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The Conditions of the Question: What Is Philosophy?

Gilles Deleuze

Translated by Daniel W. Smith and Arnold I. Davidson

Perhaps the question “What is philosophy?” can only be posed late in life, when old age has come, and with it the time to speak in concrete terms. It is a question one poses when one no longer has anything to ask for, but its consequences can be considerable. One was asking the question before, one never ceased asking it, but it was too artificial, too abstract; one expounded and dominated the question, more than being grabbed by it. There are cases in which old age bestows not an eternal youth, but on the contrary a sovereign freedom, a pure necessity where one enjoys a moment of grace between life and death, and where all the parts of the machine combine to dispatch into the future a trait that traverses the ages: Turner, Monet, Matisse. The elderly Turner acquired or conquered the right to lead painting down a deserted path from which there was no return, and that was no longer distinguishable from a final question. In the same way, in philosophy, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* is a work of old age, a wild work from which descendants will never cease to flow.

We cannot lay claim to such a status. The time has simply come for us to ask what philosophy is. And we have never ceased to do this in the past, and we already had the response, which has not varied: philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts. But it was not only necessary for the response to take note of the question; it also had to determine a time, an occasion, the circumstances, the landscapes and personae, the conditions and unknowns of the question. One had to be able to

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pose the question “between friends” as a confidence or a trust, or else, faced with an enemy, as a challenge, and at the same time one had to reach that moment, between dog and wolf, when one mistrusts even the friend.

This is because concepts need conceptual personae that contribute to their definition. “Friend” is one such persona, which is even said to attest to a Greek origin of philosophy: other civilizations had Wise Men, but the Greeks introduce these “friends,” who are not simply more modest wise men. It was the Greeks who confirmed the death of the Wise Man and replaced him with the philosophers, the friends of wisdom, those who search for wisdom, but do not formally possess it. Yet few thinkers have asked themselves what “friend” means, even and especially the Greeks. Would “friend” designate a certain competent intimacy, a kind of material affinity [*goût matériel*] or potentiality, like that of the carpenter with the wood: the good carpenter knows the potential of the wood, he is the friend of the wood? The question is an important one, since the friend, as it appears in philosophy, no longer designates either an extrinsic person, an example, or an empirical circumstance, but rather a presence intrinsic to thought, a condition of possibility of thought itself—in short, a living category, a lived transcendental, a constitutive element of thought. And in fact, at the birth of philosophy, the Greeks made the friend submit to a power play [*coup de force*] that placed it in relation, no longer with another person, but with an Entity, an Objectivity, an Essence. This is what the oft-cited formula expresses, which must be translated, “I am the friend of Peter, of Paul, or even of the philosopher Plato, but even more so, I am the friend of the True, of Wisdom, or of the Concept.” The philosopher knows a lot about concepts, and about the lack of concepts; he knows, in an instant, which are inviable, arbitrary, or inconsistent, and which, on the contrary, are well made and bear witness to a creation, even if it is a disturbing and dangerous one.

Gilles Deleuze was professor of philosophy at the University of Paris VIII, Vincennes–St.–Denis, until his retirement in 1987. Among his books translated into English are the two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (*Anti-Oedipus* [1983] and *A Thousand Plateaus* [1987]), the two-volume *Cinema* (*The Movement-Image* [1986] and *The Time-Image* [1989]), *The Logic of Sense* (1990), and *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1990). **Daniel W. Smith** is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the University of Chicago. He is at work on a study of the philosophy of Deleuze, and is translating Deleuze’s *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*. **Arnold I. Davidson**, executive editor of *Critical Inquiry*, teaches philosophy at the University of Chicago and is currently Marta Sutton Weeks Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center.

