Strange Proximity: 
*Deleuze et Derrida dans les parages du concept*

Paul Patton

*Les parages* means a vicinity; it is a metaphor that comes to us from nautical or maritime language; it names a vicinity at a distance that is difficult to measure: that which is neither near nor far. There is an attraction there, a kinship, a proximity but without the one reaching the other...¹

If there is such a thing as poststructuralist thought, then it ought to be possible to show how this is shared in different ways and to varying degrees by an indeterminate number of thinkers. And if there is a real commonality among those often grouped together under the rubric of a ‘philosophy of difference’, then this would need to be demonstrated in the case of its principal practitioners, Deleuze and Derrida. To date, there has been suprisingly little comparative investigation of their work, although many have commented upon the kinship between them: Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, points to the ‘strange proximity’ that enables him to recognise in Deleuze a philosophical contemporary despite profound differences in philosophical orientation.² Perhaps it is this strange proximity between their respective approaches to philosophy which explains the relative lack of communication between Derridean and Deleuzian thought. On the one hand, there is a considerable degree of convergence with respect to theses defended (a pure ‘difference’ more fundamental than contradiction, a repetition which is not simply the recurrence of the same) and positions taken (the ‘overturning’ of platonism, the refusal of structural, temporal or other forms of closure). On the other hand, there are marked divergences in style and philosophical affiliation (engagement with Heidegger) which distinguish their manner of pursuing non-dialectical philosophy. This essay explores in an entirely provisional and incomplete manner their respective concepts of concepts. In each case, we encounter both a specifically philosophical concept of concept and some similarities between these and their differences from ‘ordinary’ concepts as well as metaphors. Comparison from this
perspective may open up some hitherto unremarked common ground between these two approaches.

In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari define philosophy as the creation of concepts. They agree with Nietzsche that philosophers 'must no longer accept concepts as a gift, nor merely purify and polish them, but first make and create them, present them and make them convincing'. Accordingly, they define the philosopher as the 'friend' of the concept in the sense that the joiner is a friend of wood or the trainer a friend of the animal: s/he is the one endowed with the skill required to bring out the potential of the concept, which means to produce well-formed, sustainable and, above all, new concepts. In effect, this is a normative definition in which 'concept' refers to a specifically philosophical creation. On this basis, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish philosophy from other forms of creative intellectual activity such as science and art: 'The concept belongs to philosophy and only to philosophy'. Science and art, including literary art, are also ways of thinking and creating, but they do not produce concepts. In the terminology of *What is Philosophy?*, science aims at the representation of states of affairs by means of mathematical or propositional functions, while art does not aim at representation but at the capture and expression in a given medium of the objective content of particular sensations. While philosophy's exclusive right to concept creation means that it has a distinct object and vocation, it has no metaphysical pre-eminence or epistemological privilege with regard to these other activities. Art and science no less than philosophy are defined as means of casting a net or laying out a plane over chaos.

In accordance with their own account of this philosophical persona, Deleuze and Guattari appear in the role of friends of the concept. Their collaborative work is a sustained exercise in concept creation, beginning with the concept of desiring machine in *Antigone* and continuing across the various textual plateaus which define concepts such as machinic assemblage, order-word, refrain, deterritorialization, plane of consistency and becoming. Such philosophical concepts are not created *ex nihilo*. They are always proposed in relation to specific problems and constructed by means of the combination and transformation of prior concepts. Every concept, Deleuze and Guattari argue, has components which may in
turn be considered concepts. For example, the concept of the order-word in the ‘Postulates of Linguistics’ includes among its components both the Austinian concepts of a speech act and the Stoic concept of the ‘sayable’ which is expressed in a proposition but attributed to bodies and states of affairs: these combine to form the concept of the incorporeal event which is at once the sense of a linguistic expression and what is actualised in corporeal processes and events. The concept of deterritorialisation is similarly complex since it includes the concept of territory (that from which a given process of de-territorialisation escapes), and the concept of reterritorialisation: deterritorialisation is never simple but always ‘inseparable from correlative reterritorialisations’.5

