Reality and Concepts

(On a new realist philosophical method and new realist philosophy of Jocelyn Benoist)

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Abstract

I present a new realist philosophy of Jocelyn Benoist, in particular his solution to the problem of the explanatory gap in the philosophy of mind.

In his two essays, *Concepts* (Benoist 2010/2011) and *Éléments de philosophie réaliste* (Benoist 2011), which complement each other, Jocelyn Benoist lays the foundations of a contextualist (non-metaphysical) Wittgensteinian philosophy of mind and a contextualist (non-metaphysical) Wittgensteinian realism. Benoist draws his inspiration from the ideas of Wittgenstein, Austin and Charles Travis, and he develops them in the context of contemporary philosophy. At the same time he criticizes Pseudo-Wittgenstein – a rather popular philosopher – in particular the non-critical fundamentalist use of the notions of practice (Benoist reminds us that we are interested in conceptual practices, that is, actions, which already presuppose the notion of a concept) and ordinary, particularly "ordinary language", and a conservative interpretation of "philosophical grammar" as an unchangeable essence which precedes language. The distinctions between the ordinary and the non-

ordinary, for example the mathematical or the metaphysical (as, for example, the abstract notions of contemporary philosophy of mind are "metaphysical") do not play an important role. Wittgenstein's philosophy, his therapeutic and "grammatical" method can be extended to the domain of the "non-ordinary". In particular, Husserl's classical phenomenology can be corrected in the light of the contextualist approach. As for contextualism itself, though Benoist refers to Charles Travis (2000, 2008, 2011), in my view, he develops his own version of contextualism, which avoids Travis' extremes.[1] And unlike Travis, Benoist intends to create a positive, but not "mentalistic", philosophy of mind.

Benoist directs his criticism against metaphysical realism and the Cartesian theories of representation (in particular, the internalist theories of mental representation) as an intermediary between reality and the subject, which are widely used in cognitive sciences, but also against anti-representationalist anti-realist theories such as, for example, enactivist theory of perception, as well as against postmodernist identification of representation with reality.

Benoist opposes his contextualist method to Kantian and neo-Kantian transcendentalism and to objective Hegelian idealism. Reality is "un donné premier, et non un enjeu de constitution" (a primary given, not a problem of constitution. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011 : 14). It is as it is. And we are able to understand it. Thought and concepts are secondary.[2] The distinction between "represented things" (that is, "things-for-us") and "things" (that is, "things-in-

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[1] One of Benoist's definitions of contextualism is the following: « Même signification, mais ententes différentes, tel est le principe du contextualisme » (the same meaning, but different understandings, such is the principle of contextualism. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011: 79).

[2] One must not confuse reality and the sense of reality. It makes no sense to say that thought by itself is able to change something in reality (in this sense it is "weak"). Thought does not have a "free" efficacy, outside reality. However, this does not mean that thought is not able to reach ("touch" or understand) reality. Reality, the "borders of facts" precede the concepts of which they are the constituent "facts". (Benoist 2011: 197)

themselves") leads to skepticism or idealism. Against Hegel, Benoist claims that reality cannot be identified with conceptual "reality". Our thought is delimited[3], and we, as we are, do not have concepts for everything, although in principle there are no conceptual limits to understanding any reality.

Contextually, there is no sense in speaking of the essence of reality in general or in justifying it. A theory of reality in general is an absurd project, but one can construct theories of different forms of the real.

Benoist shares the point of view according to which, in a sense, philosophy is secondary in relation to other disciplines ("la philosophie *n'a pas d'objet direct*") (philosophy does not have a direct object. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2010/2011: 29). Its principal goal is conceptual analysis. For Benoist, the latter is not a purely *a priori* analysis; and it is applicable to all kinds of things; there are no things which are unworthy of philosophy. One can conceptually analyze, for example, such a singular and powerfully real object as Africa or such a social phenomenon ("social reality"[4]) as the existence of ghettos. Concepts have

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[3] Every concept has its own domain of application. That is, the capacity of a concept to attain a certain reality is exactly what prevents it from attaining others. (Benoist 2010/2011: 34) For Benoist as for Wittgenstein, "la thèse de bornage, en tant que thèse d'indétermination, est autant une thèse de clôture que d'ouverture" (the boundary thesis as a thesis of indeterminacy is as much a thesis of closing as of opening. *Translation mine*) (2010/2011: 156).

