

# From *Abstraction* to *Wunsch*

## The *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies*

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DICTIONARY Say of it: ‘It’s only for ignoramuses!’ ... ‘I’d rather die than use one!’

Gustave Flaubert, *Dictionary of Received Ideas*

The *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies*\* deserves a warm welcome from everyone interested in philosophy and its history. While connoisseurs of philosophical lexicography will take particular delight in many of the work’s artful technical features and its often audacious solutions to some of the fundamental problems of the genre of philosophical dictionary, the significance of the *Vocabulaire* far exceeds such considerations. The work in many respects redefines the genre of the philosophical dictionary, reviving the cultural ambitions of both the medieval *summa* and such Enlightenment dictionaries as Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1702). It defines philosophy’s past and its future prospects, as well as opening up new areas of research by suggesting unexpected links between existing problems and traditions of philosophy and between philosophy and its ‘non-philosophical’ others. Its cultural ambition ensures that it remains critical, never lapsing into the extremes of the uselessly monumental or antiquarian, respecting Bataille’s definition of the modern dictionary as beginning not with the meaning of words but with their tasks.

Such a text – over fifteen hundred pages largely set in double columns scrupulously and programmatically respecting the idioms of the major European philosophical languages – is less to be read than to be lived and worked with. It provides a vast number of entries organized (and typographically distinguished) in terms of ‘untranslatable’ terms and their equivalents in the vernacular languages, meta-entries on languages and themes, and introductory short entries. The entries are

historically rich, punctuated with shaded insertions of short essays on related themes, concluding with generous and useful bibliographies. With a work of such scale and ambition what follows can only be a provisional report on a few months of cohabitation, premised upon admiration for the *Vocabulaire*’s achievement tempered by a certain curiosity concerning some of its limits and eccentricities. These may be functions of a necessarily partial reading – who could claim or want to claim to have read a whole dictionary? – but some of the omissions and oversights are striking, and, given the overall ambition of the work, worthy of reflection.

One example of such a limit is the absence of an entry on the philosophical dictionary itself, crucial not only as a site for the debate and codification of philosophical idioms but also as a vector for the teaching and dissemination of philosophy. Book V of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is the earliest surviving example of the philosophical dictionary, organized in terms of concepts, although the genre as we know it is largely a product of the Enlightenment. In his study of the dissemination of Spinozist ideas – *Radical Enlightenment* – Jonathan Israel described the early Enlightenment dictionary as a vector for radical philosophy, ‘a philosophical engine of war which massively invaded the libraries, public and private, of the whole continent’. The subentry on lexicography in the entry on ‘Logos’ is too general to help, unless of course the entire *Vocabulaire* be considered as a vast entry on this very question.

Before pursuing further the dominant and inevitable trope of a dictionary review – repining over what is absent or excluded in its pages – it is necessary to pay unequivocal tribute to the extraordinary achieve-

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\* Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies: Dictionnaire des Intraduisables*, Editions du Seuil/ Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2004. xxiv + 1531 pp., €95.00, 2 85 036 580 7 (Le Robert), 2 02 030730 8 (Seuil).

ments of the *Vocabulaire*. Habitual readers or users of philosophical dictionaries will find in the *Vocabulaire* a summation of the form of the philosophical dictionary, operating at nearly all the levels covered by this genre. At its most basic, the work is designed to satisfy readers in search of a concise, working definition of a concept or problem: each major entry is preceded by a short, historically informed summary of the task or problem posed by the word set in italics. In this respect the work functions well in comparison with my preferred versions of the genre of short-entry philosophical dictionaries: D. Runes's 1962 *Dictionary of Philosophy*, the excellent *Enciclopedia Garzanti di Filosofia* of 1981 and, perhaps surprisingly, I. Frolov's *Dictionary of Philosophy*, first published by Political Literature Publishers (Moscow) in 1980. Each of these gives a short definition of a concept or theme oriented by a particular vision of the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy. Runes emphasizes the relationship between philosophy, ethics and theology; the Garzanti volume philosophy and culture; Frolov science and political theory. The *Vocabulaire* has its own pre-orientation, to which I'll return below, but it nevertheless functions well within the generic rules of the short-entry dictionary. The entry 'Qualia', for example, is a model of the genre, combining a short, conceptual description with a historical sketch of the dissemination of the term from Latin into the modern languages.