When Deleuze and Guattari say that ‘the object of philosophy is to create concepts that are always new’,6 they do not mean just that philosophy should create novel concepts, although that is part of what they mean. More importantly, they mean that philosophy as they understand it should create concepts that are untimely in Nietzsche’s sense of that term: concepts ‘acting counter to our time, and therefore acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come’.7 The phrase ‘concepts that are always new’ therefore points to a further respect in which the Deleuzian conception of philosophy is modelled on that of Nietzsche, namely in its opposition to thought which seeks only the recognition of what exists and its preference for an untimely thought which would invent new possibilities for life.8 When Deleuze and Guattari claim that the creation of concepts in itself calls for ‘a new earth and a people that do not yet exist’ this should be understood as entirely stipulative, like Deleuze’s claim in Difference and Repetition that to think is to create.9

Derrida also links the movement of deconstruction with an inventiveness in thought as well as in the social field: ‘Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all’.10 While he does not define his distinctive practice of philosophy in terms of concept creation, the deconstructive reading of philosophical texts involves a form of conceptualisation which is no less specific to this practice of philosophy. Deconstruction proceeds via the serial production of ‘quasi-concepts’ such as ‘trace’, ‘supplement’, ‘differance’ and ‘pharmakon’, eventually to affirm the need to think beyond the
concept or think the concept otherwise. Before comparing Derrida's and Deleuze's concepts of specifically philosophical concepts, it may be useful to approach the similarities between them by way of their attitudes towards the other significant but elusive figure which is always to be found in the vicinity of the concept, namely metaphor.

No metaphor versus generalised metaphoricality

Deleuze and Guattari are not friends of metaphor. Their meta-philosophical analysis makes no mention of metaphor, and their earlier work is studded with denials that their creative use of language is in any way metaphoric. Consider, for example, the following passage from *A Thousand Plateaus*, '... There is no "like" here, we are not saying "like an electron", "like an interaction" etc. The plane of consistency is the abolition of all metaphor; all that consists is Real'; or the parallel declaration from *Dialogues* that 'when a word assumes a different meaning, or even enters into a different syntax, we can be sure that it has crossed another flux or that it has been introduced to a different regime of signs ... It is never a matter of metaphor; there are no metaphors only combinations'.

By contrast, perhaps because of his attention to the textual work performed by metaphors as well as the slippage or play which metaphor brings to philosophy, Derrida is widely mistaken for a friend of metaphor. It is a characteristic move in his deconstruction of particular conceptual hierarchies to point to the metaphoric use of the subordinate term in characterisations of the superordinate term, as Plato and Saussure do in using a metaphor of writing to characterise speech as the primary form of language. However, pointing to the role of metaphor in philosophy does not amount to endorsing a conception of philosophy as purely or even predominantly metaphorical. In common with Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida's conception of deconstructive philosophy is one which does not privilege metaphor. 'White Mythology' exposes the rationale behind Derrida's suspicion of the classical philosophical concept of metaphor, arguing that this concept itself is thoroughly imbued with metaphor. In its original Aristotelian sense, the concept of metaphor presupposes the existence of a literal language in which there are
proper names for things. It is on this condition that metaphor may be defined as giving to some thing a name that belongs to something else. But if the things named are supposed to exist independently, or if the thoughts expressed in language are supposed to be capable of expression by other means, then the distinction between the literal and metaphorical becomes unstable. On the one hand, the concept of metaphor is itself irreducibly metaphoric, since it relies upon figures of the displacement or transport of meaning: transposing or carrying over the name of something onto something else already involves both a spatial as well as a proprietary metaphor. On the other hand, the proper or literal use of language involves the same metaphoric movements, since it is defined as a means of conveying that which might be conveyed by other means, or not be conveyed at all and yet still exist. For reasons such as these, Derrida argues that Aristotle’s entire semantic theory ‘is implicated in metaphor’.14