[4] Benoist argues that there is no ontological difference between social reality and, for example, ordinary reality. There is no stratified ontological pyramid, based in the "perceptual" and culminating in the "social". Social facts are immediately given to us. And ordinary facts, as for example, the postman's horn (an example borrowed from Heidegger) have a social dimension. It is not possible to be outside of society, outside of the social. We are in society even when we are completely isolated from people.

innumerable forms. True concepts, not pseudo-concepts, and true thoughts (which are always contextual and at the same time have a certain generality, that is, they exceed the framework of a given context. Thoughts do not exist in themselves, but are always *our* thoughts) are *anchored* in reality; they are alimented by it. Genuine analysis must go right to the end, that is, to the factual foundation of the concepts. « Analyser nos concepts c'est interroger le fond de la réalité qu'il y a toujours en eux» (to analyse our concepts is to interrogate the depth of reality which is always in them. *Translation mine*), says Benoist (2010/2011: 195). One of the goals of the philosophy of mind is to understand the nature of the generality of concepts and thoughts, to understand how the latter attain concrete reality. The philosopher works on the vacillating border between the conceptual and the non-conceptual. The difference which characterizes them is not ontological (as, for example, Frege thought) but logical. And "la frontière entre le conceptuel et le non-conceptuel (…) est une question de point de vue" (the border between the conceptual and the non-conceptual is a question of point of view. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2010/2011: 65).

There is no *epistemic gap* (fossé épistémique) between genuine concepts (or thoughts) and reality, because concepts are made to attain reality. This is true for radically singular concepts like concepts expressed by proper names (proper names possess cognitive generality – that of

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The reality of social intentionality is determined by what social institutions allow. This is only one level of social reality. Society is primary (and it does not choose itself. This does not mean that it must be accepted as it is. "La réalité est aussi bien ce qui se change" (reality is also what changes. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011: 171)), social intentionality is secondary, and not *vice versa*.

Benoist rejects the conventionalist model of the social habit, adopting in its place the Wittgensteinian model of habit as rule (2011, ch. 6).

recognition)[5] as well as for phenomenal concepts referring to phenomenal experiences.[6] Everything happens as if they contained in themselves a grain of reality (in the case of concepts, a grain of a real phenomenal experience).[7] At the same time, Benoist rejects the theory of identity of thought and reality. Thought is normative (and a concept is a mental norm); it must accommodate to the real. The equilibrium between thought and reality is quite fragile.

In the general case, a concept can be defined with the aid of a set of its paradigmatic applications.[8] We master a concept if and only if we master the corresponding set of its paradigmatic uses. One cannot separate having a concept from the capacity of its application. For example, the applications of phenomenal concepts are "intuitive", that is, they are determined by the corresponding experience. These concepts are based on the idea of family resemblance. That is why the limits of their application are vague. One cannot possess a phenomenal (or "experiential") concept of a certain experience if one has never experienced it (or, we may add, if one has never had a similar experience).

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[5] The distinction between singular concepts and non-singular concepts depends on the point of view; it is logical, not ontological. Reality is as it is. There is no sense in speaking about singularity or non-singularity as a *matter of fact*.

[6] Benoist also uses the notion of a "practical concept" (2010/2011: 65). Hence the conceptual is not necessary reflective. For Benoist, it would be a mistake to think that there are always *reasons* to apply or not to apply a concept. (He is talking about explicit, reflective reasons.) "*La raison, c'est le concept lui-même*" (reason is the concept itself. *Translation mine*), he says (2010/2011: 177).