The *Vocabulaire* also makes a powerful contribution to the subgenre of the dictionary of a distinct period of philosophy, especially the inaugural period of Ancient Greek philosophy. In its treatment of Ancient Greek concepts the *Vocabulaire* far exceeds other available working dictionaries in its etymological precision, conceptual rigour and ability to open new perspectives on apparently well-known terms. In comparison the *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* of 1967 seems garrulous, while J.O. Urmson's *The Greek Philosophical Vocabulary* of 1990 and Ivan Gobry's 1982 *Le vocabulaire grec de la philosophie* are too limited and dry. The *Vocabulaire*'s many excellent entries on Greek philosophical words are in most cases complemented by a review of their subsequent history. As an example, Alliez's entry on 'Aion', with the insert by Couloubaritsis, while rooted in an account of the Greek experience of the term also provides a fascinating lesson in ancient, medieval and modern understandings of time, with the insert referring to debates in modern Greek philosophy whose importance is neither widely known nor properly appreciated. The magisterial entries on such terms as

'Subject' by Baliber et al. and 'Truth' by Braque et al. are similarly impressive, and deserve to be published in pocket editions to be consulted on trains, in airports and while waiting for buses. In addition to such entries on philosophy's fundamental words of power are the apparently more modest but equally fascinating contributions to discrete concepts such as 'to ti en einai' by Courtine and Rijksbaron. Perhaps most disappointing is the entry on 'Being', where the editors seem to have (understandably) flinched and restricted themselves to a short list of cross-references, directing the reader to 'Esti' for classical and 'Sein' for post-Kantian discussions of the word.

The *Vocabulaire* also functions well as a dictionary for medieval and modern philosophy. Most of the large thematic and conceptual entries include a discussion of the medieval transformation of Greek concepts. Courtine's entry 'Res' (an English translation of which will appear in *Radical Philosophy* 139, September/October 2006) is exemplary in this respect, offering a full analysis of the medieval development of the notion of a thing. It is also noteworthy for its inclusion of the Arabic versions of Greek concepts, vitally important for the medieval Latin reception of philosophical concepts. The *Vocabulaire*'s recognition of the contribution of Arabic to the development of the language of philosophy is on the whole rather traditional, focusing upon its role as a vector for the Latin reception of Greek concepts and texts. This approach seems the result of a self-imposed editorial restriction, but one which is drawn perhaps too tightly. The contribution of the work of Henri Corbin in bringing Arabic and Persian philosophical texts into French and his postwar achievement in recovering an entire history of Islamic philosophy for European thought remains largely unacknowledged, with Corbin making a sole appearance as a translator of Heidegger. This aspect or restriction of the *Vocabulaire* will inevitably provoke an intensification of the debate into the relationship between the self-image of philosophy and 'Europe' which can only to be welcomed.

The *Vocabulaire* proves an invaluable source for information and guidance for the field of modern philosophy, although the reader must be prepared to search not only through the body of the dictionary but also through the conceptual network accessed via the indexes. The latter comprise an index of names, principal authors and passages cited, translators and translations and finally an index of words. Perhaps unique in its respect for the modern dissemination of philosophical concepts throughout the vernacular languages, the entries of the *Vocabulaire* cover most

of the modern ‘European’ languages including Basque, Ukrainian and Finnish and Hungarian – the latter pair contributing specific words for divinity. The coverage of Russian terms is especially impressive, the pursuit of the entries in the index of Russian terms providing a course in Russian-language philosophy. The entries on the philosophical languages are also invaluable, especially those on ‘Russian’ and ‘Greek’ by Malamoud/Omelyantchik and Couloubaritsis. The entry on ‘English’ by Clero and Laugier is the most disappointing, never seriously confronting the significance of the emergence of English as the current philosophical *koine*. In the midst of such linguistic diversity the *Vocabulaire* succeeds in presenting many of the central concepts and arguments of the philosophy of the modern period.

Part of the pleasure of combing the *Vocabulaire*’s indexes consists in being diverted in unexpected directions: I have still not been able to find ‘a priori’ but the search has led to many, probably more interesting, places. The indexes also permit the *Vocabulaire* to be used as an example of another subgenre of the philosophical dictionary, that of the idiosyncratic individually authored work. Quine’s *Quiddities* and Savater’s *Dizionario filosofico* establish the limits of this subgenre between the often wicked individualism of the former and the parochial gossip of the latter. In the case of the *Vocabulaire* it is possible, using the list of contributors provided at the beginning of the work, to follow the entries of a particular author, often adding up to a text in their own right, as is the case with those of Balibar, Courtine and Alain de Libera. The list of contributors also makes it possible to identify large individual contributions by writers such as Alliez on ‘Aion’, Badiou on ‘French’, Bodei on ‘Italian’, Bollack on ‘Memory’, Dastur on ‘Appearance’ and Malabou on ‘Plasticity’.