Deleuze and Derrida are united in their rejection of the logocentric metaphysics which underpins the Aristotelian conception of metaphor. Both endorse Nietzsche’s overturning of Platonism and deny the possibility of a metaphysical equivalent of literal language. In view of this common heritage, Nietzsche’s dissolution of the opposition between metaphor and concept, in his essay ‘On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense’, may be taken to trace in advance the outlines of their common refusal to grant philosophical status to metaphor. Both the Derridean recourse to generalised metaphoricity and the Deleuzian dismissal of metaphor are equally grounded in this Nietzschean problematic. Consider his famous characterization of the genesis of language and concepts as a process of metaphor: ‘to begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one’.15

In this passage, Nietzsche describes a process which is anterior to both literal and metaphorical uses of language. In consequence, since this process is the precondition even of the literal language use on which metaphorical use depends, it can only be metaphorically described as ‘metaphor’.
Since Nietzsche's account of the origin of language relies upon a metaphor of metaphor, it needs to be asked what aspect of the metaphoric use of language is being considered analogous to this primary artistic activity. It cannot be the case that, for Nietzsche, what matters here is an implicit reference to a 'proper' relation between words and things. Given his account of language and concept formation, it cannot be that what is at issue in this primary metaphorical process is giving something a name that belongs to something else. For this would suppose the metaphysical equivalent of a literal language, one which would designate things as they are in themselves, apart from human capacities and interests. But it is precisely Nietzsche's claim that there is no such literal system of metaphysical representation, no logos. It is true that he relies upon the belief in such a logos, and in the possibility of truth in the sense of metaphysical correspondence with the nature of reality, in order to suggest that what we take as truths are illusions, and to assert that man 'forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves'. But this is only a conditional acceptance of the idea of truth for rhetorical effect. Throughout the essay 'On Truth and Lies', he remains agnostic about whether or not human categories correspond to the essence of things. For Kant's metaphor of a Copernican revolution in the understanding of knowledge, Nietzsche substitutes his own image of man as the eternal reason spider, spinning out of himself the 'rigid and regular web of concepts' upon which he relies for the guidance of his life and conduct. Since we have no way of stepping outside the web of perceptual mechanisms and scientific concepts in terms of which we interpret the world in order to compare the results with reality in itself, we have no reason to suppose these results to be 'congruent with things'. Nietzsche is careful to point out that we equally have no reason to suppose that categorial distinctions such as the contrast between individual and species do not 'correspond to the essence of things'. To do so, he says, 'would of course be a dogmatic assertion and, as such, would be just as indemonstrable as its opposite'. All we have then is the metaphysical equivalent of metaphorical language, where this is understood to involve the indirect presentation of phenomena which impact upon our senses, their transposition into other spheres, like
Chladni's sound figures which represent sound waves in air by means of patterns in sand. The idea of truth as correspondence with the nature of reality has no place here. As Nietzsche argues, between the world as such and our representations of it, 'there is, at most, an aesthetic relation': art, science and philosophy are all equally the work of 'an artistically creating subject'.

Thus, what matters in Nietzsche's metaphor of metaphor is not the reference to the proper but the fact of transport or transposition from one medium to another. On this basis, he argues that rational and intuitive means of representation are equally products of this same transformative activity. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, but there is no a priori ground on which to privilege one over the other. Concepts, like artworks, will always involve what he calls 'a suggestive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue'. There is no question of the proper or adequate representation of one thing by another: all signs are equally improper. It is even a matter of indifference, in relation to this problematic, whether we say that concepts are derived from this primary metaphoric process or that metaphors are produced according to the logic of concept formation, for the process of assimilation or the imitation of one thing by means of another is common to both. Thus we can say with equal justice that the concept of metaphor is irreducibly metaphorical, or that the metaphor of metaphor is a proto-concept.