[7] Conceptualization can be standardized, abstract, poor, such as for example when concepts refer in a formal way to the correspondent objects, without reflecting all their richness. Such impoverished conceptualization is not fatal to concepts.

[8] The source of the notion of a "paradigmatic" concept can be found in Wittgenstein.

I would say that for Benoist the concept of a thing (for example of an experience) is its essence in the following sense. The essence, for example, the phenomenological essence, is not "transcendent"; it can be *given*, and it is in the particularity of what is given. For example, the essence of an apple can be given in the sorbet of an apple, which in a way constitutes a "living concept" of an apple. (Benoist 2010/2011: 89-90)

Benoist analyzes the concept of the real by considering its different uses, that is, the logical "grammar" of the real in the Wittgensteinian sense. He discovers that perception plays a basal role in the definition of reality.[9] (And our ordinary language is anchored in perception. It represents a mode of contact with reality.) There is a grammatical priority of the *perceived* in the concept of reality. "Parler des choses réelles, c'est toujours, *aussi et d'abord* (même si *pas seulement*), parler des choses que nous voyons, touchons, goûtons, sentons et entendons" (to talk about real things is always, *also and first of all* (even if not *only*) to talk about things that we see, touch, taste, feel and hear *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011: 108). This is a logical (grammatical), not empirical, fact.[10]

Strictly speaking, reality is not "given" to us. We are part of reality; we are in permanent contact with it. A certain *distance*, but not an unbridgeable *ontological* gap (between the thought or consciousness and the thing) or *epistemic* gap (between the concept and the thing,

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[9] "Le fait de la perception (…) constitue une des dimensions mêmes du concept de réalité" (the fact of perception (…) constitutes one of the dimensions of the concept of reality. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011 : 99).

[10] Immediate consciousness (awareness) precedes perception. The latter *presents* reality; the former allows us to grasp reality in all its plenitude. According to Benoist, with respect to perception (in general: experience), thought is situated at the superior level of consciousness. (Thought attributes a meaning to experience. Experience and thought can be separated temporarily.) This distinction between the levels of consciousness is not grammatical.

for example, between the concept and phenomenal experience or the concept and "singular reality"), between us and reality appears when we use the concepts. One does not impose genuine concepts from outside; they are determined and alimented by reality itself. The concepts identify the things, make distinctions between them, give them "their meaning"[11], allow us to "reach" them and understand them; they also allow us to *do* something with them. The concept supervenes where the presence, the reality is typified. According to Benoist, what matters is not what we have (what is real), but *what we make of what we have*.

The employed concepts may not correspond to the given reality, that is, they may be *inappropriate* (this is the negative normative dimension of concepts). In other words, there are true concepts and false concepts. (That being said, as a rule, true concepts allow us to reach (describe, represent) only a part of reality. An analysis of any reality can be more or less detailed.) Another normative dimension of the concepts – which is "positive" – is *adequacy*. The two normative dimensions are closely related, but the second is stronger than the first. If appropriateness is the possibility of use of a concept (of a description, of a representation) in a given situation, adequacy is the quality of the use of the concept (of the description, of the representation) – that of the mutual adjustment between the concept and the reality. Adequate concepts reach reality (within a point of view) such as it is; they touch reality as a reality. It is with the help of adequate concepts that we represent and know things in their authenticity. Not only are adequate representations true, but they are also exact.[12] In the case of an

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[11] There is no sense in saying that reality as such has meaning or not. There is no sense in saying, as the transcendentalists do, that "naked reality" is deprived of sense. Sense is associated with the use of the concepts in a context.

[12] True representations are those which formally "correspond" to reality. Exact representations are those which not only correspond to reality but are also anchored in it.

adequate representation of a thing, "sa réalité perce en quelque sorte alors à travers sa vérité" (in a way its reality pierces through its truthfulness. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011: 58).

