

# French Philosophy\*<sup>1</sup>

Henri Bergson

The part that France has played in the evolution of modern philosophy is a very clear one: France was the great initiator. Without a doubt, there were philosophers of genius who sprang elsewhere as well: but nowhere has there been, comparably to France, such an uninterrupted continuity of original philosophical creation. Admittedly, it is possible that more successful efforts have been made elsewhere in developing further a given idea, in building up more systematically with such and such materials, or in giving more extension to such and such a method; but very often the materials, the ideas, the method itself had come from France. There can be no question here of listing all the doctrines, or mentioning all the names. We shall make a choice; then we will endeavor to untangle the distinctive features of French philosophical thinking. We shall see both why it has remained creative, and the reasons underlying its powerful influence.

## I

The whole of modern philosophy stems from Descartes.<sup>2</sup> We shall not try to sum up his doctrine: every time some headway is made in science and in philosophy, there occurs about it some new discovery, to such an extent that we could readily compare his works to the works of nature, whose analysis shall never be over. But just as the anatomist makes a series of sections in an organ or a tissue in order to study each of them an alternate way, we too shall proceed in a similar

\* Summary table for the San Francisco Exhibition, *La revue de Paris*, Issue: May 15<sup>th</sup> 1915: 236-256; first English translation.

<sup>1</sup> This work must be distributed, in the form of a brochure, to the visitors of the San Francisco Exhibition. Together with other works of the same kind, relating to the different branches of science, and written by various authors, it will be part of a book called *French Science*, which will soon be released by the Larousse publishing house.

<sup>2</sup> 1596-1650.

way, by sectioning Descartes' works through parallel planes, each one placed under the other, in order to obtain, successively, more and more profound views.

A first section within Cartesianism reveals the philosophy of "clear and distinct" ideas, the philosophy which has permanently relieved modern thought from the yoke of authority, allowing evidence instead as the only acceptable seal of truth.

A little bit underneath, while digging the meaning of the terms "evidence", "clarity" or "distinctness", one finds a theory of method. With the invention of a new geometry, Descartes has analyzed the act of mathematical creation. He describes the conditions of such a creation. In this manner, he brings about general processes of research, which have been suggested to him by his geometry.

In turn, if one goes still deeper into this extension of geometry, one reaches a general theory of nature, where nature is now considered as an immense mechanism governed by mathematical laws. Thus, Descartes has provided modern physics with its framework, the blueprint that it has never ceased working on, and at the same time he has brought about the model for every mechanistic conception of the universe.

Below this philosophy of nature, one could now find a theory of mind, or as Descartes puts it, a theory of "thought", that is, an effort to break up thought into simple elements: this effort has opened the way to the research of Locke and Condillac. Above all, one could find over here the idea that first of all thought exists, that matter is given as an addition and could, if need be, exist only as a mere representation of mind. The whole of modern idealism stemmed from this, particularly German idealism.

Finally, at the root of Descartes' theory of thought, there lies a new effort to bind thought to the will, at least partially. The 19<sup>th</sup> century "voluntarist" philosophies are in this way tied up with Descartes. It is not without reason that Cartesianism has been viewed as a "philosophy of freedom".

So the main doctrines of modern philosophy go back to Descartes. On the other hand, even though Cartesianism shows, regarding some details, a few similarities with such and such a doctrine from the Antiquity or the Middle Ages, it does not owe anything essential to any of them. Biot, the mathematician and physicist, once said about Descartes' geometry: "*proles sine matre create*". We could say the same about his philosophy.

Even though all the different trends of modern philosophy coexist in Descartes, it is rationalism which is the predominant figure, just as it was meant to dominate the thinking of the following centuries. But next to the rationalist trend, or rather underneath it, there lies another current, covered up and most often concealed by it, which crosses modern philosophy. One could qualify it

as the sentimental one, provided one takes the word "sentiment" to mean the same thing as it used to during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and to understand by it all knowledge which is immediate and intuitive. Now, this second current, like the first, derived from a French philosopher. Pascal<sup>3</sup> introduced within philosophy a certain way of thinking, which is neither pure reason (since it mitigates the geometrical aspects of the power of reasoning by the spirit of finesse [*esprit de finesse*]), nor a kind of mystical contemplation, because it leads to results which may very well be verified and checked by everyone. By putting together all the intermediary links of the chain, one would find out that all the modern doctrines which put forward immediate knowledge, intuition, or the inner life, are all tied up with Pascal, while all the philosophies of pure reason are more particularly tied up with Descartes (despite the vague impulse for intuition one can encounter in Cartesianism itself). We cannot undertake this task here. We shall restrict ourselves in simply noticing that Descartes and Pascal are the great representative figures of the two forms or methods of thinking between which the modern spirit has had its divide.