Either way, there is no place for a concept of metaphor along Aristotelian lines. If there is no proper relation to the object, and if, as Deleuze argues, concepts are always defined in relation to the particular problem field in which they operate, then there is no more justification for calling the transposition of a term from one field of application to another metaphor than for calling it the creation of a new concept. This is the basis for Deleuze's view that to think is to create, and in philosophy to create is to produce new concepts. Thus, when in *Difference and Repetition* he employs mathematical terms in order to define his own concept of problematic Ideas (which serve as the 'differentials of thought'), he denies the existence of metaphor in any sense other than that which coincides with the creation of new concepts: there is no metaphor here, he writes, 'except the metaphor consubstantial with the notion
of Ideas, that of the dialectical transport or "diaphora". In later works, he and Guattari claim that there is no such thing as metaphor, just the deterritorialization that is involved in the transfer of a term to a completely foreign domain: in other words, the creation of new concepts where this entails stuttering, not by the speaker, but by the language itself. Such creations may be more or less successful, but there is no difference in principle between the more and less durable outcomes of this process.

Nietzsche's account of the origin of language relies upon the possibility of the exchange of linguistic items for non-linguistic items. This possibility is presupposed by both the literal and metaphorical use of linguistic signs. Derrida calls this 'metaphoricity' and generalises it to include the possibility of exchange of linguistic items for one another. Generalised metaphoricity explains the frequent comparison drawn between language and money, and the ubiquity of metaphors of effacement, erasure or wearing away whenever the topic of metaphor is broached. From the fact that Nietzsche views the drive towards the formation of metaphors (in this metaphoric sense) as the fundamental human drive, we cannot derive any priority in the relations between metaphor and concept. Both have their origins in originary metaphoricity, and the only difference between literal and metaphorical language is that in the former case we forget that there are only similarities or likenesses between things: 'Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of senusous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins'. Nietzsche's response to this diagnosis is not to recommend the abandonment of concepts in favour of metaphors, but to recommend a different 'sense' of truth, and thereby a different exercise of conceptual thought. Albeit in different ways, this is also Deleuze's and Derrida's response.

Philosophy and (quasi-)concepts

Nietzsche and Deleuze's use of 'stuttering' to describe the invention of concepts is echoed by Derrida's use of the rhetorical term 'catachresis' to describe the paradigmatically philosophical gesture
of claiming to have discovered and named a content not previously known. As defined by Fontanier, catachresis consists in 'the imposition of a sign upon a meaning which did not yet have its own proper sign in language'.\textsuperscript{22} This is not, as in Aristotle's definition of metaphor, the transport or transfer of a name which properly belongs to one thing onto something else, but rather the forced extension of a sign so that it stands for some content that did not previously have its own sign. It still rests upon the logocentric assumption that such contents exist prior to being named or expressed in language. Derrida therefore uses the term 'by analogy' to refer to the philosophical invention of concepts. In doing so, he repeats or mimics the philosophical gesture of discovering and naming a new content. On his own account, all philosophy is necessarily subject to this transcendental illusion, and in a sense the practice of deconstruction is no different. By the forcible extension of ordinary concepts such as writing, trace, supplement and difference, and by grafting the newly generalised sense onto the ordinary concept, deconstruction 'discovers' what Gasché calls the quasi-transcendental 'infrastructures' of all language, experience and thought.

In this manner, for example, Derrida argues that the characteristic features of writing in the ordinary sense, including the differential determination of its marks and the necessity that it be readable in the absence of any determined origin or destination, apply equally to speech and must therefore be considered features of 'writing' in a more general sense. In a more recent discussion, he takes the ordinary concept of cinders, which refers to that which remains after a material has burned, 'the cinders or ashes of a cigarette, of a cigar, of a human body, of a burned town', and extends it so that 'this concept of cinders becomes the figure for everything that precisely loses its figure in incineration and thus in a certain disappearance of the support or of the body whose memory is kept by the cinders'. As a result, 'cinders' becomes another name for those things that were earlier identified by such names as 'trace', 'writing', and 'gramme'.\textsuperscript{23} In this manner, and in accordance with a paleonymic logic by which it retains old terms while forcibly extending their meaning, deconstruction weaves its network of
terms which are not entirely words or concepts, neither properly concepts nor metaphors.