Benoist's realism is an *intentional realism* which can be understood in two closely related senses (to pass from one to another it is sufficient to move the emphasis in the expression *intentional realism* from one word to the other): every reality is given to us within a point of view, an intention, a context (these notions are not separable from each other). In this sense, reality is intentional. On the other hand, genuine intention, not a pseudo-intention, is anchored in reality which is a condition of its existence (that is, there is a realist "constraint" on intentionality). In this sense and only in this sense, the intention is real. (Even our fantasies have a realist dimension. Their force is in their anchoring in the real.) Intentional realism rejects the metaphysical approach to intentionality, which considers intentionality as something *sui generis*, as something which is added to the matter from outside.[13]

A point of view is not separable from the thing viewed from this point of view. It must not be imposed from outside, as something independent from the thing itself. Within a context, a point a view, a thing is given to us as it is.[14] In one context we are dealing, for example, with a book; in another context, with a parallelepiped. This does not mean that there is a third object

In the pragmatic Wittgensteinian spirit, Benoist notes that the notion of success is deeper than that of truth. He understands "success" as (successful) pursuing of a "normatively constituted path" (see Benoist 2010/2011, p. 70, footnote 1), which I interpret as the correct following of a rule in the sense of Wittgenstein.

[13] Notice in this connection, that Benoist criticizes the use of the Aristotelian notion of "second nature". Benoist does not separate the animality of man from her/his "rationality". Man as a "rational animal" perceives things immediately. Her/his rationality *is* her/his animality. (Benoist 2011 : 154)

[14] "Il n'y a de contexte que là où on rentre dans ce jeu normatif dans le réel que, en un sens ou en un autre, on appelle "pensée". Mais le contexte lui-même (…) est ce qui reste dans le silence" (context only exists where one enters into this normative game within the real which, in one sense or another, is called "thought". But the context itself remains in silence. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011: 88).

considered sometimes as a book and sometimes as a parallelepiped (though such a point of view is possible). In our case there are only two "things-in-themselves" which are at the same time "things-for-us": a book and a parallelepiped. "A book" and "a parallelepiped" are not different *representations* of one and the same object. They are two different objects.

The context is "silent", that is, it includes what is implicit. Within a context, the "reality", or the level of "brute" (non-normative) facts, is what is supposed, what is gained; within another context this "brute reality" itself can become conceptual. (One also calls something that remains unanalyzed, non-conceptualized "real".)

For example, within the context of our institutions, the fact that I paid two dollars to the grocer consists in giving him a piece of paper. The institutions play the role of reality. This does not mean that in another context they could not be called into question (reality is what changes).

Even mathematical claims are contextual (see an example from set theory (Benoist 2011, ch. 3)). This permits us to make natural sense of such - at first glance - absurd notions (to which philosophers have given a lot of thought) as the *round square*. (Benoist 2010/2011, pp. 165-168.)

Thought, consciousness, and mental representation contain elements of reality, since their anchoring in reality is the condition of their existence. The philosophy of mind cannot be constructed without using the concept of reality, and without understanding the nature of reality.

For Benoist, the real is *what one has*. However, this metaphor must not be understood in the literal sense, that is, in the sense of possession. It must be understood in the sense in which

one says "let us see what we have!"[15] That being said, what is important is *what we do with what we have* (it may happen that we do not know what to do with what we have). A goal of contextual realism is to clarify the meaning (or meanings) of the expression "what one has", the nature and the forms of "what one has".[16]

Our concepts are determined by reality, by the relationship between the real forces which partly constitute their substance. "The same phenomenon" can be described differently according to different points of view. This does not mean that such and such a description does not reflect reality. This, conversely, means that reality is multiple; it is divided by borders. The real divisions, the real relation of forces determine the conceptual divisions. "Ce qui s'appelle *waiting* d'un coté s'appelle *loitering* de l'autre, par exemple" (what is called *waiting* on the one hand, is called *loitering* on the other, for example. *Translation mine*) (see the example of inhabitants of a ghetto) (Benoist 2010/2011: 202). Often we are not able to think (because we do not have the corresponding concepts). In consequence, we do not want to think. And because we do not want to think, we are not able to. For example, we do not want to and are not able to think about such a singular and massive object as Africa. We do not want to and we are not able to think about those black bodies which are washed up every day on our European beaches. (Benoist 2010/2011: 31)

