Art, philosophy and the connectivity of concepts: Ricoeur and Deleuze and Guattari

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Abstract. In the history of philosophy, concepts are traditionally pictured as discrete containers that bring together objects or qualities based on the possession of shared, uniform properties. This paper focuses on a contrasting notion of the concept which holds that concepts are defined by their capacity to reach out and connect with other concepts. Two theories in recent continental philosophy maintain this view: one from Ricoeur, the other from Deleuze and Guattari. Both are offered as attempts to bring art and philosophy into relation, but they differ over how the process of connection is theorized. With Ricoeur, a concept is only a concept if it is inherently predisposed to connect with others, and open to being misapplied through metaphor, whereas, with Deleuze and Guattari, connection is left as the general notion of each and every concept being mutually consistent with other concepts, with the consistency attributed to the external action of “bridging”. I demonstrate the impact of this difference on how the philosophers perceive the art–philosophy relation, and argue that Ricoeur is better placed to provide a theory of philosophical discourse that is open to the aesthetic. Ricoeur can show it through metaphor, while Deleuze and Guattari can only assert or state an art–philosophy relation through a series of technical claims. The significance of the showing–saying distinction is that it can demonstrate the depth with which conceptual connectivity is located with the philosophers’ respective ontologies and, within this, it can help to reveal the value of conceptual connectivity for that ontology.

Keywords: concept, connectivity, metaphorical, octopus, reference, rhizome, sense, show, speculative, state.
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In the history of philosophy, concepts are traditionally pictured as discrete containers that bring together objects or qualities based on the possession of shared, uniform properties, for example, Plato’s analogy of knowledge as an aviary in the *Theaetetus*¹ and Aristotle’s metaphor of predicates as containers in *Prior Analytics*.² Mathematical set theory is organized around the principle that there are collections of objects called “sets”, where the objects are identified as “members” or “elements” of a set. “Membership” is a form of “being within”, and so is being an element, in the sense that an element is a constituent of or a unit within a larger entity. The “containment” metaphor is reinforced in 1880 by the English logician John Venn who introduces the convention of representing concepts as circles in order to allow syllogistic arguments to be represented as diagrams, known as Venn diagrams.³

In contrast to this tradition, I want to consider the idea that concepts are defined by their capacity to reach outwards to connect with other concepts. Three philosophers are relevant here: Ricoeur, Deleuze and Guattari. Although there are three philosophers, it is two theories that are produced: one by Ricoeur, the other by Deleuze and Guattari. Both theories emphasize the importance of connection to the nature of a concept, but the nature of the connection is different. Both theories also examine the connection between concepts as part of their exploration of the relation between art and philosophy. Again, the relations presented are different. I argue that Ricoeur introduces what I call an “octopus” vision of the concept, in which the capacity of a concept to be a concentration of meaning is also its capacity to reach out and be applicable to other, remote meanings. In contrast, although Deleuze and Guattari provide a vocabulary with which to describe the action of connection, the results, I maintain, are a series of statements merely asserting that connection can happen, and a terminological
apparatus that is more preoccupied with territorialism than connection. The main
difference between them, I propose, is over their stance on the use of concepts
as referring expressions, with Ricoeur embracing the use, and Deleuze and
Guattari rejecting it. I consider the consequence of this difference for a theory of
conceptual connectivity and for the relation between art and philosophy.

Art and philosophy

Both Ricoeur and Deleuze and Guattari examine the connection between
concepts as part of their exploration of the relation between art and philosophy.
Ricoeur's theory forms part of his account of metaphor in *The Rule of Metaphor
(La métaphore vive)*. Metaphor, he argues, is constitutive of our capacity to describe
at all. To understand it, he argues, we have to take the widest view of language
possible, where language is active, in operation, and where it has an interest; in
other words, language as discourse. He formulates metaphor as the intersection
of two discourses: metaphorical and speculative. Metaphorical discourse is the
domain in which new expressions are created but not conceptualized or
translated; it is where inventive metaphors receive their first outing. Instances of
the discourse might be a poem, a narrative or an essay. Speculative discourse is
the domain of the concept and, furthermore, the domain in which the concept
can be predicated of an object. It is the discourse which focuses the play of
meanings thrown up by metaphor into a proposition which revivifies our
perception of the world. It is also the discourse that is at work in philosophy,
since “it expresses the systematic nature of the conceptual” and is active