A further possibility opened by the indexes is the use of the *Vocabulaire* as a dictionary for the work of individual philosophers. The principal authors index seems designed to serve precisely this purpose although there are differences in the treatment of philosophers, some being considered more principal than others, or, as is noted at the head of the index, being ‘treated in a more detailed manner’. The entries on Aristotle, Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Kant, Plato and Wittgenstein are accordingly distinct from the others in the type and extent of their coverage. This is an indication of the virtual canon that structures the *Vocabulaire*’s vision of philosophy and its history.

There are two subgenres of the philosophical dictionary to which the *Vocabulaire* does not pretend

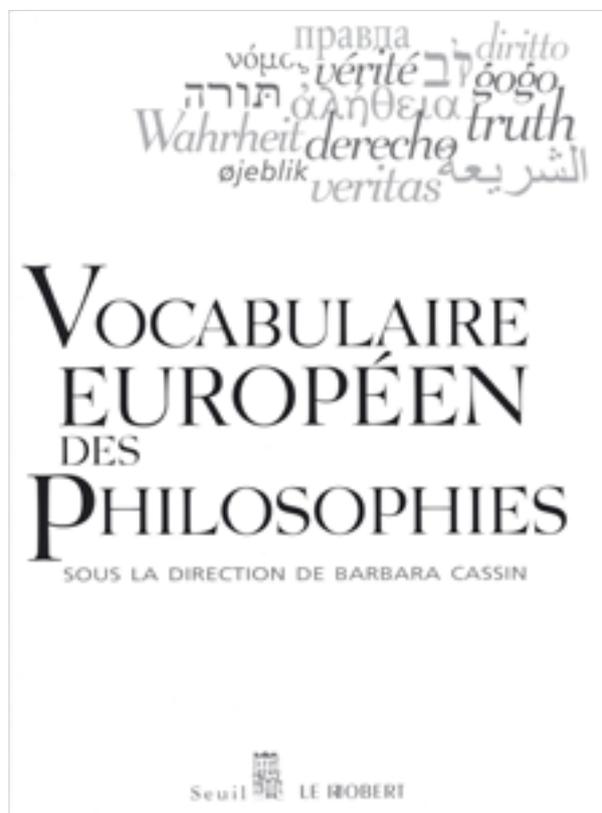
to make any contribution. These are the dictionaries that focus on philosophers and on philosophical texts. There is very little biographical information or attempt to reconstruct and present an individual philosophical itinerary, as is the premiss of Lange and Alexander’s *Philosophen-Lexicon*. The same holds for the treatment of philosophical works as a basic unit of meaning – there is no systematic treatment of the philosophical text as a whole such as that proposed in Franco Volpi’s *Dizionario delle opere filosofiche*. Instead the *Vocabulaire* samples and reassembles fragments of text into a consecutive historical argument, separating concepts from their setting within texts and detaching texts from their broader cultural and political situations. The systematic relegation of the integrity of the philosophical text as a site for philosophizing is evident even in attempts to recuperate the notion of the integral work in the index of principal authors. The entry on the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787) gives a list of topics in order of appearance in the *Critique* but it would be impossible to gain any sense of the consistency of that text from this presentation.

The *Vocabulaire* eschews any systematic reference to dates and places of philosophers’ lives and the publication of their works, strangely distancing itself from the geo-philosophy to which its attention to linguistic difference would seem to incline it. While the individual articles possess detailed and valuable bibliographies, with much of the necessary bibliographic information nested within them, this is not assembled in the indexes not systematically respected in the texts of the articles themselves. The effect of this perhaps necessary avoidance of repetition of dates and places is to blur the historical specificity of emergence and development of philosophical concepts. While such biographical and bibliographic information is readily available elsewhere, it would have been very simple to add it to the indexes and make the coverage of the *Vocabulaire* more complete.

In spite of such caveats regarding biography and bibliography, the historical range of the *Vocabulaire* remains one of its most impressive features, providing a comprehensive account of the history of the European philosophical language. Rivalling Joachin Ritter’s monumental and still incomplete *Historisches Wortebuch der Philosophie*, the *Vocabulaire*’s sense of engagement and argument with the history of philosophy contrasts favourably with the often indiscriminate citation that characterizes the German work. Yet the inevitable choices taken in each article regarding inclusion and approach are guided not only by an implied canon but also by a vision of philosophy

defined by what it regards as its friendly neighbours and what it silently excludes.