This procedure takes us to the heart of Derrida's practice of philosophy as a kind of 'double writing', a practice which produces its own distinctive series of philosophical 'concepts': writing, mark, trace, supplement, differance, iterability and so on. This forced extension might be considered a kind of doubling of the ordinary concept as metaphor, a becoming-metaphor of the concept, were it not for the fact that the resultant term ('writing', 'cinders') now becomes a name for the quasi-transcendental infrastructures which stand as the conditions of possibility and impossibility of language, meaning and conceptual thought. In effect, the procedure is one by which deconstruction moves from ordinary concepts (writing, cinders) to something else, another kind of concept 'heterogeneous to the philosophical concept of the concept'. By the philosophical concept of the concept here Derrida means the traditional view according to which concepts are determinate idealities, conforming to the logic of exclusive disjunction and serving to identify regular or identifiable entities or kinds. Just as Deleuze and Guattari insist upon the specificity of concepts as they define them to 'philosophy', so Derrida distinguishes his distinctively deconstructive 'concepts' from ordinary philosophical concepts by calling them 'quasi-concepts' or 'aconceptual concepts'.

Let us examine this process more closely in the case of iterability. This is a privileged example since iterability is itself both a concept and a mark or defining characteristic of every concept. Derrida's treatment of iterability therefore exemplifies the procedure of creating a deconstructive 'concept', while also extending the 'logic' of such aconceptuality so that it applies to all concept formation. As a result, iterability becomes 'a "concept" that marks both the possibility and the limit of all idealisation and hence of all conceptualisation'. In the first place, he accepts the ordinary logic of concept formation according to which a concept only exists when there is distinction: 'it is impossible or illegitimate to form a philosophical concept outside this logic of all or nothing'. Thus, insofar as iterability is an idealisation or concept in this sense, it accords with this logic: some things are iterable (phonemes, words, numbers) and some things are not (sensations, performances,
occurrences). Iterability implies repetition or recurrence of the same: those things are iterable which can be repeated. To the extent that a concept identifies something common to a range of particulars, conceptualisation implies iterability in this sense. Following Frege, modern logic defines a concept as a function from singular terms to truth values. Such a formal definition captures precisely this identificatory feature of concepts: in a given formal language with a given domain of interpretation, a concept $F$ will be exhaustively defined by the set of sentences of the form $Fx$ which are true: \{Fa, Fb, Fe \ldots\}. But Derrida goes on to argue that iterability in this 'pure' and straightforward sense is never attained in natural language. It is precisely in order to account for this fact that deconstructive philosophy proposes to think the concept of concept otherwise. Iterability in the straightforward sense is never attained because in reality things are never simply instantiations of a uniform concept: the 'same' phoneme is heard in an open-ended variety of sounds, no two leaves are exactly identical. Even the concept of number applies to different kinds of number, complex numbers as well as natural numbers.

The obvious response to such nominalism is to point out that, of course, a given concept will be true of different things. That is what makes it a concept and is therefore a necessary feature of all idealisation. As Nietzsche argued in 'On Truth and Lies', 'a word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases... Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things'. One leaf is always different from another one, so 'the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects'. But then it follows, as Derrida points out contra Searle, that "iterability" does not signify simply repeatability of the same, but rather 'alterability of this idealised same in the singularity of the event'. In other words, concepts must be supposed to involve at once repetition of the same and realisation or instantiation of that same in different particulars: 'leaf' is both this leaf and that leaf as well as leafhood in general. Since leafhood is determined by the totality of particulars to which the concept applies, past and future, and since there is no possibility of measuring any particular against that ideal totality in the present, a necessary openness or
indeterminacy affects the concept. And to the extent that the concept of iterability takes this feature of concepts into account, it becomes a complex concept which combines (horizontal) sameness and (vertical) difference: ‘it entails the necessity of thinking at once both the rule and the event, concept and singularity’. Finally, since iterability is itself a concept, it is necessarily affected by the same indeterminacy: ‘there is thus a reapplication ... of the principle of iterability to a concept of iterability that is never pure.’ By this means, Derrida moves from the concept of iterability, in the ordinary sense of concept, to a ‘concept’ of iterability which is ‘aconceptual or another kind of concept’.