in all the speculative attempts to order the “great genera”, the
“categories of being”, the “categories of understanding”,
“philosophical logic”, the “principal elements of representation”, or
however one wants to express [the systematic nature of the
conceptual].4
The characterization of the metaphorical and the speculative – and the fields in which they find expression, namely the poetic and the philosophical – as intersecting discourses means “intersection” is also Ricoeur’s understanding of the relation between art and philosophy. It also means that metaphor, in as much as it is constituted by the intersection of metaphorical and speculative discourse, is the relation between art and philosophy made manifest in a single, albeit tensional, form.

The importance of the productive tension between metaphorical and speculative discourse for Ricoeur cannot be overstated. Metaphorical discourse creates the utterance “A is B” together with all the “nonsensical” possibilities that it implies, and through its encounter with the speculative, the play of possibilities is resolved and A’s B-like nature is conceptualized. Metaphor “is living”, he proclaims, “by virtue of the fact that it [metaphorically] introduces the spark of imagination into a “thinking more” at the conceptual [speculative] level”. As such, metaphorical discourse is the condition of possibility of speculative discourse. That is to say, world-directed, claim-making speculative discourse can only get underway within the play of possibilities created when a concept from one frame of reference is applied to another in metaphorical discourse. As Ricoeur makes the point:

On the one hand, speculative discourse has its condition of possibility in the semantic dynamism of metaphorical utterance, [while] on the other hand, speculative discourse has its necessity in itself, in putting the resources of conceptual articulation to work.

Speculative discourse “has its necessity in itself”, according to Ricoeur, in the sense that the resources of conceptual articulation “belong to the mind itself,… are the mind itself reflecting upon itself”. Despite the stress on interplay, speculative discourse is shown to be the principal element in Ricoeur’s theory, since it is the mode of discourse which resolves the “nonsensical” possibilities of the metaphorical “A is B’ into appropriate, worldly meaning; that is to say, it is the speculative which assigns metaphor its “ontological vehemence”.

The
interpretation of metaphor, he adds, “is the work of concepts” and “consequently a struggle for univocity”.  

Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the concept is presented in their 1991 book *What is Philosophy?* as part of an exploration of the nature of philosophy and its relationship with art and science. Philosophy, they declare, is “the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts”, in the sense, for example, that Kant introduces a new concept of time. Instead of the Newtonian concept of a linear succession of episodes, Kant presents time as a three-fold principle of anticipation, retention, and succession, fundamental to the organization of experience. Concepts have to be made: they are “not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies. There is no heaven for concepts. They must be invented, fabricated, or rather created and would be nothing without their creator’s signature”. It is philosophy, and only philosophy, that is the creator of concepts. “Sciences, arts, and philosophies are all equally creative”, they assert, “although only philosophy creates concepts in the strict sense”. No account is given of what this “strict sense” might be. Reference is made to Nietzsche’s declaration, in *The Will to Power*, that philosophers “must no longer accept concepts as a gift, not merely purify and polish them, but first make and create them, present them and make them convincing”, and it is pointed out that, although Plato said “Ideas must be contemplated”, he nevertheless first “had to create the concept of Idea”. But these observations remain at the level of stating “philosophers create concepts” and go no deeper into explicating the meaning of “strict creation”.

In contrast, art, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is the formation of sensations, which they call “percepts” and “affects”. Art, they declare, makes experience stand on its own, distinct from the artist and her original experience; perception is made to stand on its own, apart from its object, as “percept”, and affection is given form distinct from the moment as “affect”. Art is “a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself”. Science, they maintain, “passes from chaotic virtuality to the states of affairs and bodies that actualize it”, which is to say that it
creates the functions and functives (components of functions) that allow propositions in discursive systems to refer to states of affairs.\textsuperscript{15}

Art, science and philosophy are theorized as part of Deleuze and Guattari’s immanent ontology, immanent in that it focuses on experience in itself, as its own condition, and not experience which belongs to a subject. As such, the component terms introduced above – percept and affect (sensation); functions; and concepts – are not items that can be apportioned to either human subjects or “real world” objects, but instead occur within their respective “planes” – of composition; of reference; and of philosophy – where “plane” does the philosophical work of being the field or surface wherein events, i.e. percepts, functions, concepts, arise.