What does “friend” mean when it becomes a conceptual persona, or a condition for the exercise of thought? Or even “lover”; is it not rather the lover? And will not the friend reintroduce, within thought itself, a vital relation with the Other that one had believed excluded from pure thought? Or again, is it not a question of someone other than the friend or lover? For if the philosopher is the friend or lover of Wisdom, is it not because he lays a claim upon it, striving for it potentially rather than possessing it actually? Thus the friend would also be the claimant, and what he calls himself the friend of is the Thing on which the claim is made, but not the third party, who would become, on the contrary, a rival. Friendship would involve as much jealous distrust of the rival as it would amorous tension toward the object of desire. When friendship is turned toward essence, the two friends would be like the claimant and the rival (but who could distinguish them?). In this way, Greek philosophy would coincide with the formation of “cities”: relations of rivalry were promoted between and within cities, opposing claimants in all domains, in love, in the games, the tribunals, the magistratures, politics—and even in thought, which would find its condition, not only in the friend, but in the claimant and the rival (the dialectic that Plato defined by *amphisbētēsis*).¹ A generalized athleticism. The friend, the lover, the claimant, and the rival are transcendental determinations which, for all that, do not lose their intense and animated existence, whether in a single persona or in several. And when, today, Maurice Blanchot, one of those rare thinkers to consider the meaning of the word “friend” in *philosophy*, takes up this question internal to the conditions of thought as such, does he not again introduce new conceptual personae into the heart of the most pure Thought, personae that are now hardly Greek, but come from elsewhere, bringing in their wake new living relations raised to the status of a priori figures: a certain fatigue, a certain distress between friends that converts friendship itself to the thought of the concept, as an infinite sharing and patience.² The list of conceptual personae is never closed, and for this reason plays an important role in the evolution or mutations of philosophy; their diversity must be understood without being reduced to the already complex unity of the philosopher.

The philosopher is the friend of the concept, he has the concept potentially. This means that philosophy is not a simple art of forming, inventing, or fabricating concepts, for concepts are not necessarily forms, discoveries, or products. Philosophy, more rigorously understood, is the discipline that consists of *creating concepts*. Would the friend then be the friend of his own creations? To create ever new concepts—this is the

1. Deleuze contrasts Plato's use of *amphisbētēsis* with Aristotle's use of *antiphrasis* in *Différence et Répétition* (Paris, 1968), pp. 82–89.—TRANS.

2. See Maurice Blanchot, *L'Amitié* (Paris, 1971).—TRANS.

object of philosophy. It is because the concept must be created that it refers back to the philosopher as the one who has the concept potentially, or who has the potential and competence of the concept. One cannot object that creation is instead expressed through the sensible or through the arts, insofar as art brings spiritual entities into existence, and philosophical concepts are also “sensibilia.” In fact, the sciences, arts, and philosophies are all equally creators, although it falls to philosophy alone to create concepts in the strict sense. Concepts do not wait for us ready-made, like celestial bodies. There is no heaven for concepts. They must be invented, fabricated, or rather created, and would be nothing without the signature of those who create them. Nietzsche specified the task of philosophy when he wrote, “Philosophers must no longer be content to accept the concepts that are given to them, so as merely to clean and polish them, *but must begin by fabricating and creating them, positing them and making them convincing to those who have recourse to them.* Hitherto they have generally trusted their concepts as if they were a miraculous gift from some sort of equally miraculous world,”³ but this trust must be replaced by mistrust, and it is concepts that the philosopher must mistrust the most as long as he has not himself created them (Plato knew this well, though he taught the reverse . . .). What would be the worth of a philosopher of whom one could say: he did not create the concept? We at least see what philosophy is not: *it is neither contemplation, nor reflection, nor communication*, even if it can sometimes believe itself to be one or the other of these because of the capacity of every discipline to engender its own illusions, and to hide itself behind its own particular fog. It is not contemplation, for contemplations are things themselves, as viewed through the creation of their own concepts. It is not reflection, because no one needs philosophy in order to reflect on whatever one wants to reflect on: we believe that we are giving a great deal to philosophy by making it the art of reflection, but we take away everything from it, for mathematicians per se have never waited for philosophers in order to reflect on mathematics, nor artists, on painting or music; to say that they then become philosophers is a bad joke, as long as their reflection belongs to their respective creation. And philosophy finds no final refuge in communication, which works only with opinions, in order to create a “consensus” and not a concept.

Philosophy does not contemplate, it does not reflect, nor does it communicate, although it has to create the concepts of these actions or passions. Contemplation, reflection, and communication are not disciplines, but machines that constitute Universals in all disciplines. The Universals of contemplation, then of reflection, are like the two illusions that philosophy has already traversed in its dream of dominating the other disciplines

3. We have translated this quotation directly from the French. For an English translation from the German, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1967), pp. 220–21.—TRANS.