Both of them broke off with Greek metaphysics. Yet the human mind does not easily renounce what it has considered to be its own nourishment during so many centuries. Thanks to Aristotle, Greek philosophy had fueled the Middle Ages. Thanks mainly to Plato, it had pervaded the Renaissance. After Descartes, it was only natural that one tried to make use of it by bringing it closer to Cartesianism. Such an inclination was necessary, both in so far as philosophers always feel the urge to set down their thinking under a systematic form, and that "the system" is *par excellence* what was first paved by Plato and Aristotle, and finally constituted and consolidated by the Neo-Platonists; and it would be easy to show (we cannot enter here into the detail of such a demonstration) that any attempt to build a system has to be inspired in one way or the other by Aristotelianism, Platonism or Neo-Platonism. *De facto*, the two metaphysical doctrines that arose outside of France during the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, were both combinations of Cartesianism and Greek philosophy. Spinoza's philosophy, however original one may consider it to be, leads to a fusion of Cartesian metaphysics with the Aristotelian conception of the Jewish physicians. Leibniz's philosophy, whose originality should not be undermined as well, is yet also a combination of Cartesianism with Aristotelianism, especially the Neo-Platonist legacy of Aristotelianism. For reasons that we will indicate further on, French philosophy has never had a great taste for great metaphysical constructions; but every time it did indulge in such speculative thinking, it showed that it was very well capable of doing so, and with what ease it could do it. At the time when

<sup>3</sup> 1623-1662.

Spinoza and Leibniz were still producing their system, Malebranche<sup>4</sup> already had his own. He as well had combined Cartesianism with Greek metaphysics (more particularly the reception of Platonism with the Church Fathers). The monument he has erected is a model of the kind. Yet one finds at the same time in Malebranche a whole psychology and a whole moral philosophy that both retain all of their value even if one does not rally his metaphysical conceptions. Here lies one of the hallmarks of French philosophy: it sometimes agrees to take on a systematic form, but it does not make any sacrifices for the spirit of system; it does not distort the elements of reality to such a far extent that one is no longer able to use the building materials outside the construction itself. The pieces always remain good for that.

Descartes, Pascal, Malebranche: these are the three great representative figures of 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy. They have provided three types of doctrines that we can find in modern times.

18<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy was also creative by essence. But here again we must renounce going into details. Let us only say a word about the most important theories and let us mention the principal names.

Only since recently has Lamarck<sup>5</sup> started receiving his due recognition. This naturalist, who was a philosopher as well, is the true creator of biological evolutionism. He is the first to have clearly conceived the idea of making species come out from each other through the process of transformation, and to have carried this idea all the way. Despite this, Darwin's glory is by no means diminished. Darwin kept closer to the facts; more particularly, he discovered the role of competition and selection. But competition and selection explain how a set of variations are conserved over time; they do not (as Darwin himself used to say) account for the causes of the variation. Long before Darwin, Lamarck (whose research dates back to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), had affirmed with the same degree of clarity, that species are subject to transformation, and he had made an attempt, moreover, to determine their causes. Many naturalists nowadays return to Lamarck, either in order to combine Lamarckism and Darwinism together, or even to replace Darwinism with an improved form of Lamarckism. This shows how France, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, has provided science and philosophy with the broad explanatory principle of the organized world, just as, in the previous century, with Descartes, it had given to them the blueprint for the explanation of inorganic nature.

<sup>4</sup> 1638-1715.

<sup>5</sup> 1744-1829.

Moreover, the research and reflections of Lamarck had been prepared in France by a great variety of original works on nature and life. We will only restrict ourselves in recalling the names of Buffon<sup>6</sup> and Bonnet.<sup>7</sup>

Generally speaking, 18<sup>th</sup> century French thinkers have supplied the elements for a certain number of theories of nature that were going to get formed during the following century. We have just talked about the problem of the origin of species. In addition, the one concerning the relationship between mind and matter, when taken more specifically from a materialistic perspective, was set by 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers with so much preciseness that from then on it called just as well for other solutions. One must mention here the names of La Mettrie,<sup>8</sup> Cabanis,<sup>9</sup> etc., and Charles Bonnet again.

