

Philosophy in France today

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Introduction

If publishers' lists and sales are anything to go by, it seems as if French and English-speaking readers – or at any rate buyers – of books on philosophy are, after a long and notorious break, starting to find a renewed interest in what is going on in each other's world. To mention just two highly successful straws in this new and as yet somewhat fitful wind: Vincent Descombes's very personal account of *Modern French Philosophy*,* commissioned and written specifically for the English-speaking reader, and, in the other direction, the double number of the review *Critique*,† in which a variety of philosophers, mainly British or American, set out to present to French-speaking readers the present state of research and debate in the world of analytic philosophy, taking each some particular region of that world as they see it.

This present volume is not conceived as an exact counterpart to that number of *Critique*. The French philosophers contributing to it were not asked to try and divide up between them the overall terrain of contemporary French philosophy. Indeed, for a number of reasons which may become at least partially apparent to any reader of the whole book, this might have been an inappropriate or even unworkable request to make. There is, in principle, notably less agreement within that world, whatever it may be or be held to be, as to how or where its map and its boundaries should be drawn – whether in respect of its external frontiers, if, indeed, it has any, or in respect of its internal regions – or even as to the possibility of any such map-making venture at all.

* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

† Vol. XXXVI, nos. 399–400, August–September 1980.

What the authors of the eleven contributions that together make up this volume were asked to do was rather to present to the English-speaking reader their own view of their own work as they now see it in relation to the context in which they are working and, perhaps, to the reactions which they might expect it to provoke. In this way the resulting book offers, both by way of exposition and explanation and by way of direct exemplification, a very fair introductory, sample experience of the world of philosophy as it may be found in France today. But it is essential to any proper understanding, whether of that world or of this book as an introduction to it, to recognize also that there might be in principle many other introductory experiences that, though different, might be equally fair. Not only should none of those who happen to find themselves contributing to this book be taken as seeking to 'represent' anything or anyone other than themselves or their own work; there is an important sense in which anyone trying to respond to such editorial questions as those which lie at the origin of this book, is bound to certain pressures that may lead him to write in a way that may be, in certain important respects, *unrepresentative* of his own 'normal' work as such. The most obvious of these pressures lies in the untypical nature of the situation of a French philosopher having to write with a non-French readership in mind. It is, after all, of the very essence of this book's interest that it is conceived out of the very recognition that the cultural contexts of contemporary French and English language philosophy are still in the main very different, and that what may be taken for granted in the one context will need to be explained or rendered otherwise accessible in the other. Other reasons will emerge in the course of this introduction and, no doubt, in the course of the book as a whole. But it is important to recognize at the outset that just as the questions of how, where and even whether there are any internal or external boundaries to be drawn within or around the world of French philosophy are themselves deeply and properly controversial within that world, whatever one may take it to be, so too are any questions of just how this writer, this current of thought, or that may or may not be related to what other.

It is an attempt to avoid the advance begging of any such questions that the contributions to this book have been placed with arbitrary simplicity in the mere alphabetical order of their

authors' surnames. But, it should likewise be noted at the outset, there are also problems in the way of avoiding a rather different form of question-begging in advance that could only too easily be involved in the writing of any would-be introduction to a book such as this. It is not just that it would be inappropriate for a British philosopher to presume to be able to step in to tell the 'true' story of the present state of French philosophical affairs or, by commenting one by one on each of the following contributions, to explain in more effectively Anglo-Saxon terms what they are 'really' trying to say; it would be in principle wholly misconceived to envisage the task in this way. Of course, every reader, the writer of this introduction among them, will, it is hoped, be able to form some sort of view as to the content and point of each contribution and, if appropriate, to set down his view in writing. But the nature of the relationship between such views and those of the contributors themselves, or – to set the matter in a different perspective – to the texts that constitute their present contributions, is not simply to be judged in terms of straightforwardly factual accuracy or inaccuracy. On the contrary, it itself presents a characteristically philosophical problem; and one, moreover, on which these same contributors would, one may suppose, themselves have very different views, or reactions. In other words, any attempt to make of an introduction to a volume of this sort some kind of *précis* in advance, simpler and easier of access than the texts themselves but still somehow unproblematically faithful to them, is virtually bound to end up by being in one way or another misleading; misleading in as much as it would involve – in some cases, significantly, very much more than in others – a radical shift from the mode or modes of presentation adopted by the contributors themselves, but above all misleading in that it would in effect and inevitably constitute an intervention in a complicated and deeply divided debate under the guise of an apparently neutral explanation and report.