Considered as ideal objects defined in terms of the deconstructive logic of iterability, Derridean aconceptual concepts are open multiplicities. They lack the determinacy associated with the traditional concept of concepts: ‘from the moment this concept of cinders becomes the figure for everything that precisely loses its figure in incineration ... at that moment cinders is no longer a determined concept’. As such, deconstructive ‘concepts’ share certain formal characteristics of Deleuze and Guattari’s specifically philosophical concepts. Deleuze and Guattari also define concepts in such a way that these must be considered open-ended and potentially variable ideal objects. They contrast the susceptibility to variation or transformation which is characteristic of philosophical concepts with the determinacy of the mathematical or propositional functions which are the objects of science and logic. In science as in logic, the determinate character of functions is ensured by the independence of the variables which define the relevant system of reference. The Fregean definition of a concept as a function from individuals to a truth value defines a thoroughly determinate extensional multiplicity. By contrast, in philosophy as Deleuze and Guattari define it, the components of concepts are neither constants nor variables but ‘pure and simple variations ordered according to their neighbourhood’.

Within a given concept, these components are like so many intensive ordinates arranged in zones of neighbourhood or indiscernibility which define the consistency of the concept: ‘components remain distinct, but something passes from one to the other, something that is undecidable between them’. In these
terms, we might say that it is precisely such a zone of undecidability between spoken and written signification or communication that defines the deconstructive concept of writing in general. Between concepts, however, the same kinds of zones of indiscernibility or undecidability constitute bridges or virtual paths along which a given concept may be transformed, as the concept of writing in general shades into the concept of iterability. These constitute the becoming of the concept: as multiplicities susceptible to variation or transformation all concepts are defined by their becomings. Like Derrida’s ‘aconceptual concepts’, Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts are not restricted by the logic of exclusive disjunction which is supposed to govern concept formation in the sciences and all ‘rigorous’ thought. Their concepts are ‘anexact’ because they are susceptible to continuous variation, iterable in Derrida’s sense of the term. The ‘zones of undecidability’ which render such concepts consistent also render them indeterminate and open in the manner of all rhizomatic assemblages.

Over and above the formal parallels between Deleuzian and Derridean concepts, there are considerable differences in the accounts given of the objects of such concepts, and in the semantic relations between concept and object. The differences in philosophical orientation and allegiance are significant in this regard: for example, Deleuze’s persistent expressionism reappears in the thesis put forward in What is Philosophy? that philosophical concepts express events. By contrast, deconstructive quasi-concepts ‘name’ conditions of the possibility and impossibility of determinate thought. These infrastructural entities lack the stable structure and identity normally associated with the referents of concepts, and it is precisely for this reason that deconstruction only simulates or mimes the philosophical gesture of discovery. Space does not permit a detailed account of the complex character of these objects corresponding to deconstruction’s distinctive concepts. Nor does it permit a parallel account of the differential virtual multiplicities or Ideas which Deleuze invokes in Difference and Repetition, in the similarly paradoxical role of groundless grounds. A rigorous comparison between these two approaches to the philosophy of difference would need to compare these quasi-trancendental objects
and their quasi-foundational role as the ‘ground’ of all that is actualised in thought.