(objective idealism and subjective idealism), and philosophy does not honor itself by now falling back upon the universals of communication that would give it an imaginary mastery of the marketplace and the media (intersubjective idealism). Every creation is singular, and the concept, as the properly philosophical creation, is always a singularity. The first principle of philosophy is that Universals explain nothing, but must themselves be explained. *Knowledge through pure concepts*—we can consider this definition of philosophy as decisive. But the Nietzschean verdict falls: you will know nothing by concepts if you have not first created them To philosophize is to create concepts, and great philosophers are thus very rare.

To know oneself—to learn to think—to act as if nothing were self-evident—to wonder, “to wonder why there is something . . . ,” these determinations of philosophy and many others form interesting though, in the long run, tiresome attitudes, but they do not constitute a well-defined occupation, a true activity, even from a pedagogical point of view. To create concepts, at least, is to do something. The question concerning the use or utility of philosophy, or even its harmfulness, must be changed accordingly.

Many problems crowd in upon the hallucinating eyes of an old man who would see himself confronting all sorts of philosophical concepts and conceptual personae. First of all, these concepts are and remain signs: Aristotle's *substance*, Descartes's *cogito*, Leibniz's *monad*, Kant's *condition*, Schelling's *potency*, Bergson's *durée*. . . . But, also, certain concepts demand an extraordinary word, sometimes barbarous or shocking, that must designate them, while others are content with a very ordinary word in current usage, which is swelled with such distant harmonics that they risk being imperceptible to a nonphilosophical ear. Some concepts call forth archaisms, others neologisms, through almost mad etymological exercises: etymology as a properly philosophical athleticism. In each case, there must be a strange necessity for these words and their choice, like an element of style. The baptism of the concept solicits a properly philosophical taste that proceeds with violence or with insinuation, and that constitutes, within language, a language of philosophy—not only a vocabulary, but a syntax that rises to the sublime or a great beauty. Now, although they are dated, signed, and baptized, concepts have their own way of not dying, and yet are submitted to constraints of renewal, replacement, and mutation that give philosophy a history and also a restless geography, of which each moment and each place are conserved, but within time, and pass away, but outside of time. If concepts never cease changing, it will be asked what unity remains for the philosophies. Is it the same unity as that of the sciences or the arts, which do not proceed by concepts? Where do their respective histories lie? If philosophy is this continuous creation of concepts, we will obviously want to ask not only what a concept is as a philosophical Idea, but also what the other creative Ideas consist of, which are not concepts and which belong to the sciences and the arts, and that have

their own history and their own becoming, and their own variable relations among themselves and philosophy. The exclusivity of the creation of concepts assures philosophy a function, but gives it no preeminence, no privilege, insofar as there are other ways of thinking and creating, other modes of ideation that do not have to pass through concepts—beginning, for example, with scientific thought. And we will always come back to the question of knowing of what use is this activity of creating concepts, given that it is differentiated from scientific or artistic activity. Why is it necessary to create concepts, and ever new concepts; under what necessity, for what use? Create them for what? To respond that the greatness of philosophy would lie precisely in having no use at all is a stupid coquetry. In any case, we have never had any problem concerning the death of metaphysics or the overcoming of philosophy: this is useless and tiresome drivel. People today speak of the bankruptcy of systems, whereas it is only the concept of system that has changed. If there is a place and a time to create concepts, the operation that is carried out there will always be called philosophy, or would not even be distinguished from it even if one gave it another name. Philosophy would willingly yield its place to any other discipline that could better fulfill the function of creating concepts, but as long as that function subsists, it will still be called philosophy, always philosophy.

We know, however, that the friend or the lover, as claimants, are not without rivals. If philosophy has a Greek origin as we have so often been told, it is because the city, unlike empires or states, invents the *Agon* as the rule of a society of “friends,” the community of free men as rivals (citizens). This is the constant situation that Plato describes: if each citizen lays claim to something, he necessarily encounters rivals, so that it is necessary to be able to judge the well-foundedness of the claims. The carpenter claims the wood, but clashes with the forester, the lumberjack, and the joiner, who say, “*I am the friend of the wood!*” If it is a question of taking care of humans, there are many claimants who present themselves as the friend of humans—the peasant who nourishes them, the weaver who clothes them, the doctor who nurses them, the warrior who protects them. If in all these cases the selection is made, after all, from within a somewhat limited circle, it is no longer so in the case of politics, where, in the Athenian democracy as Plato sees it, anyone can claim anything. Hence the necessity for Plato to sort out these claims, to create instances according to which the well-foundedness of the claims can be judged: these are the Ideas as philosophical concepts. But even here, will we not encounter all sorts of claimants who say, “*I am the true philosopher! I am the friend of Wisdom or of the Well-Founded?*” The rivalry culminates with that of the philosopher and the sophist, who fight over the remains of the ancient sage. But how is one to distinguish the false friend from the true, and the concept from the simulacrum? The simulator and the friend: it is an entire

