

The Adventure of French Philosophy

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Translated into English

Panorama de la Philosophie Française Contemporaine,
Conférence à la Bibliothèque Nationale de Buenos Aires,
1 Juin 2004

Let us begin these reflections on contemporary French philosophy with a paradox: that which is the most universal is also, at the same time, the most particular. Hegel calls this the “concrete universal,” the synthesis of that which is absolutely universal, which pertains to everything, with that which has a particular time and place. Philosophy is a good example. Absolutely universal, it addresses itself to all, without exception; but within philosophy there exist powerful cultural and national particularities. There are what we might call moments of philosophy, in space and in time. Philosophy is thus both a universal aim of reason and, simultaneously, one that manifests itself in completely specific moments. Let us take the example of two especially intense and well-known philosophical instances. First, that of classical Greek philosophy between Parmenides and Aristotle, from the 5th to the 3rd centuries BC: a highly inventive, foundational moment, ultimately quite short-lived. Second, that of German idealism between Kant and Hegel, via Fichte and Schelling: another exceptional philosophical moment, from the late 18th to the early 19th centuries, intensely creative and condensed within an even shorter time span. I propose to defend a further national and historical thesis: there was — or there is, depending where I put myself — a French philosophical moment of the second half of the 20th century which, *toute proportion gardée*, bears comparison to the examples of classical Greece and enlightenment Germany.

Sartre’s foundational work, *Being and Nothingness*, appeared in 1943 and the last writings of Deleuze, *What is Philosophy?*, date from the early 1990s. The moment of French philosophy develops between the two of them, and includes Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan as well as Sartre and Deleuze — and myself, maybe. Time will tell; though if there has been such a French philosophical moment, my position would be as perhaps its last

representative. It is the totality of this body of work, situated between the ground-breaking contribution of Sartre and the last works of Deleuze, that is intended here by the term 'contemporary French philosophy'. I will argue that it constitutes a new moment of philosophical creativity, both particular and universal. The problem is to identify this endeavour. What took place in France, in philosophy, between 1940 and the end of the 20th century? What happened around the ten or so names cited above? What was it that we called existentialism, structuralism, deconstruction? Was there a historical and intellectual unity to that moment? If so, of what sort?

I shall approach these problems in four different ways. First, origins: where does this moment come from, what were its antecedents, what was its birth? Next, what were the principal philosophical operations that it undertook? Third, the fundamental question of these philosophers' link with literature, and the more general connection between philosophy and literature within this sequence. And finally, the constant discussion throughout this whole period between philosophy and psychoanalysis. Origins, operations, style and literature, psychoanalysis: four means by which to attempt to define contemporary French philosophy.

Concept and interior life

To think the philosophical origins of this moment we need to return to the fundamental division that occurred within French philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century, with the emergence of two contrasting currents. In 1911, Bergson gave two celebrated lectures at Oxford, which appeared in his collection *La pensée et le mouvement*. In 1912, simultaneously, in other words, Brunschvicg published *Les Étapes de la philosophie mathématique*. Coming on the eve of the Great War, these interventions attest to the existence of two completely distinct orientations. In Bergson we find what might be called a philosophy of vital interiority, a thesis on the identity of being and becoming; a philosophy of life and change. This orientation will persist throughout the 20th century, up to and including Deleuze. In Brunschvicg's work, we find a philosophy of the mathematically based concept: the possibility of a philosophical formalism of thought and of the symbolic, which likewise continues throughout the century, most specifically in Lévi-Strauss, Althusser and Lacan.

From the start of the century, then, French philosophy presents a divided and dialectical character. On one side, a philosophy of life; on the other, a philosophy of the concept. This debate between life and concept will be absolutely central to the period that follows. At stake in any such discussion is the question of the human subject, for it is here

that the two orientations coincide. At once a living organism and a creator of concepts, the subject is interrogated both with regard to its interior, animal, organic life, and in terms of its thought, its capacity for creativity and abstraction. The relationship between body and idea, or life and concept, formulated around the question of the subject, thus structures the whole development of 20th-century French philosophy from the initial opposition between Bergson and Brunschvicg onwards. To deploy Kant's metaphor of philosophy as a battleground on which we are all the more or less exhausted combatants: during the second half of the 20th century, the lines of battle were still essentially constituted around the question of the subject. Thus, Althusser defines history as a process without a subject, and the subject as an ideological category; Derrida, interpreting Heidegger, regards the subject as a category of metaphysics; Lacan creates a concept of the subject; Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, of course, allotted an absolutely central role to the subject. A first definition of the French philosophical moment would therefore be in terms of the conflict over the human subject, since the fundamental issue at stake in this conflict is that of the relationship between life and concept.

