

## The Notions of Operative and Thematic Concepts

Nagib Callaos

*International Institute of Informatica and Systemics (IIS, www.iis.org)*  
*Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics, and Informatics (JSCI)*

*n.callaos@iis.org*

The purpose of this short article is to describe the Notions of Eugen Fink's "Operative and Thematic Concepts"

Fink, in a famous article (1968), differentiated between *operative and thematic concepts*. We will briefly describe the meaning of these terms because we will use them along this essay and especially in the following sections.

It is evident that we cannot think, at once, in all things involved in our thinking processes. To think of a concept we need other concepts that we do not think about them. *Operative concepts* are those that are frequently used to clarify other concepts, i.e. the *thematic ones*, but they, in turn, are not clarified. They are "*shadow concepts*" that stand behind the "what-is-being-clarified", supporting the clarification process while they are maintained un-clarified, in the shadow. Montgomery and Allan (1992) associate Louis Althusser's notion of Ideology (Ideology and ideological state apparatuses: Notes towards an investigation, 1971) to the notion of operative concepts. Paul Ricoeur (1986) makes this association in more explicit terms. He affirms that "Althusser's reading is that an ideology is not to be discussed as a thought that somebody assumes, because *an ideology is not something that is thought, but rather something within which we think.*" (p. 120) [Italics added]. Mutatis Mutandis, operative concepts are not something that is thought about, but something with which we think.

To think, analyze, and clarify a concept (thematic concept), a notion, an idea, we need to use other concepts that are not clarified. Fink provides some examples of thematic concepts in Philosophy: the "idea" or "form" in Plato; "usía", "dynamis", "energeia" in Aristotle; the "monad" in Leibniz; the "transcendental" in Kant; the "spirit or absolute

idea” in Hegel; the “will to Power” in Nietzsche; "transcendental subjectivity" in Husserl, etc. To make a conceptual development and clarification of these ideas (thematic concepts), other concepts are required which, in turn, are not clarified in our reflections, thinking or discourses. Fink calls these concept “operative concepts” because they allow our thinking to operate. Operative concepts are intellectual schemes, thinking models, operative instruments, tools that are required for conceptual thematization and clarification. The concepts that a philosophical, scientific, or intellectual thinking process usually uses, but, they are not, in turn, object of reflection or clarification, are what Fink called “operative concepts”. These concepts are necessary to clarify others, but they are not themselves addressed or clarified. To maintain in the shadow these concepts is a necessary condition to clarify others. These concepts are what might be called the shadow of a philosophy or a science.

Fink affirms that “The enlightening force of a thought is nourished by what remains in the shadow of a thought. In a profound reflection, there is always an immediacy, without hesitation or reflection. It [the thought] has a productive elan in using irreflexively these concepts covered by shadows... The human grasp of the world comprehend the totality in a thematic concept of the world, which nevertheless is a finite perspective, since in its formulation concepts that are kept in the shade are being used.”<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Lawrence (In the Shadow of Illusion – Kant and Fink on the problem of philosophical reflection, 2014), referring to Eugene Fink affirms that “Philosophical reflection claims to cast light onto the shadows of everyday life but in doing so obscures its own medium of seeing from itself.” (p. 6)

Using Fink’s differentiation between operative and thematic concepts and the metaphor he used to convey the idea, we might briefly describe the following four levels of details as follows:

1. We will use concepts that will not be defined, notions that will not be described, and terms which meaning will not be provided. These are, in Fink’s terms, the *operative concepts*, that are kept in the *shadows* in order to clarify the fundamental

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a translation from Spanish (Los Conceptos Operatorios en la Fenomenología de Husserl (Originally published in French), 1968), which; in turn, is a translation from German.

theme, as well as sub-themes, and functional concepts. They are, metaphorically, the shadow of any reflection, not just the philosophical ones, the shadow of any intellectual clarity. *The clearer the reflection the more obscure and border-defined is the respective shadow.*

2. We will also use little less obscure terms, concepts, and/or notions which will be very shortly described as we did in this section of “operative and thematic concepts”. We will use the phrase “*functional concepts*” because *the description is a means not an end in itself*. The end is to support the clarification of the reflection on other concepts. Functional concepts will be used especially in the case of an *explicitly specified* meaning which should not be confused with the *implicit* meaning that an operative concept might have or with the *general* meaning described in a dictionary. They will also be used to alert the reader on a different meaning that the same term might have.
3. *Sub-thematic* concepts will be used as part of the reflection and clarification process required for the thematic concept. Sub-thematic concept are themselves a theme, but in the context and oriented to the objective of clarifying the main theme. Our description of the notion of “information” below is an example of a sub-theme because it is essential to scientific communication and, hence, to a systemic notion of science which the Theme of this essay.
4. The purpose of reflecting and writing this essay on a “systemic notion of Science” determine the selection of its sub-themes and the orientation to the reflection related to all of them. It provides context to (hence meaning) and integrates all other concepts used in this essay: operative, functional, and sub-thematic.

We will mostly use, in this essay, two ways to briefly describe a functional concept:

- A. To relate the functional concept to the meaning it has in a *specific* intellectual (philosopher, scientists, etc.) as it is the case, for example, of Fink’s differentiation between operational and thematic concepts, summarized and briefly described in this section.

B. To indicate the meaning with which it will be used in this essay. In this case, we will attempt a short *systemic definition* of the respective functional concept. Consequently, we will briefly describe what we are meaning with “systemic definition”.

## References

- Althusser, L. L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses: Notes towards an investigation. In *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (pp. 127-186). New York and London: Monthly Review Press.
- Fink, E. (1968). Los Conceptos Operatorios en la Fenomenología de Husserl (Originally published in French). In C. Royaumont, *Husserl*. Argentina (Initially published in Paris): Paidós (Originally published by Les Editions de Minuit).
- Lawrence, N. (2014). *In the Shadow of Illusion – Kant and Fink on the problem of philosophical reflection*. Department of Culture and communication . Södertörn University.
- Montgomery, M., & Allan, S. (1992). Ideology, Discourse, and Cultural Studies . *Canadian Journal of communication* , 17 (2).
- Ricoeur, P. (1986). *Lectures on ideology and Utopia*. New York, New York, EUA: Columbia University Press.