It could be shown with no difficulty that their research was at the origin of psycho-physiology, which developed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But psychology itself, conceived as an ideology, that is to say as a reconstruction of the mind carried out with simple elements, – psychology as it was understood by the "associationist" school during the last century, – came out, in part, from 18<sup>th</sup> century French works, particularly those that were undertaken by Condillac. It is only right to recognize both that the English have contributed to psychology to an even larger extent, and that Locke's doctrine had not been without influence on French ideology. But Locke himself had he not been under Descartes' influence? In anticipation of what we will have to say about the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we may notice right now that Taine's works in psychology, his analysis of intelligence, partly derive from 18<sup>th</sup> century ideology, and more particularly from Condillac.

We shall not talk here about social philosophy. Every one knows how the principles of political science (broadly speaking), and more particularly those ideas that were going to bring about a transformation of society, were all developed in France during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We owe Montesquieu,<sup>10</sup> Turgot,<sup>11</sup> and Condorcet,<sup>12</sup> for their in-depth study of the concepts of law, government, progress, etc; and the Encyclopedists in general (d'Alembert,<sup>13</sup> Diderot,<sup>14</sup> La

<sup>6</sup> 1707-1788.

<sup>7</sup> 1720-1793. Charles Bonnet, who was tied to Geneva, belonged to a French family.

<sup>8</sup> 1709-1751.

<sup>9</sup> 1757-1808.

<sup>10</sup> 1689-1755.

<sup>11</sup> 1727-1781.

<sup>12</sup> 1713-1794.

<sup>13</sup> 1717-1783.

<sup>14</sup> 1713-1781.

Mettrie,<sup>15</sup> Helvetius,<sup>16</sup> d'Holbach<sup>17</sup>) were the ones who set about the process that led to "rationalize" mankind, and to turn it towards the mechanical arts.

But after Descartes, the most powerful of all the influences that have befallen the human spirit is undoubtedly Jean-Jacques Rousseau's,<sup>18</sup> whichever the way one passes judgment on him. The reform he carried out in the sphere of practical thought was as radical as Descartes' in the field of pure speculation. He too called everything into question; he wanted to reshape society, morality, education, the whole of human life, on "natural" principles. Even those who were not supportive of his ideas were bound to adopt some aspects of his method. By calling on to sentiment, to intuition, to inner conscience, he encouraged a certain way of thinking that could already be found in Pascal (even though it is true that it was aimed in a very different direction), but which had not yet been established in philosophy. Although he did not build a system, he partly inspired the metaphysical systems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: first Kantianism, then the "Romanticism" of German philosophy, all owed much to him. Art and literature owe him at least as much. His works appear to each new generation under some new light. They still have an influence on us.<sup>19</sup>

With the quick look that we have just taken at French philosophy during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, we have only had an overview; we have had to leave aside a great number of thinkers in order to consider only the most important ones among them. What will it be for the 19<sup>th</sup> century? There is hardly one French scholar, or even a French writer, who has not brought his contribution to philosophy.

While the three earlier centuries had witnessed the birth and the development of the abstract and concrete sciences of inorganic matter (mathematics, mechanics, astronomy, physics and chemistry), the 19<sup>th</sup> century was meant to go yet deeper in the field of the sciences of life: organic life and even, to a certain extent, social life. Here as well the French were initiators. We owe them the theory of method, and an important part of the results. We mostly have in mind over here Claude Bernard and Auguste Comte.

Claude Bernard's<sup>20</sup> *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* has been, for concrete laboratory science, comparable to what Descartes' *Discourse*

<sup>15</sup> 1709-1751.

<sup>16</sup> 1715-1771.

<sup>17</sup> 1723-1789.

<sup>18</sup> Born in 1712 in Geneva, in a family with French origins. Died in 1778.

<sup>19</sup> Voltaire (1691-1778) belongs to the history of arts rather than to the history of philosophy. In this work, we lay our focus on those figures who were, in philosophy, the creators of new ideas and methods.

<sup>20</sup> 1813-1878.

*on the Method* had been for the more abstract sciences. It is the work of a physiologist of genius who examines the method that he has followed, and who gathers from his own experience a set of general rules for experimenting and making discoveries. Scientific research, as Claude Bernard promotes it, is a dialogue between man and nature. The answers that nature gives to our questions set the discussion on an unforeseen path, leading to new questions, which nature replies to by bringing to mind new ideas, and indefinitely so forth. Thus, neither the facts nor the ideas are constitutive of science: the latter, which is always provisional and always partly symbolic, comes about from the collaboration between the idea and the fact. Claude Bernard's claim that there is a discrepancy between human logic and the logic of nature is central to his works. On this point, as well as several others, Claude Bernard has preceded the "pragmatist" theorists of science.