The relation between art, science and philosophy, for Deleuze and Guattari, is one of “intersection and intertwinement”, with sensation, function, concept, and their respective planes, as the participating entities:

\[\text{Art, science and philosophy} \text{ intersect and intertwine but without synthesis or identification. With its concepts, philosophy brings forth events. Art erects monuments with its sensations [i.e., percepts and affects]. Science constructs states of affairs with its functions. A rich tissue of correspondences can be established between the planes. But the network has its culminating points, where sensation itself becomes sensation of concept or function, where the concept becomes concept of function or of sensation, and where the function becomes function of sensation or concept. And none of these elements can appear without the other being still to come, still indeterminate or unknown. Each created element on a plane calls on other heterogeneous elements, which are still to be created on other planes: thought as heterogenesis.}\]
An example of intersection given by Deleuze and Guattari is the development of the thickness of paint in modern art, when “the surface can be furrowed or the plane of composition can take on thickness insofar as the material rises up, independently of depth or perspective, independently of shadows and even of the chromatic order of colour”. From here, the philosopher Hubert Damisch “turn[s] the thickness of the plane into a genuine concept by showing that ‘plaiting could well fulfil a role for future painting similar to that performed by perspective’”. Thus, the percept of thickness becomes a concept of thickness, with the potential for connections with other concepts that is intrinsic to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of a concept.

Although both Ricoeur and Deleuze and Guattari maintain that their accounts of art and philosophy have them in states of interaction and intertwinement, the nature of the interaction and intertwinement is different. The fact that Ricoeur refers to a mind, belonging to a subject, whereas Deleuze and Guattari present an immanent, subject-less ontology, is an important difference, but it does not have a bearing on how they understand the connectivity of concepts. The vocabularies that are used to articulate their art–philosophy relationships are also not influenced by the differences that can be found between a subject–object and an immanent ontology. With Ricoeur, metaphor stimulates speculative thought: it “introduces the spark of imagination into a “thinking more” at the conceptual [speculative] level”. Although speculative discourse “has its necessity in itself”, “belong[s] to the mind itself” and is “the mind itself reflecting upon itself”, its condition of possibility, its mobilization, is given by metaphorical discourse.

In contrast, with Deleuze and Guattari, despite the claim for “intersection and intertwinement” between art and philosophy, there is a propriety at work that tries to ensure that each way of thinking remains on its own plane. With the Damisch example above, it is the philosopher and not the artist or art theorist who creates the concept of plaiting, despite artists’ pursuit of medium-specificity prior to the philosopher’s 1984 publication. “Art thinks no less than philosophy”, Deleuze and Guattari maintain, “but it thinks through percepts and affects”.
This, they are keen to point out, “does not mean that the two entities do not often pass into each other in a becoming that sweeps them both up in an intensity which co-determines them”.20 Yet when it comes to describing this “passing into each other”, it is not clear what the “passing” amounts to. At this point, they refer to the work of Michel Guérin who, on his own website, describes himself as a writer and a philosopher, so straight away it is uncertain whether we are dealing with an artist (as writer) or a philosopher.21 To serve Deleuze and Guattari’s illustration, he needs to be a philosopher. They declare that Guérin makes “a profound discovery of the existence of conceptual personae [concepts with the power to determine the course of a philosopher’s work]22 at the heart of philosophy”. But rather than articulate these conceptual personae conceptually, Guérin presents them within a “logodrama” or a “figurology” that put affect into thought. This means that the concept as such can be the concept of an affect, just as the affect can be the affect of the concept. The plane of composition of art and the plane of immanence of philosophy can slip into each other to the degree that parts of one may be occupied by entities of the other [au point que des pans de l’un soient occupés par des entités de l’autre]. In fact, in each case the plane and that which occupies it are like two relatively distinct and heterogeneous parts. A thinker may therefore decisively modify what thinking means, draw up a new image of thought, and institute a new plane of immanence. But, instead of creating new concepts that occupy it, they populate it with other instances, with other poetic, novelistic, or even pictorial or musical entities [mais, au lieu de créer de nouveaux concepts qui l’occupent, il le peuple avec d’autres instances, d’autres entités, poétiques, romanesques, ou même picturales ou musicales].23