We could, of course, take the quest for origins further back and describe the division of French philosophy as a split over the Cartesian heritage. In one sense, the postwar philosophical moment can be read as an epic discussion about the ideas and significance of Descartes, as the philosophical inventor of the category of the subject. Descartes was a theoretician both of the physical body — of the animal-machine — and of pure reflection. He was thus concerned with both the physics of phenomena and the metaphysics of the subject. All the great contemporary philosophers have written on Descartes: Lacan actually raises the call for a return to Descartes, Sartre produces a notable text on the Cartesian treatment of liberty, Deleuze remains implacably hostile. In short, there are as many Descartes as there are French philosophers of the postwar period. Again, this origin yields a first definition of the French philosophical moment as a conceptual battle around the question of the subject.

Four moves

Next, the identification of intellectual operations common to all these thinkers. I shall outline four procedures which, to my mind, clearly exemplify a way of doing philosophy that is specific to this moment; all, in some sense, are methodological ones. The first move is a German one, or rather, a French move upon German philosophers. All contemporary French philosophy is also, in reality, a discussion of the German heritage. Its formative moments include Kojève's seminars on

Hegel, attended by Lacan and also influential upon Lévi-Strauss, and the discovery of phenomenology in the 1930s and 40s, through the works of Husserl and Heidegger. Sartre, for instance, radically modified his philosophical perspectives after reading these authors in the original during his sojourn in Berlin. Derrida may be regarded as, first and foremost, a thoroughly original interpreter of German thought. Nietzsche was a fundamental reference for both Foucault and Deleuze.

French philosophers went seeking something in Germany, then, through the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger. What was it that they sought? In a phrase: a new relation between concept and existence. Behind the many names this search adopted — deconstruction, existentialism, hermeneutics — lies a common goal: that of transforming, or displacing, this relation. The existential transformation of thought, the relation of thought to its living subsoil, was of compelling interest for French thinkers grappling with this central issue of their own heritage. This, then, is the “German move,” the search for new ways of handling the relation of concept to existence by recourse to German philosophical traditions. In the process of its translation onto the battleground of French philosophy, moreover, German philosophy was transformed into something completely new. This first operation, then, is effectively a French appropriation of German philosophy.

The second operation, no less important, concerns science. French philosophers sought to wrest science from the exclusive domain of the philosophy of knowledge by demonstrating that, as a mode of productive or creative activity, and not merely an object of reflection or cognition, it went far beyond the realm of knowledge. They interrogated science for models of invention and transformation that would inscribe it as a practice of creative thought, comparable to artistic activity, rather than as the organization of revealed phenomena. This operation, of displacing science from the field of knowledge to that of creativity, and ultimately of bringing it ever closer to art, find its supreme expression in Deleuze, who explores the comparison between scientific and artistic creation in the most subtle and intimate way. But it begins well before him, as one of the constitutive operations of French philosophy.

The third operation is a political one. The philosophers of this period all sought an in-depth engagement of philosophy with the question of politics. Sartre, the post-war Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Althusser and Deleuze were political activists; just as they had gone to German philosophy for a fresh approach to concept and existence, so they looked to politics for a new relation between concept and action, in particular, collective action. This fundamental desire to engage

philosophy with the political situation transforms the relation between concept and action.

The fourth operation has to do with the modernization of philosophy, in a sense quite distinct from the cant of successive government administrations. French philosophers evinced a profound attraction to modernity. They followed contemporary artistic, cultural and social developments very closely. There was a strong philosophical interest in non-figurative painting, new music and theatre, detective novels, jazz and cinema, and a desire to bring philosophy to bear upon the most intense expressions of the modern world. Keen attention was also paid to sexuality and new modes of living. In all this, philosophy was seeking a new relation between the concept and the production of forms — artistic, social, or forms of life. Modernization was thus the quest for a new way in which philosophy could approach the creation of forms.

In sum: the French philosophical moment encompassed a new appropriation of German thought, a vision of science as creativity, a radical political engagement, and a search for new forms in art and life. Across these operations runs the common attempt to find a new position, or disposition, for the concept: to displace the relation between the concept and its external environment by developing new relations to existence, to thought, to action, and to the movement of forms. It is the novelty of this relation between the philosophical concept and the external environment that constitutes the broader innovation of 20th-century French philosophy.