August Comte's<sup>21</sup> *Course of Positive Philosophy* is one of the great works of modern philosophy. The simple and brilliant idea of laying down a hierarchical order between the different sciences, from mathematics all the way to sociology,<sup>22</sup> urges itself on our minds ever since Comte first spelled it out, with the force of an ultimate truth. Even though it is possible to challenge his authoritative works in sociology on a few points, it is nevertheless greatly to his credit to have sketched out sociology's research program, and to have started to fulfill it. As it has been pointed out, he was a reformer in the manner of Socrates, and he would have thus been very well disposed to adopt the Socratic maxim ("know thyself"); but he would have applied it to societies, and no longer to individuals, since he considered knowledge of the social man to be the summit of science, as well as the object *par excellence* of philosophy. It must also be added that the founder of positivism, who declared himself to be the opponent of any kind of metaphysics, is nevertheless the soul of a metaphysician, and that his works will go to posterity as a powerful effort to "divinize" humanity.

Renan<sup>23</sup> has no intellectual kinship with Comte. Nonetheless, he has also had, in his own manner, and in a quite different direction, the same religious

<sup>21</sup> 1798-1857.

<sup>22</sup> Since sociology is going to be the object of a special monograph, we will not talk here about Saint-Simon, Pierre Leroux and Proudhon. For the same reason, we have to leave aside a number of other distinguished contemporary thinkers who have turned towards sociology: Espinas, Tarde, Durkheim, Lévy-Brühl, Le Bon, Worms, Bouglé, Simiand, Izoulet, Lacombe, Richard and many others. The work undertaken by the French sociological school is considerable; it must be studied separately. One would have to link it to the works of the moralists: Bureau, Belot, Parodi, H. Michel, Caro, Bourdeau, Rauh, Darlu, Malapert, Buisson, etc. Lastly, one should give a special treatment to G. Sorel, an original thinker who does not fit into any of these categories.

<sup>23</sup> 1823-1892.

sense for humanity that the founder of positivism had dreamed of. The strong power of seduction that he exerted on his time admits for a wide range of causes. He was first of all a wonderful writer, if however one can still call a writer one who makes us forget that he is using words, his thought seeming to penetrate directly within our own. But his conception of history, which irrigated his masterful works, was very attractive as well (and well adapted for a century that had revitalized the historical sciences), and it was doubly optimistic: on the one hand he believed that history allows for an uninterrupted progress of mankind, and on the other hand, he saw in history the substitute for philosophy and religion.

This same faith for science – for the sciences that study human beings – can also be encountered in Taine,<sup>24</sup> a thinker who was as influential as Renan in France, and perhaps even more so abroad. Taine wants to apply the methods of both the physicist and the naturalist to the study of human activity, under its various forms: in literature, in art, in history. On the other hand, he is very much penetrated by the old masters' thought: he believes with Spinoza in universal necessity; regarding the somewhat magical power of abstraction, and the "foundational qualities" (*qualités principales*) or "leading faculties" (*facultés maîtresses*), his views bring him close to Aristotle and Plato. In this way he implicitly reverts to metaphysics; but he restricts the limits of such a metaphysical conception to the horizon of man and human affairs. Just like Renan, he is neither tied up with Comte nor does he resemble him. And yet, it is not entirely without reason that he sometimes gets classified among the positivists, like Renan himself. There are indeed a good many ways of defining positivism; but we believe that one should see it, before anything, as an anthropocentric conception of the universe.

Between biological philosophy and social philosophy, the creation of which is so largely due to the French genius, there lies a field of research which also belongs mostly to the 19<sup>th</sup> century: we mean psychology. This is not to say that there had not been any shrewd psychologists before, particularly in France, England and Scotland; but the inner observation, when it was left to its own devices, and was limited to the study of normal phenomena, had trouble accessing certain regions of the mind, particularly the "subconscious". In addition to the standard method of inner observation, the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought two others methods: on the one hand, all the different measurement procedures that are put to use in the laboratories; and on the other hand, what one can call the *clinical* method, which consists in gathering observations from patients,

<sup>24</sup> 1828-1893.



and even inducing morbid phenomena (intoxication, hypnotism, etc.). Out of these two methods, the first one has been mostly practiced in Germany; even though it is not insignificant, it is far from having yielded what was expected from it.<sup>25</sup> The second one, on the contrary, has already provided important results, and it gives us a glimpse at all the even more considerable ones to come. Now this latter form of psychology, which is cultivated today in a large number of countries, is a science that has a French origin, and which has remained eminently French. After having been prepared by the French alienists during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was put together in its final form with Moreau de Tours, and since then it has never ceased to be represented by authoritative figures in France, either ones who had come to psychology from pathology, or by psychologists attracted towards mental pathology. It will be enough here to mention the names of Charcot, Ribot, Pierre Janet and Georges Dumas.