This said, it remains the case that the manner, as much as the content and insofar as the two may be clearly distinguished, of many of the following essays is different enough from that to which most English-speaking readers will be accustomed as to be liable to cause them a certain initial perplexity. An introduction may not sensibly set out to tell them in advance just what they are to read out of or into the texts themselves; but certain things may

be said which, whether they end up by endorsing them or not, may be of some provisional help to them in working out their own readings. And while it is, of course, true that no amount of disclaimers can succeed in altogether neutralizing an intervention that remains an intervention however its sense may have been modified or disguised by the disclaimers in question, it is proper that this too should be noted – by way of yet a further disclaimer? – in this introduction itself.

One of the things which may first strike, perhaps even surprise, the reader of these essays is their multifaceted and criss-crossing diversity. From this side of the Channel, no doubt, this diversity may still be perceived as existing within a certain indeterminate unity. But if unity there is, it is at most a unity of family history and resemblance; and even then one might in certain cases have to count mutual recognition as partners or contestants in an arena of common dispute as a family relationship, if kinship is to be extended to all. That such diversity is here made so explicit is surely a good thing, if for no other reason than that any collection that allowed the reader to carry away an impression of contemporary French philosophy as constituting one homogeneous bloc would be encouraging an illusion of major proportions. Such diversity within a family, however disparate and discordant it may be, must in principle allow of a certain number of generalizations; but they will be generalizations which virtually never extend to cover every member of the family, which lie in overlapping relations to each other and which, moreover, apply to such members as they do apply to with only varying degrees of precision. Nevertheless, such generalizations, imperfect though they may be, may still in their way be characteristic of the family to which they apply.

Among the generalizations which seem to apply in this way to the papers of this collection are the following:

(i) A significant number of the participants seem to find themselves somehow embarrassed by the personal or narrative nature of the request 'How do you understand the nature of your own (philosophical) work?'

(ii) A significant number of the participants are committed to a view of philosophy as having an indissociable, and perhaps never fully expressible, 'practical' dimension. Typically, but not invariably, an acute awareness of this dimension even of their own

contribution to this volume may play a problematic part in the fashioning of that contribution. (Typically, too, this 'practical' dimension may be understood as including the political.)

(iii) A significant number of the participants seem to regard themselves as standing alone, or almost alone, in whatever part of the field it is that they occupy.

(iv) It should perhaps be repeated as a fourth generalization that none of the above generalizations would seem to apply to *all* of the contributors here gathered together and that, though there may well be certain links between one generalization and another, these links fall far short of constituting identity of application.

Why should one find anything problematic in the (apparently?) straightforward request to provide an account of how one sees one's own work and the context within and for which it is produced? The reasons go far deeper, and are of far greater interest, than any mere considerations of personal modesty or professional embarrassment. No doubt there will be (and in principle must be) an indefinite number of different ways in which these reasons may be articulated, classified, marshalled, presented and analysed; their proper study would demand the space of a whole book on its own. For the more limited sake of this introduction, however, we may try to bring them under some sort of provisional control by dividing them into two groups: (i) those that are bound up with the subject's loss of self-confidence in its own ability to understand itself, and, indeed, in its own intrinsic significance; and (ii) those that have more to do with a loss of confidence in the sense or security of the distinction between stating and other forms of practical expression or activity, together with a related loss of confidence in the sharpness of any distinction between what is or is not of properly philosophical significance or relevance.

What would one have to be sure of *not* to find anything problematic in the request to report on one's own view of the nature and point of one's own work in philosophy? One would need, of course, to have some idea of whether one's work, or which part of it, was 'really' to be counted as philosophical and why; one would in any case need to be confident in laying claim to or in acknowledging any work, or any body of work, as one's own; and thus, even more primitively no doubt, one would need to have some reasonably confident idea – or at least some reasonable confidence

in the possibility of working through to an idea – of what is involved in any reference back to oneself. But, philosophically speaking at any rate, any such confidence has proved to be of a notoriously uncertain stability. Descartes may have thought that this at least, even if nothing else, was something that he could claim truly to know. But even in the fairly close Cartesian succession the nature of the self-subject of this certain knowledge of what it is to be oneself became more and more problematically distanced from the seemingly ordinary, everyday human being who might have to get up and go to work in the morning, make his way around the streets or, occasionally perhaps, find himself trying to read or even to write a book of what might be regarded as philosophy. By the time one gets to Hume, for instance, this distance has become, so to speak, unmeasurable. Hume himself, in that famous passage in the Appendix to his *Treatise*, was brought to recognize that within the framework of his philosophy the very notion of the ‘self’ had come, as it were, to pieces. And Kant was to need all his transcendental horses and king’s men to put the temporally discrete fragments back together into some sort of unity again.