To a large degree the *Vocabulaire* is informed by a vision of philosophy as standing in close proximity to art and aesthetics and to a marked but lesser degree to psychoanalysis. One of the most wonderful features of the work is its systematic descriptions of the relationships between philosophical and aesthetic concepts. This is evident not only where it might be expected, in the entries on ‘Aesthetics’, ‘Art’, and ‘Beauty’, but also in entries not usually anticipated in philosophical dictionaries such as ‘Baroque’ and ‘Work in Progress’ as well as in crossovers between philosophical and aesthetic concepts such as ‘*Stimmung*’ and ‘Form’. ‘Baroque’ and ‘Work in Progress’ are extremely suggestive: the former proposing a review of the debate



around the nature of the stylistic concept, the latter an eccentric but engaging attempt to situate Schwitters’ *Merzbau* in terms of the concept of *energeia*. The impressive entry on *Stimmung* (attunement) aligns musical and philosophical senses of the term with two facing essays on Heidegger’s and Stockhausen’s uses of the concept.

*Energeia* is one of the key organizing concepts of the *Vocabulaire* cited by the editor Barbara Cassin in her introduction as part of a distinction between language as an inventive action and as a thing or completed work (*ergon*). Although the word does not have its own entry, the index of Greek words func-

tioned perfectly to direct this reader to the appropriate entries and the short essay by Cassin nested within the entry ‘Force’. The fascinating opening paragraphs of this entry by Balibar on the relationship between the concepts of force and energy create a desire in the reader to find out more about this and other episodes in the relationship between philosophy and natural science, but unfortunately this is left unsatisfied by the *Vocabulaire*. The absence of comprehensive coverage of the concepts of natural philosophy is perhaps the most questionable aspect of the entire work.

If nested within the *Vocabulaire* is an implied dictionary of philosophical aesthetics, traceable through the cross-references at the head of each related entry, what is definitely – stunningly – absent is a dictionary of philosophy and science. The *Vocabulaire* offers a history of philosophy that rigorously respects and enforces the divergence between philosophy and science in the modern period, a divergence repeatedly called into question, especially in recent French philosophy and history of science. The most obvious and superficial symptom of this exclusion appears in the indexes of words. There is no entry on *Wissenschaft* and the index refers to Art, Nature, Literature, *Geisteswissenschaften*. The entry on nature, surprisingly short, moves from Aristotle’s dictionary definition of *physis* (Metaphysics V) to Heidegger’s reading of *physis*: it is accompanied by supplementary arguments on ‘Homer, *Physis* and *Pharmakon*’ and the ‘Supernatural’. There is no ‘Science’ and the reference in the French index has in parenthesis ‘human, moral, new, political, social, *de l’esprit*, of man, of language etc.’, with cross-references to ‘Human Sciences’, ‘Writing’, ‘Epistemology’, ‘*Geisteswissenschaften*’ and ‘Politics’. The absence of an entry on science is not covered by the small entries on Epistemology and Human Sciences, nor on the discrete sciences such as astronomy, biology, chemistry and physics.

The systematic absence of natural philosophy and philosophical cosmology is confirmed by the relegation of Newton from a ‘principal author’ to a ‘proper name’, a fate not shared by Cardinal John Henry Newman. The Bergson preferred by the *Vocabulaire* is the early model of the 1890s, not the author of *Creative Evolution* or *Duration and Simultaneity*, and the only reference to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* is to be found, tangentially, under the entry discussing the Russian term *Samost*. The superficial absence of direct reference to natural philosophy extends into the articles themselves, which seem uniformly to respect the modern separation between philosophy and science. A striking exception already mentioned is Balibar’s entry

'Force', which, with its clear distinction of force and energy and its philosophical history of the former, will have to satisfy those coming to the *Vocabulaire* from their readings of Bergson, Whitehead, Deleuze, Prigogine and Stengers in search of help in understanding the philosophy of nature. More typical is the entry '*Mutazione*' (Mutation), which focuses on Machiavelli's account of political mutation with no reference to the mutations of the concept itself in evolutionary biology and genetics. Creationists, incidentally, will be cheered by the complete absence of Darwin and his natural philosophy from the *Vocabulaire*, to say nothing of the concept of evolution.

Nevertheless, the *Vocabulaire* is an immense achievement. It demands time to live with it and

to learn how to use it. It may be that many of the shortcomings and parochial habits that I have sensed are less a function of the work than of insufficiently developed skills in using it. As a philosophical dictionary, it is perhaps sui generis and any attempt to judge it according to existing generic rules is fundamentally misplaced and inappropriate. The work certainly succeeds in its ambition to map differences within the linguistic histories of philosophy and it opens new agendas for – as well as setting new standards of – debate. It makes an important contribution not only as a work of reference, but, more significantly, as a report on the place of philosophy in European culture and its prospects, as it is called to leave the confines of the peninsula and its languages.

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CPE : sur une crise

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Masoch / Deleuze

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Deleuze : article de 1961

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activistes du hoax :  
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