Yet, while part of 19<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy was thus turning towards physiology, psychology, or sociology, the rest of it took up as its speculative object the mind in general, in the same way that the previous centuries had taken up nature in general.

At the very beginning of the century, France has a great metaphysician, the greatest it had ever produced since Descartes and Malebranche: Maine de Biran.<sup>26</sup> After having gone relatively unnoticed when it first appeared, Maine de Biran's doctrine has had an increasing influence: one can wonder whether the road opened by this philosopher will now remain the one where all metaphysics will have to walk on for good. Maine de Biran, in opposition to Kant's beliefs (and it is quite a mistake that he should have been called by some the "French Kant"), judged that the human mind was capable, on one issue at least, of reaching the Absolute, and of turning it into an object of speculation. He showed that the knowledge we have of ourselves, particularly through the feeling of effort, is a distinguished kind of knowledge that goes beyond the pure "phenomenon" and reaches reality "in itself", – the very reality that Kant had declared to be inaccessible to our speculations. In short, he conceived the idea of a metaphysics that would rise always higher, towards the mind in general, while consciousness went down, at the same time, into the depths of inner life. A brilliant view, of which he drew the consequences without playing dialectic games, without building a system.

<sup>25</sup> It has had in France a number of remarkable representative figures. Let us mention Alfred Binet in particular.

<sup>26</sup> 1766-1824. De Biran should be linked to Ampère (1775-1826). Space is lacking here to talk about the theological school. Let us recall the names of De Bonald (1754-1840), De Maistre (1753-1821) and Lamennais (1782-1854).

Furthermore, one can sense that there is a certain kinship between Maine de Biran and Pascal, when reading Ravaisson.<sup>27</sup> The latter was attached to Pascal as much as he was to Maine de Biran, and he was enamored with Greek art as much as with Greek philosophy: Ravaisson makes us understand admirably how the originality of each French philosopher does not prevent him from being related to a certain tradition, and how this tradition itself is linked to the classical tradition. However much a figure such as Descartes has parted from ancient philosophy, his works retain the qualities of order and measurement that characterized Greek thought. Ravaisson has shed light on this artistic and classical side of French philosophical thought. He himself sketched the outline of a kind of philosophy which measures the reality of things to their degree of beauty.

It is not possible to utter Ravaisson's name without immediately matching it with Lachelier's, a thinker whose influence was very significant as well. Lachelier woke philosophy, in its academic form, from its slumber in Victor Cousin's<sup>28</sup> pleasant and easy doctrine. His thesis on the foundation of induction will remain as a classical standard work, like everything that bears the mark of perfection. His doctrine claims its inspiration from Kantianism, but in fact it goes beyond Kant's idealism and even paves the way to a new specific kind of realism, which could be linked with Maine de Biran's. He was an unrivaled master, and his thinking nourished several generations of masters.

Ravaisson's philosophy, particularly his views on habit, as well as Auguste Comte's philosophy (in so far as it asserts the irreducibility of the sciences to each other), may be related to the new and profound theory that Boutroux puts forward in his thesis on "the contingency of the laws of nature". Through a completely different path, by analyzing scientific concepts and the conditions underlying their construction, Henri Poincaré,<sup>29</sup> the great mathematician, has come up with similar conclusions: he shows what is relative to human beings, relative to the requirements and preferences of our science, within the network of laws that our thought extends to the universe. Milhaud's doctrine<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 1813-1900.

<sup>28</sup> 1792-1867. We will not insist on Cousin's philosophy because it mostly was an eclectism. There were nevertheless very distinguished philosophers in Cousin's school, such as Saisset, Simon, Janet. A special place should be made for Jouffroy (1796-1842) and Vacherot (1809-1897). Royer-Collard (1763-1845) must be mentioned as a forerunner of Cousin.

<sup>29</sup> 1854-1912.