But at the very moment when it would be helpful to see how Deleuze and Guattari’s vocabulary of percepts, affects and concepts enables the description of the intersection and intertwineiment of art and philosophy, they are not to be
seen. Instead, a general description is given in terms of “other instances, with other poetic, novelistic, or even pictorial or musical entities”. But where do such “entities” sit within Deleuze and Guattari’s system? They are presumably not concepts, as we are told that, on this occasion, the philosopher chooses not to create a concept. Are they percepts or affects? Perhaps the latter, since we are told that Guérin puts “affect into thought”. But what is the effect of putting “affect into thought”? With Ricoeur, while he identifies two discourses, metaphorical and speculative, their intersection is explained through the former being the generation of heterogeneous possibilities that call upon the unifying power of the latter. But with Deleuze and Guattari, they have at this crucial point to rely upon the general notions of “other poetic, novelistic, or even pictorial or musical entities”. Any hope that their notions of the intersection and intertwininement of art and philosophy might be articulated further is dashed by a propriety which ensures that concept and affect remain “like two relatively distinct and heterogeneous parts”, with the “each to its own” impulse reinforced by the metaphor of “occupation”: “in each case the plane and that which occupies it”.

The connectivity of concepts

Let us turn our attention to the theories of the connectivity of concepts that are given by Ricoeur and Deleuze and Guattari. The ways in which they formulate connectivity and the notion of a “concept” are different. What Ricoeur understands by the notion can be extracted from his theory of metaphor. Ricoeur works from the perspective of the interactionist theory of metaphor developed by Max Black (1962, 1979). Central to the interactionist account is the idea that metaphor is creative: the interaction between its two subject terms provides the condition for a meaning which neither of the subject terms possesses independently of the metaphorical context. The interaction, as a process, brings into being what Black terms an “implication-complex”, a system of associated implications shared by the linguistic community as well as an impulse of free meaning, free in that it is
meaning which was unavailable prior to the metaphor’s introduction. Somehow, interaction admits a meaning that is not already deducible from or present in the lexicon of a community. The creativity of metaphor is described by Ricoeur in the following terms:

Does not the fittingness [of metaphor]… indicate that language not only has organized reality in a different way, but also made manifest a way of being of things, which is brought to language thanks to semantic innovation? It would seem that the enigma of metaphorical discourse is that it “invents” in both senses of the word: what it creates, it discovers; and what it finds, it invents.26

Metaphor has the double aspect of being both creation and discovery because when two terms are juxtaposed unconventionally in a metaphor, metaphorical discourse emphasizes the surprise and the novelty of the combination, while speculative discourse seeks to make sense of it by working through all the ways in which “A is B” might refer to A now that the idea of it has been transformed by its new B-nature.

The model for the metaphorical–speculative contrast is the distinction drawn by Gottlob Frege in 1892 between “sense” and “reference”.27 Frege makes the distinction to show that words with the same reference can nevertheless have different senses, for example, “Venus”, “Morning Star” and “Evening Star” all refer to the same celestial object, but their senses – the qualities that might prompt a writer to choose one over the others, such as association, mood, character – are very different. However, for Ricoeur, there is a dynamic interplay between sense and reference. The site of the interplay is predication: the creation of a sentence by attaching a verb or a verb-phrase to a noun, as in “the cat sleeps”, “the electron orbits the nucleus”. “In ordinary language”, he explains,

