis or to produce a concept. The synthesis can either take the form of a question or of a proposition expressing a problem, a paradox or a contradiction.

■ Example: to deal with the question of truth, first formulate two propositions: “truth is a universal principle” and “truth is a subjective concept”, then articulate a synthesis in the form of a question: “does the individual have access to the truth?”, or in the form of an assertion: “the concept of truth is in each person the legitimate access of the singular individual to the universal”.

(See [Completing an idea](#), [Introducing an operative concept](#))