<sup>30</sup> We leave aside, in this study, the works relative to the analysis and the critique of scientific methods. The part France has played, here too, is considerable. Let us mention, among many other authors: the great chemist Berthelot, Jules and Paul Tannery, Lechalas, Couturat, Duhem, Rey, Perrin, Borel, Pierre Boutroux, L. Poincaré, Goblot. Lalande's works, as well as Meyerson's and Brunschvicg's, belong to scientific theory as much as to general philosophy. We could say the same about

is analogous. And it would be possible to bring Édouard Le Roy on the same side, if despite some external similarities, the works of this philosopher were not driven by a different spirit: his critique of science is tied up with his profound and personal views on reality in general, on morality and religion.<sup>31</sup>

Liard's dominant idea has been to maintain metaphysics and science in front of each other, as two equally legitimate forms of thought. The same concern can be found in Fouillée.<sup>32</sup> Fouillée, a psychologist and a sociologist, as well as a dialectician, has developed a theory of "*idées-forces*", which is a broad kind of rationalism. There is hardly one question, theoretical or practical, which this brilliant thinker has not taken up, and on which he has not come up with interesting and suggestive conceptions. He found in Guyau<sup>33</sup> a disciple of genius. Guyau, who was less famous than Nietzsche, had argued before the German philosopher, in more measured terms and in a more acceptable form, that the moral ideal must be searched in the highest possible expansion of life.

We have left aside from this quick enumeration two first-class thinkers which we could not link to the tradition that stemmed from Maine de Biran. We have in mind Renouvier and Cournot.<sup>34</sup>

After having started with Kantian critical philosophy, which besides he had deeply modified from the very beginning, Renouvier<sup>35</sup> gradually moved away and ended up reaching conclusions that are not very far removed from those of metaphysical dogmatism, when followed to the letter: in particular, he asserts the independence of the human person; he reinstates freedom in the world. But he casts a whole new light on the meaning of such themes, by relating them to the facts of positive science, and moreover by preceding them with a critique of the human understanding. Through his morals, no less than his theories of nature and man, he acted considerably on the thinking of his time.<sup>36</sup>

Hannequin's elegant book on atomic theory. – In Le Dantec's works one finds an interpretation and an extension of positive science carried out in a mechanistic way. We can neither talk here of aesthetics (Sully-Prudhomme, Séailles, Souriau, Dauriac, Bazaillas, Paulhan, Lalo, etc.), nor the history of philosophy (Ravaisson, Cousin, Bouillier, Janet, Vacherot, Fouillée, Em. Boutroux, Delbos, Lévy-Brühl, Brochard, Espinas, Adam, Thamin, Halévy, Picavet, Faguet, X. Léon, G. Lyon, Delacroix, R. Berthelot, Hamelin, Basch, Berr, Rodier, Robin, Rivaud, Bréhier, etc.).

<sup>31</sup> Religious philosophy in France has given rise to important works. We shall limit ourselves only to the most recent ones; let us mention the names of Ollé-Laprune, Blondel, Laberthonnière, Fonsegrive, Wilbois, H. Bois, Segond, Auguste Sabatier, Paul Sabatier, etc.

<sup>32</sup> 1838-1912.

<sup>33</sup> 1854-1888.

<sup>34</sup> So many other metaphysicians and psychologists would deserve to be studied here! Let us mention, in particular, Évelin, Dunan, Paulhan, Weber.

<sup>35</sup> 1818-1903.

<sup>36</sup> Among the philosophers who are connected with Renouvier, let us mention Pillon, Dauriac and Hamelin.

Cournot,<sup>37</sup> who was also led to philosophy through the study of the sciences, and in particular mathematics, introduced a new kind of critique, which unlike Kantian critical philosophy, is equally concerned both with the form and the content of our knowledge, both with the methods and the results. On a multitude of points – particularly on chance and probability – he brought about new profound and penetrating conceptions. It is time to put this thinker at his proper place, – one of the leading ones, – among 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers.

One could now, as a conclusion, say a word about the attempt, undertaken by the author of *Creative Evolution*, to carry metaphysics on to the terrain of experience and to establish, by calling on to science and to consciousness, and by developing the faculty of intuition, a philosophy capable of supplying concrete explanations of particular facts, and no longer only general theories. Philosophy, understood in this manner, is capable of the same preciseness as positive science. Like science, it will progress continuously by adding up its results together, as soon as they have been acquired. But it will also aim – and this is where it stands out from science – at enlarging more and more the frameworks of the understanding, even if it should in the process break one or two of them, and expand human thinking indefinitely.