Writing, language, forms

The question of forms, and of the intimate relations of philosophy with the creation of forms, was of crucial importance. Clearly, this posed the issue of the form of philosophy itself: one could not displace the concept without inventing new philosophical forms. It was thus necessary not just to create new concepts but to transform the language of philosophy. This prompted a singular alliance between philosophy and literature which has been one of the most striking characteristics of contemporary French philosophy. There is, of course, a longer history to this. The works of those known to the 18th century as philosophes — Voltaire, Rousseau or Diderot — are classics of French literature; these writers are in a sense the ancestors of the postwar alliance. There are numerous French authors who cannot be allocated exclusively either to philosophy or to literature; Pascal, for example, is both one of the greatest figures in French literature and one of the most profound French thinkers. In the 20th century Alain, to all intents and purposes a classical philosopher and no part of the moment that concerns us here,

was closely involved in literature; the process of writing was very important to him, and he produced numerous commentaries on novels — his texts on Balzac are extremely interesting — and on contemporary French poetry, Valéry in particular. In other words, even the more conventional figures of 20th-century French philosophy can illustrate this affinity between philosophy and literature.

The surrealists also played an important role. They too were eager to shake up relations regarding the production of forms, modernity, the arts; they wanted to invent new modes of life. If theirs was largely an aesthetic program, it paved the way for the philosophical program of the 1950s and 60s; both Lacan and Lévi-Strauss frequented surrealist circles, for example. This is a complex history, but if the surrealists were the first representatives of a 20th-century convergence between aesthetic and philosophical projects in France, by the 1950s and 60s it was philosophy that was inventing its own literary forms in an attempt to find a direct expressive link between philosophical style and presentation, and the new positioning for the concept that it proposed.

It is at this stage that we witness a spectacular change in philosophical writing. Forty years on we have, perhaps, grown accustomed to the writing of Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan; we have lost the sense of what an extraordinary rupture with earlier philosophical styles it represented. All these thinkers were bent upon finding a style of their own, inventing a new way of creating prose; they wanted to be writers. Reading Deleuze or Foucault, one finds something quite unprecedented at the level of the sentence, a link between thought and phrasal movement that is completely original. There is a new, affirmative rhythm and an astonishing inventiveness in the formulations. In Derrida there is a patient, complicated relationship of language to language, as language works upon itself and thought passes through that work into words. In Lacan one wrestles with a dazzlingly complex syntax which resembles nothing so much as the syntax of Mallarmé, and is therefore poetic — confessedly so.

There was, then, both a transformation of philosophical expression and an effort to shift the frontiers between philosophy and literature. We should recall — another innovation — that Sartre was also a novelist and playwright (as am I). The specificity of this moment in French philosophy is to play upon several different registers in language, displacing the borders between philosophy and literature, between philosophy and drama. One could even say that one of the goals of French philosophy has been to construct a new space from which to write, one where literature and philosophy would be indistinguishable; a domain which would be neither specialized philosophy, nor literature as

such, but rather the home of a sort of writing in which it was no longer possible to disentangle philosophy from literature. A space, in other words, where there is no longer a formal differentiation between concept and life, for the invention of this writing ultimately consists in giving a new life to the concept: a literary life.

With and against Freud

At stake, finally, in this invention of a new writing, is the enunciation of the new subject; of the creation of this figure within philosophy, and the restructuring of the battlefield around it. For this can no longer be the rational, conscious subject that comes down to us from Descartes; it cannot be, to use a more technical expression, the reflexive subject. The contemporary human subject has to be something murkier, more mingled in life and the body, more extensive than the Cartesian model; more akin to a process of production, or creation, that concentrates much greater potential forces inside itself. Whether or not it takes the name of subject, this is what French philosophy has been trying to find, to enunciate, to think. If psychoanalysis has been an interlocutor, it is because the Freudian invention was also, in essence, a new proposition about the subject. For what Freud introduced with the idea of the unconscious was the notion of a human subject that is greater than consciousness — which contains consciousness, but is not restricted to it; such is the fundamental signification of the word “unconscious”.

Contemporary French philosophy has therefore also been engaged in a long-running conversation with psychoanalysis. This exchange has been a drama of great complexity, highly revealing in and of itself. At issue, most fundamentally, has been the division of French philosophy between, on one side, what I would call an existential vitalism, originating with Bergson and running through Sartre, Foucault and Deleuze, and on the other a conceptual formalism, derived from Brunschvicg and continuing through Althusser and Lacan. Where the two paths cross is on the question of the subject, which might ultimately be defined, in terms of French philosophy, as the being that brings forth the concept. In a certain sense the Freudian unconscious occupies the same space; the unconscious, too, is something vital or existing yet which produces, which bears forth, the concept. How can an existence bear forth a concept, how can something be created out of a body? If this is the central question, we can see why philosophy is drawn into such intense exchanges with psychoanalysis. Naturally, there is always a certain friction where common aims are pursued by different means. There is an element of complicity — you are doing the same as I am — but also of rivalry: you are doing it differently. The relation between philosophy and psychoanalysis within French philosophy is just this, one

of competition and complicity, of fascination and hostility, love and hatred. No wonder the drama between them has been so violent, so complex.