we master the predicative use of abstract meanings only by relating them to objects, which we designate in the referential mode. This is
possible because the predicate is such that it performs its characteristic function only in the context of the sentence, when it targets this or that relatively isolatable aspect within a determined referent... So we master meaning by varying the conditions of use in relation to different referents. Conversely, we investigate new referents only by describing them as precisely as possible. Thus the referential field can extend beyond the things we are able to show, and even beyond visible, perceptible things. Language lends itself to this by allowing the construction of complex referential expressions using abstract terms that are already understood, i.e. definite descriptions in Russell’s sense. In this way, predication and reference lend support to one another, whether we relate new predicates to familiar referents, or whether, in order to explore a referential field that is not directly accessible, we use predicative expressions whose sense has already been mastered.28

The sense of a word, how we understand it in the abstract as a concept and the possible uses to which it might be put, is made apparent through what objects the word can be used to describe and, reciprocally, the reference of a word, the object which a word can be used to describe, is conveyed through a description which uses words the senses of which we understand. For Ricoeur, sense and reference are not just complementary terms which happen to form a partnership but elements which are fused together in a “continuing Odyssey”:29 established referents help to determine sense, and established senses help to determine referents. The application of this interplay to metaphorical and speculative discourse, the prime movers in this Odyssey, is evident in the final sentence of the quotation: the two discourses sustain one another through relating new predicates to familiar referents (the formation of concepts in speculative discourse), or by using predicative expressions whose sense has already been mastered to open up a new referential field (the unconventional but generative combination of terms in metaphorical discourse). Thus, the capacity of a concept to be a concept, to apply to the things it does in a familiar, referential way, is
conditional upon its capacity to be stretched and extended onto other things. Speculative discourse, the domain of the concept and claim-making, has metaphorical discourse as its condition of possibility because it is the field of possible meanings generated by metaphorical discourse that provides the ground whereupon a concept can set to work as a concept, showing how some of these meanings can be drawn upon to form a novel, insightful claim about the world.  

I suggest that Ricoeur’s account of the concept amounts to visualizing concepts not as containers but as being “tentacled” (my term): a concept is only a concept if it is predisposed to connect with others, and open to being stretched and creatively misapplied. I recommend depicting or diagramming the concept as an octopus or jellyfish or echinoderm (one variety of which is the starfish): any creature with a central body, to signify that something particular is being referred to, but surrounded by tentacles that reach out to make contact with other creatures or conditions. Visually, jellyfish and some echinoderms are probably better suited to displaying a centre with radial tentacles, but I think the notion of an “octopus concept” is more potent, if only because of its “oct”–“con” assonance, and the rhythm of its consonance.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the concept is a principle of connection, both internally and externally, that is to say, a concept is made of other concepts internally, while also reaching out to other concepts externally. They refer to these aspects respectively as the “endoconsistency” (endo-consistance) and the “exoconsistency” (exo-consistance) of the concept. The endoconsistency of a concept is defined by the “inseparability” of the components that make up the inside of the concept. An example is the concept of “other person” which includes the concepts of “face” and of “our passing from one world to another” (in the sense that we recognize another person as having their own world or life-world). The exoconsistency of the concept is its capacity to form “bridges” with other concepts. The exoconsistency of the concept “other person” might be the “expression of a possible world in a perceptual field” and “the possible occupants of this field, perceived in a new way”. The internal and external
consistencies of the concept are such that each concept “partially overlaps, has a zone of neighbourhood [zone de voisinage], or a threshold of indiscernibility with another one”. Yet each concept is also “in a state of survey [survol] in relation to its components, endlessly traversing them according to an order without distance”. Deleuze and Guattari summarize the point by announcing that “zones and bridges are the joints of the concept”, “les zones et les ponts sont les joints du concept”. It is because a concept is made of other concepts internally, while also reaching out to other concepts externally, that it is never finite, definite or ultimately definable. Rather, it is always a becoming, always in a state of having its endoconsistency and exoconsistency flexed by the push-and-pull of history, problems and situations, and the formation of new concepts, whose own endoconsistencies and exoconsistencies go on to join the process.