## II

We have gone through a certain number of French philosophers, particularly by taking into account their diversity, their originality, the novelty of their contributions, and what the world owes them. We shall now investigate whether they also display a certain number of common features typical of the French way of thinking.

When one skims through their books, the first striking feature is the simplicity of the form. If one leaves aside a period of twenty or thirty years, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during which a small number of thinkers, who were subjected to a foreign influence, departed from traditional clarity, it is possible to say that French philosophy has always been ruled by the following principle: there is no philosophical idea, however profound or subtle it may be, that could not or should not be expressed in everyday language. French philosophers do not write for a restricted circle of initiated people; they address themselves to humanity as a whole. While it is indeed necessary to be a philosopher and a scholar in order to assess the profoundness of their thought and to understand it fully, any cultivated person, however, can read their main works

<sup>37</sup> 1801-1877.

and benefit from them. When they were in need of new means of expression, they did not look for them, as it has been the case elsewhere, in the creation of a special vocabulary (such a process often leads to enclosing ill-digested ideas in artificially made up terms), but rather in an ingenious composition of everyday words, which gives to these words new shades of meaning and allows them to convey more subtle or more profound ideas. This is the reason why figures like Descartes, Pascal or Rousseau – only to mention these ones, – have considerably increased the force and flexibility of French language, whether the subject matter of their analysis was more specifically thought (Descartes) or sentiment (Pascal, Rousseau). It is indeed necessary to have gone all the way through the process of breaking down what there is in the mind, in order to be able to express oneself in simple terms. Yet every French philosopher has had to a certain degree this gift for analytic thinking. The need for reducing ideas, or even sentiments, to clear and distinct elements, which find their means of expression in everyday language, is typical of French philosophy since its origins.

If now we move from form to content, one can first notice the following.

French philosophy has always been closely tied up with positive science. Elsewhere, in Germany for instance, it may have happened that a given philosopher was also a scientist, or that a given scientist was also a philosopher; but the conjunction of the two abilities or the two habits has been an exceptional occurrence, and an accidental one as it were. Even though Leibniz was both a great philosopher and a great mathematician, we can see that the core of German philosophy's development, which covers the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has taken place outside the realm of positive science. On the contrary, it is in the essence of French philosophy to rely on science. In Descartes, the union of philosophy and mathematics is so intimate that it is difficult to say whether his geometry was put to him by his metaphysics, or his metaphysics is an extension of his geometry. Pascal was a profound mathematician and an original physicist before he was a philosopher. 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy was mainly recruited among the geometers, the naturalists and the physicians (d'Alembert, La Mettrie, Bonnet, Cabanis, etc.). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of the greatest French thinkers, like Auguste Comte, Cournot, Renouvier, etc., came to philosophy through mathematics; one of them, Henri Poincaré, was a mathematician of genius. Claude Bernard, who gave us the philosophy of experimental method, was one of the creators of the physiological science. Even those French philosophers who, during the last century, were devoted to inner observation, felt the need to look for something outside themselves (in physiology, mental pathology, etc.), which would assure them that they were

not simply engaging in a game of ideas, in a mere handling of abstract concepts: this orientation is already visible in Maine de Biran, the great initiator of the method of profound introspection. In brief, the close union between philosophy and science is such a constant trait in France, that it could suffice to characterize and to define French philosophy.

Another trait, which is less specific but still quite a striking one, is the taste of French philosophers for psychology, their fondness of inner observation. Surely, this trait could not suffice, like the previous one, in order to define the French tradition, in so far as the aptitude to go deep into oneself, and to penetrate sympathetically within the soul of others, is undoubtedly also widespread elsewhere to the same degree as it is in France, for instance in England and in America. Yet, while the great German thinkers (even Leibniz, even Kant), have scarcely had, or at least have scarcely shown any psychological sense, while Schopenhauer (who was by the way very much immersed in 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy) is perhaps the only German metaphysician to have been a psychologist; on the contrary, there is no great French philosopher that has not occasionally revealed himself as a penetrating and subtle observer of the human soul. Needless to recall the shrewd psychological studies one may find in Descartes and in Malebranche, which are intimately mingled with their metaphysical speculations. The vision of someone like Pascal was equally sharp when he put it to use in the dark regions of the soul, or when he directed it on the things of physics, geometry or philosophy. Condillac was both a psychologist and a logician. Not to mention all of those who opened new ways in psychological analysis, like Rousseau and Maine de Biran. During the whole of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, French thinking sought attunement with the inner life, and thus prepared for the purely scientific psychology that was going to be the 19<sup>th</sup> century's achievement. No one, besides, has contributed more to giving birth to this scientific psychology than such figures as Moreau de Tours, Charcot or Ribot. Let us notice that the method used by these psychologists – the one, in short, that allowed psychology to make its most important discoveries – is just an extension of the method used for inner observation. It is always to consciousness that it appeals to; only, it takes note of the indications of consciousness in the patient, instead of merely being content with the healthy man.