Platonic theater that makes the conceptual personae proliferate by endowing them with the potential of the comic and the tragic.

Closer to us, philosophy has met with many new rivals. These were first of all the human sciences, and especially sociology, which wanted to replace it. But as philosophy had increasingly misunderstood its vocation of creating concepts, in order to take refuge in universals, it no longer knew very well what was at stake. Was it a matter of renouncing every creation of the concept in favor of a strict human science? Or, on the contrary, was it a matter of transforming the nature of concepts by making them either into collective representations, or into the conceptions of the world created by peoples, their vital, historical, and spiritual forces? Then it was the turn of epistemology, linguistics, or even psychoanalysis, and logical analysis. From test to test, philosophy confronted increasingly insolent and calamitous rivals, which Plato himself would not have imagined in his most comic moments. Finally, the deepest disgrace was reached when computer science, advertising, marketing, and design appropriated the word "concept" itself, and said, "This is our business, we are the *creative* ones, we are the '*conceptors*'! We are the friends of the concept, we put them into our computers." Information and creativity, concept and enterprise: already an abundant bibliography. . . . The general movement that replaced *Critique* by commercial promotion has not left philosophy unaffected. The simulacrum, the simulation of a package of noodles, has become the true concept, and the person who packages the product, merchandise, or work of art has become the philosopher, the conceptual persona, or the artist. But how could philosophy, an old person, line up with smart young executives in a race for the universals of communication in order to determine a marketable form of the concept, *Merz*? The more philosophy clashes with impudent and silly rivals, the more it encounters them in its own heart, the more it feels itself driven to fulfill its task of creating concepts, which are meteorites [*aérolithes*] rather than merchandise. It has mad smiles that wipe away its tears. The question of philosophy is thus the singular point where the concept and creation are linked together.

Philosophers are not sufficiently concerned with the nature of the concept as a philosophical reality. They have preferred to consider it as a given representation or piece of knowledge, which would be explained by the faculties capable of forming it (abstraction, or generalization) or using it (judgement). But the concept is not given, it is created, it is to be created; and it is not formed, it posits itself in itself, a self-positing. Each activity implies the other, since what is truly created, from the living being to the work of art, by that very fact enjoys a self-positing of itself, or a self-poetic character by which one recognizes it. The more the concept is created, the more it posits itself. What is dependent upon a free creative

activity is also that which posits itself in itself, independently and necessarily: the most subjective will be the most objective. It is the post-Kantians, notably Schelling and Hegel, who paid the most attention, in this sense, to the concept as a philosophical reality. Hegel powerfully defined the concept by the Figures of its creation and the Moments of its self-positing: the Figures constitute the side under which the concept is created by and within consciousness, through the succession of minds, while the Moments make up the other side according to which the concept posits itself and brings together minds in the absolute of the Ego. Hegel thereby showed that the concept has nothing to do with a general or abstract idea that would not depend on philosophy itself. But he did so at the price of an indeterminate extension of philosophy that hardly allowed the independent movement of the sciences and arts to subsist, because it reconstituted universals with its own moments and no longer treated the personae of its own creation as anything but figuring phantoms. The post-Kantians circled around a universal *encyclopedia* of the concept that referred the creation of concepts to a pure subjectivity, instead of giving itself a more modest task, a *pedagogy* of the concept, that should analyze the conditions of creation as factors of moments that remain singular. If the three ages of the concept are the encyclopedia, pedagogy, and the professional commercial formation, only the second can prevent us from falling from the summits of the first into the absolute disaster of the third, an absolute disaster for thought, no matter what, of course, the social benefits from the point of view of universal capitalism.