There is a similarity between the models of the concept given by Ricoeur and Deleuze and Guattari. Both present the concept as a double action that combines components gathering together to form a neighbourhood with a capacity to extend to concepts that are considered to be beyond that neighbourhood. However, there are two differences. The first concerns the distance covered by the external reach of a concept. Firstly, with Ricoeur, the capacity of a concept to apply to the things it does in a familiar, referential way, is conditional upon its capacity to be stretched and extended onto other, remote things in a metaphor. This is a defining property of metaphor: the description of one thing in terms of a concept that is ordinarily considered to be remote from it. The flexibility that enables a concept to be applied in intricate and specific ways in what becomes a “home” referential field is also the flexibility that enables it to leap across to an alien field of sense. However, with Deleuze and Guattari, the contrast between endoconsistency and exoconsistency is characterized simply in terms of internal and external, and not local and remote. We are told that, in terms of its exoconsistency, the concept is “in a state of survey [survol] in relation to its components, endlessly traversing them according to an order without distance”, but “without distance” is not “remoteness”. “An order without distance” suggests that questions of proximity are not relevant to the concept’s external
connections. The two consistencies are likened to “zones and bridges” respectively, but it is uncertain how the “bridge” metaphor is to be interpreted. A bridge usually connects neighbours who are separated by an obstacle or other intervening object, such as water or parts of a city that need to be traversed at speed, but does normally connect remote regions. If “neighbourhood” is a property of endoconsistency, and “bridging” is a metaphor for exoconsistency, then it is reasonable to assume that exoconsistency can be thought metaphorically in spatial terms. It is just that the only spatial quality that Deleuze and Guattari make significant is externality, rather than proximity or remoteness. Although remoteness is not identified with exoconsistency, it is included elsewhere within Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy as “lines of flight”, “the openings that”, as Tomlinson and Burchell describe them, “allow thought to escape from the constraints that seek to define and enclose creativity”, but these are not explicitly identified with the exoconsistency of the concept.  

The second difference is that, with Deleuze and Guattari, the double action is merely stated: a concept has an endoconsistency and an exoconsistency. They have to identify “exoconsistency” as a “bridging”, whereas with Ricoeur the connectivity is already contained within the concentration–extension relation of the octopus. With Ricoeur, each part of the action is dependent on another: the two discourses sustain one another through relating new predicates to familiar referents (the formation of concepts in speculative discourse), or by using predicative expressions whose sense has already been mastered to open up a new referential field (the combination of terms in metaphor). Deleuze and Guattari do refer to the concept possessing an “inseparability”, but this is with regard to the “zones, thresholds, or becomings” that constitute the concept’s endoconsistency, and not to the idea that endoconsistency and exoconsistency are inseparable.
Author biography

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Notes

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Ricoeur, Rule of Metaphor, 298.
Part of this paragraph first appeared in my book *Art, Research, Philosophy*, 157–8.


32 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 20.

33 Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu’est ce que la philosophie?, 25*; *What is Philosophy?*, 20.

34 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 19.

35 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 20.

36 Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu’est ce que la philosophie?, 25*; *What is Philosophy?*, 20.

37 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 20. As Tomlinson and Burchell note in their “Translators’ Introduction”, “it is difficult to find a single English equivalent for the word *survol*”. The word comes from “*survoler*”, meaning “to fly over” or “to skim or rapidly run one’s eyes over something”. Tomlinson and Burchell base their translation on the work of philosopher Raymond Ruyer. In his 1952 book *Neo-Finalisme*, Ruyer uses “*survol*” to refer to the sense of a surveilling “I-unity” that emerges from the subjective experience of the visual field. Tomlinson and Burchell take issue with the idea of an “I-unity” that stands above subjective experience, on the basis of their commitment to the philosophy of immanence advanced by Deleuze and Guattari, in which the apparent unity of subjective experience is a form of “self-enjoyment” that does not require the postulation of an emergent, external “I-unity”. Despite this disagreement, they nevertheless use Ruyer’s understanding of “*survol*” to translate the term as “survey”. See Tomlinson and Burchell, “Translators’ Introduction”, ix–x.

38 Tomlinson and Burchell, “Translators’ Introduction”, viii.