These are the two main features of French philosophy.

When they are combined together, they give to it its own specific look. It is a philosophy that closely follows the outlines of the outside reality, such as the physicist represents it for himself, and it also closely follows the outlines of the inner reality, such as it appears to the psychologist. Hence, it is most often reluctant to take the form of a *system*. It rejects both extreme dogmatism

and radical critical thinking; its method is as far removed from Hegel's as it is from Kant's. This does not mean that it is not capable of edifying great constructions, when it pleases. However, French philosophers generally seem to have had an afterthought, namely that it is easy to systematize and to think through all the consequences of a given idea, but that the real difficulty is much rather to stop a deduction when it is necessary to do so, to bend it as required, by using the in-depth study of the particular sciences and the uninterrupted contact with reality. Pascal said that the "geometrical spirit" (*esprit de géométrie*) was not enough: the philosopher must join to it the "spirit of finesse" (*esprit de finesse*). And Descartes, the great metaphysician, declared that he had spent only a few hours doing metaphysics; what he probably meant is that the work of pure deduction, or of pure metaphysical construction, gets done all by itself, if only one has a predisposed mind for it. – Will one argue that philosophy, when it becomes less systematic, moves away from its goal, and that its role is precisely to unify reality? – But French philosophy has never given up on such a unification. Only, it distrusts the process that consists in taking some given idea, and to enclose within it the totality of what there is, whether it agrees or not to it. There will always remain the possibility to object to such a given idea by appealing to another, with which one will erect a different system, using the same method; moreover, both systems will be equally defensible, equally unverifiable; so much so that philosophy will become a simple game, a tournament between dialecticians. Let us notice that an idea is an element of our intelligence, and that our intelligence is itself an element of reality: how then could an idea, which is only a part of a part, embrace the Whole? The unification of all things will only be carried out by a process that is much more difficult, much longer, and more delicate: human thinking itself, instead of narrowing down reality to the size of one of its ideas, will have to expand to the point where it will start coinciding with an ever growing portion of reality. Yet for this to happen, the accumulated work of many centuries will be necessary. Meanwhile, the role of each philosopher is to get a view, regarding all things, which will be permanent on a certain number of points, but will necessarily remain provisional on others. In doing so one will indeed have, if you like, a certain kind of system; but the system's very principle will be flexible, indefinitely extendable, instead of being fixed, like those principles that have yielded the current metaphysical constructions. Such is, it seems to us, the implicit idea of French philosophy. It is an idea that has only recently become fully aware of itself or made the effort to express itself. And the reason why it was not revealed before, is precisely because it was so naturally engrained within the French spirit, which is a lively and supple spirit, with nothing mechanical or artificial, an eminently sociable spirit

as well, which loathes individual constructions and is instinctively drawn to what is human.

Thus, through these two or three orientations that we have indicated, one can perhaps explain better what has been constantly brilliant and constantly creative in French philosophy. It has always been mindful about speaking the everyday language, which is why it has not been the privilege of a sort of philosophical cast; it has remained under the control of everyone; it has never cut its ties with common sense. By being practiced by men who were psychologists, biologists, physicists, mathematicians, it has continuously kept contact with science as much as with life. This permanent contact with life, with science, with common sense, has ceaselessly fertilized it, while preventing it both from playing with itself and from artificially rebuilding things through abstractions. But if French philosophy thus showed that it was able to revivify itself indefinitely, by making use of all the manifestations of the French spirit, is it not because these manifestations were themselves oriented towards taking a philosophical form? It is very rare to find a scholar in France, or a writer, an artist or even a craftsman, who get completely absorbed in the materiality of their involvement, and who do not try to retrieve – even in a clumsy or naïve way – the philosophical implications of their science, their art or of their craft. The need for philosophy is a universal one: it tends to bring every discussion, even practical ones, on the terrain of ideas and principles. Such a need probably conveys the most deep-rooted aspiration of the French soul for what is general, and in this light, for what is generous. From this angle, the French spirit and the philosophical spirit are identical.

*Translated from French by Claude Vishnu Spaak*