Three key texts may give us an idea of it. The first, perhaps the clearest example of this complicity and competition, comes from the beginning of Bachelard's work of 1938, *La psychanalyse du feu*. Bachelard proposes a new psychoanalysis grounded in poetry and dream, a psychoanalysis of the elements — fire, water, air and earth. One could say that Bachelard is here trying to replace Freudian sexual inhibition with reverie, to demonstrate that this is the larger and more open category. The second text comes from the end of *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre, in his turn, proposes the creation of a new psychoanalysis, contrasting Freud's 'empirical' psychoanalysis with his own (by implication) properly theoretical existential model. Sartre seeks to replace the Freudian complex — the structure of the unconscious — with what he terms the 'original choice'. For him what defines the subject is not a structure, neurotic or perverse, but a fundamental project of existence. Again, an exemplary instance of complicity and rivalry combined.

The third text comes from Chapter 4 of *Anti-Oedipus* by Deleuze and Guattari. Here, psychoanalysis is to be replaced by a method that Deleuze calls schizoanalysis, in outright competition with Freudian analysis. For Bachelard, it was reverie rather than inhibition; for Sartre, the project rather than the complex. For Deleuze, as *Anti-Oedipus* makes clear, it is construction rather than expression; his chief objection to psychoanalysis is that it does no more than express the forces of the unconscious, when it ought to construct it. He calls explicitly for the replacement of "Freudian expression" with the construction that is the work of schizoanalysis. It is striking, to say the least, to find three great philosophers, Bachelard, Sartre and Deleuze, each proposing to replace psychoanalysis with a model of their own.

Path of greatness

Finally, a philosophical moment defines itself by its program of thought. What might we define as the common ground of post-war French philosophy in terms, not of its works or system or even its concepts, but of its intellectual program? The philosophers involved are, of course, very different figures, and would approach such a program in different ways. Nevertheless, where you have a major question, jointly acknowledged, there you have a philosophical moment, worked out through a broad diversity of means, texts and thinkers. We may summarize the main points of the program that inspired postwar French philosophy as follows.

1. To have done with the separation of concept and existence — no longer to oppose the two; to demonstrate that the concept is a living thing, a creation, a process, an event, and, as such, not divorced from existence;
2. To inscribe philosophy within modernity, which also means taking it out of the academy and putting it into circulation in daily life. Sexual modernity, artistic modernity, social modernity: philosophy has to engage with all of this;
3. To abandon the opposition between philosophy of knowledge and philosophy of action, the Kantian division between theoretical and practical reason, and to demonstrate that knowledge itself, even scientific knowledge, is actually a practice;
4. To situate philosophy directly within the political arena, without making the detour via political philosophy; to invent what I would call the ‘philosophical militant’, to make philosophy into a militant practice in its presence, in its way of being: not simply a reflection upon politics, but a real political intervention;
5. To reprise the question of the subject, abandoning the reflexive model, and thus to engage with psychoanalysis — to rival and, if possible, to better it;
6. To create a new style of philosophical exposition, and so to compete with literature; essentially, to reinvent in contemporary terms the 18th-century figure of the philosopher-writer.

Such is the French philosophical moment, its program, its high ambition. To identify it further, its one essential desire — for every identity is the identity of a desire — was to turn philosophy into an active form of writing that would be the medium for the new subject. And by the same token, to banish the meditative or professorial image of the philosopher; to make the philosopher something other than a sage, and so other than a rival to the priest. Rather, the philosopher aspired to become a writer-combatant, an artist of the subject, a lover of invention, a philosophical militant — these are the names for the desire that runs through this period: the desire that philosophy should act in its own name. I am reminded of the phrase Malraux attributed to de Gaulle in *Les chenes qu'on abat*: “Greatness is a road toward something that one does not know.” Fundamentally, the French philosophical moment of the second half of the 20th century was proposing that philosophy should prefer that road to the goals it knew, that it should choose philosophical action or intervention over wisdom and meditation. It is as philosophy without wisdom that it is condemned today.

But the French philosophical moment was more interested in greatness than in happiness. We wanted something quite unusual, and admittedly problematic: our desire was to be adventurers of the concept. We were not seeking a clear separation between life and concept, nor the subordination of existence to the idea or the norm. Instead, we wanted the concept itself to be a journey whose destination we did not necessarily know. The epoch of adventure is, unfortunately, generally followed by an epoch of order. This may be understandable — there was a piratical side to this philosophy, or a nomadic one, as Deleuze would say. Yet ‘adventurers of the concept’ might be a formula that could unite us all; and thus I would argue that what took place in late 20th-century France was ultimately a moment of philosophical adventure.

Published in *New Left Review* 35, September-October 2005.

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