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[15] "Le monde n'a rien de "notre", et nous le dit encore moins" (the world has nothing of "ours", and tells us this even less. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011 : 92). "Le monde ne parle pas" (the world doesn't speak. *Translation mine*) (see Benoist 2011 : 92, note 1). "Le réel n'est (…) ni ce que nous n'avons, ni ce que nous n'avons pas, mais ce en quoi, entre autres choses, cela a un sens de dire que nous ayons ou n'ayons pas quelque chose" (the real is neither what we have nor what we do not have, but that in which, among other things, it makes sense to say that we have or do not have something. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2011 : 93).

[16] Benoist goes to the furthest edge of the impersonal use of "one". The question of personalization arises only at the end, not at the beginning.

Philosophy does not have a monopoly on the creation of concepts, and its goal does not consist in giving a full classification of basic concepts (which is not possible). Physics and mathematics produce very complicated concepts which philosophers without special training are not able to understand. The goal of philosophy is conceptual analysis, investigation of the nature of concepts, of the relation between concepts and reality. Like every discipline, philosophy has its own technique. This is the technique of conceptual analysis, which requires a lot of patience and attention toward the object of analysis, toward reality. The necessary condition of a satisfactory analysis is good knowledge of the object of analysis. Nevertheless, Benoist rejects a return to regional epistemologies. Philosophy applies conceptual analysis at its own level, which is the most general.

Concepts possess some flexibility, plasticity; they have an "open texture".[17] The domain of their applications is restricted, that is, it is not without limits[18] (there are *real possibilities* of applications of concepts), but at the same time it is "vague". In general it cannot be known *a priori*. *A posteriori* it often happens that a concept has an application which one has not been able to predict. In many cases, it does not make any sense to say whether a concept is applicable or not in an imaginary situation until a real practice permits us to make a justified decision. For example (Benoist borrows this example from Charles Travis (2000)), given the state of our current knowledge it is not possible to answer the question of whether a genetically created animal which resembled a pig but which could fly should be identified by the same concept of a pig or by another concept (maybe a concept of a different kind of a

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[17] Benoist refers to Friedrich Weismann (see Benoist 2010/2011, ch. 5). But this is, of course, also an idea of Wittgenstein's.

[18] "Celles-ci sont celles de l'honnêteté, autrement dit de l'engagement que nous avons au monde" (they are those of honesty, in other words, of the commitment we have to the world. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2010/2011: 169).

pig). In other words, one cannot answer *a priori* the question of its identification with another kind of a pig or the same kind of a pig.[19] (Benoist 2010/2011: 180-182)

The conceptual identification of a thing as "the same", as belonging to the same kind or "sufficiently similar", depends on the context. For example, something which is a *representation* of a thing in one context can be "the same thing" in another context. According to Benoist, every identity has a normative dimension.

The resemblance between different applications of one and the same concept is what Wittgenstein calls "family resemblance" (in Husserl this notion corresponds to the notion of *Orientierung*). Benoist is right to call this resemblance "normative resemblance".

The conceptual emerges where there is a norm[20], something new (not a standardized repetition), where questions like "What is it?" or "What should we do?"[21] are put. For example, calculation itself (produced mechanically) does not involve anything conceptual. The conceptual appears only when calculation is an *action* of the subject (for example, a calculation produced for the first time).