In any case, it is above all with regard to the pragmatic dimension of their distinctive concepts that the strange proximity between these two approaches emerges. Neither claims to provide knowledge in any empirical sense of the term. For Deleuze and Guattari, philosophical concepts provide a kind of knowledge, but it is knowledge of a pure event which they describe as the event proper, a pure event which is ‘immaterial, incorporeal, unlivable: pure reserve’\textsuperscript{34}. In a material sense, this pure event is an inaccessible and impossible object which is never entirely present in its historical incarnations. Historical events such as the social contract which establishes the rule of law, or the justice which ‘grounds’ such rule, may be actualised in institutions and legal judgments, but the pure event in its becoming remains irreducible to these states of affairs. What philosophy achieves when it extracts an event from the clashes of bodies and things is the ‘counter-effectuation’ or counter-actualisation in thought of the pure event. As a result, the creation of philosophical concepts necessarily involves a certain experience of the pure event and therefore also an experience of the impossible.

This experience is inseparable from the utopian vocation of philosophy as Deleuze and Guattari define it. As we saw above, the task of philosophy when it creates concepts is always to extract an event from things, always to give them a new event. But this event is new in the twofold sense of Nietzsche’s untimely: on the one hand, it is an incorporeal entity irreducible to the configurations of bodies in which it is actualised at a given moment. On the other hand, it is not just any event which philosophy seeks to extract but those hitherto unconceptualised events which are at play and which shape our present and future reality. When Deleuze and Guattari insist upon the utopian vocation of philosophy, they point to a sense in which the creation of new concepts may contribute to a different future, to the emergence of ‘a new earth and a new people’. Ideally, the events to which philosophy gives expression are those which are at work in the present but which point towards a different future. The characterisation of events which are new in this double sense affords us new means of description and action. It enables us to become conscious of processes and forces at work in the present,
those which we might seek to advance as well as those we might oppose. In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari argue, ‘the concept is the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come’.  

The concept of the pure event also appears in Derrida’s accounts of the undecidable objects of quasi-concepts: for example, his discussion of signature explains the ‘enigmatic originality’ of every such mark of identity by reference to ‘the pure reproducibility of the pure event’. In a sense, all the objects of deconstructive aconceptual concepts might be described as pure events, or even as variations upon the one pure event of sense or meaning: writing, iteration, differance, incineration, justice, etc. From the point of view of the pragmatics of such concepts, the important feature is that they all share in the ethical and political sense in which undecidability involves an experience of the impossible. This is the sense in which undecidability ‘calls for’ decision: ‘there can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this experience and experiment of the undecidable.’ This experience of the undecidable is also an experience of the event, or an experience of that which is necessary in order for there to be an event. Deleuze and Guattari’s characterisation of the event as the contour of an event ‘to come’ is mirrored by Derrida’s concept of the ‘to come’ as ‘the space opened in order for there to be an event, the to-come, so that the coming be that of the other’. For Derrida as for Deleuze and Guattari, the event is untimely in Nietsche’s twofold sense: both an inaccessible incorporeal reserve and the guarantee of an open future. In each case, their distinctively philosophical concepts are therefore linked to a conception of freedom.

Notes

I am grateful to Moira Gatens for her comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and especially to Peter Cook for his comments and for many conversations on these issues.
4. *What is Philosophy?*, p.34.
16. ‘On Truth and Lies’, p.86. Maudemarie Clarke points out that, far from rejecting the notion of truth in this essay, Nietzsche here relies upon a metaphysical correspondence theory of what would constitute
truth in order to claim that we have no reason to suppose that human experience, even in its most developed conceptual form, gives us truth in that sense: cf Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p.83.

17. ‘On Truth and Lies’, p.84.


25. ‘Afterword’, Limited Inc, p.119. Only in the case of differance is this difference from ordinary concepts typographically marked.
32. What is Philosophy?, p.20.
34. What is Philosophy?, pp.33, 156. For further discussion of the differences between this philosophical ‘knowledge’ and scientific or empirical knowledge, see Paul Patton, ‘Concept and event’, Man and World, Vol.29 no.3, July, 1996, pp. 315-26.
35. What is Philosophy?, p.32-3.
36. ‘Signature Event Context’ in Limited Inc, p.20.