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[19] Benoist writes that the question of calling a "flying pig" a "pig" is undecidable. "Cela non pas au sens où nous ne saurions pas encore s'il s'agit d'un cochon ou non, mais au sens où nous ne pouvons pas savoir, *a priori*, le sens dans lequel il faudrait le savoir" (this is not in the sense that we do not yet know if it is a pig or not, but in the sense that *a priori* we cannot know the sense in which one should know it. *Translation mine*) (2010/2011: 182).

[20] That being said, there are different norms ("grammars"): there are, for example, physical norms and there are phenomenological norms (Benoist 2011: 113).

[21] "Un concept, c'est une norme mentale, qui sert à mesurer si une chose est comme ceci ou comme cela" (a concept is a mental norm, which serves to measure if a thing is like this or like that. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2010/2011 : 133).

Benoist makes a distinction between a concept and a rule, which Benoist understands as an explicit rule. In consequence, "le fait qu'on ne suive pas entièrement les règles (…) ne veut pas nécessairement dire qu'on soit sorti du "concept" que ces règles seraient censées exprimer" (the fact that one does not completely follow rules does not necessary mean that one has abandoned the concept which these rules are presumed to express. *Translation mine*) (2010/2011: 192). (Benoist gives an example of violation of the rules of immigration by the officials of a French prefecture which, however, are not a violation of the corresponding concept (of the "spirit" of the rule)[22].

"Conceptual thought" is a pleonasm. By the very their nature, language and thought are conceptual. Odd notions such as, for example, "non-conceptual content" or "non-conceptual intentionality" are a consequence of incomprehension or restricted comprehension of the notion of a concept. The conceptual does not necessary suppose the use of language. Thought expressed in language and unexpressed thought have the same nature. In principle, any genuine thought (not pseudo-thought) can be expressed in language. "Private thoughts", that is, thoughts which do not have a conceptual structure, are not genuine thoughts, and they cannot be understood even by their bearers. "Private thoughts" in the sense of "genuine but idiosyncratic" (that is, not widely public) have a conceptual structure, and, in principle, they can be understood by other people, but they can be easily lost, forgotten. Thought, especially thought associated with such and such an experience (including specific experience), is anchored in it and alimented by it. The loss of an experience entails the loss of the corresponding concept, the capacity to think about this experience.

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[22] About the concept of border Benoist says: "La violence (…) n'est pas en aval du concept – dans ses transgressions et mésapplications -, mais bel et bien *en amont*, dans le corps même du concept" (violence is not after the concept, in its transgressions and misapplications, – but well and truly *before*, in the very body of the concept. *Translation mine*) (2010/2011 : 194).

According to Benoist, thought is real (and always contextual), and this reality is normative. That is, "la réalité est ce qui est en question dans la norme, mais vient toujours aussi limiter celle-ci" (reality is what is in question in the norm, but which also always limits it. *Translation mine*) (Benoist 2010/2011 : 11). Pseudo-thought is not able to make distinctions. Pseudo-concepts are not able to distinguish between the cases where they can be applied and those where they cannot.

Thought is able to involve in itself the singularity of the thing; it is able to touch the thing in its singularity, and not only to refer to it in a formal way. Thoughts of this kind form the phenomenological substance of our relationship with the world. The "gap" between experience and thought concerning it ("description" of the experience, its "thematization") is logical (and not necessary real).

In the two essays, Benoist "dissolves"/resolves the problem of the explanatory gap, or the hard problem of the philosophy of mind, within his Wittgensteinian contextualism.

In the essays, in a fascinating way Benoist sets up a relation between the most abstract philosophy and the most concrete social and political questions. Nevertheless, one of his questionings left me perplexed. Benoist puts the following question: "Is waterboarding a torture?" (2010/2011: 170). In my view, the answer is obvious.

In conclusion, the reader will find in Benoist's essays a long list of "mental cramps", illusions, phantasms, myths, philosophical mistakes and confusions, which the author identifies and corrects, by applying the therapeutic Wittgensteinian method. At the same time, the two essays lay the foundations of contextualist philosophy of mind, phenomenology and positive metaphysics.

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