‘All his transcendental horses and king’s men . . .’ But here we are caught up in a new version of the problem. For how unified after all was this new sort of unity? What, within the framework of ‘his’ own philosophy, could Kant be justified in regarding as constituting himself as *Kant*? ‘How the “I” that thinks can be distinct from the “I” that intuits itself . . . and yet, as being the same subject, can be identical with the latter; and how, therefore, I can say: “I, as intelligence and *thinking* subject, know myself as an object that is *thought*, in so far as I am given to myself [as something other or] beyond that [I] which is [given to myself] in intuition, and yet know myself, like other phenomena, only as I appear to myself, not as I am to the understanding” – these are questions that raise no greater nor less difficulty than how I can be an object to myself at all, and, more particularly, an object of intuition and of inner perceptions.’* Nor do the difficulties stop here. Behind the self that is intuited, observed, met with in experience lies perhaps, unspecifiably but in the end ineliminably, a self-in-itself. Is this (unknowable and even strictly unsayable)

* *Critique of Pure Reason*, ‘Transcendental Deduction’, B155. Translation by Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan, 1929.

self to be identified straightforwardly with the self that thinks, that is conscious of itself? Not *straightforwardly* at any rate. For – among other possible reasons – the self-in-itself, thought of simply as the putative ground of the self-that-appears, is from the standpoint of the theory of knowledge at best a mere object of thought and at worst nothing more than a limiting or negative concept to which no positive content can even be meaningfully ascribed. The self-that-thinks, on the other hand, is a transcendently necessary presupposition of any conscious experience, any intentional action, whatsoever.

With which if any – or all? – of these selves is Kant to identify himself? The critical philosophy as a whole seems to provide no satisfactorily consistent answer, even, it may be argued, to rule out any such answer as in principle impossible. Not least of the difficulties lies in the fact that the principle of individuation of persons as a plurality of inhabitants of a common world of experience would seem to have to lie in the body and its spatio-temporal history; but this means, of course, that Kantian persons, inasmuch as they *are* individually distinct from one another, are so under that aspect of their dual nature which is necessarily subject to laws of a mechanical or efficient causality, a strictly deterministic causality of a sort which is seen as incompatible with that freedom of rational autonomy which is equally inseparable from the idea of persons as persons. For persons as persons, that is (necessarily) to say as rational agents, self-conscious of themselves as such, cannot but think of themselves as, precisely, autonomous and free. Indeed, as rational thinker and synthesizer of the discrete inputs of sensory awareness into a knowable experience, I (or that principle of active thought and synthesis within me) am (or is) the source of causally determinate order itself. How, indeed, can the two, the 'I' that thinks and the 'I' that is met with in experience, be one and the same, or different aspects of one and the same, thing?

Furthermore – for these problems have their own momentum – the question will also have to be faced of how, on this understanding of the matter, any other thinking subject or self can be observed or known to appear, or even be consistently thought of as possibly appearing, in a world of experience that is constituted as such by 'my own' activity of categorial synthesis. Or to put the same difficulty another way: how could any two materially

distinct embodiments of this world-constituting principle of activity of transcendental synthesis both inhabit the same constituted world as each other? Unless perhaps, and supposing that one can make adequate sense of this suggestion, the world-constituting principle in both of us is numerically distinct only in its embodiments, but not in its capacity for conscious and self-conscious thought. Perhaps, indeed, such thought is only able to achieve any determinate consciousness of itself through its self-recognition as dispersed and separated from itself throughout and by the diversity of its different experiential situations and perspectives, while still having to recognize itself as being throughout this diversity the thought or thoughts of the one and self-same subject; for how otherwise could this diversity of situation and perspective be understandable as a feature of one and the same world? But if this *is* the case, and if 'we' find 'ourselves' thus committed to thinking of the whole world of objective knowledge as related ultimately to only one thinking subject (as unity of the field of experience), whatever the empirical diversity of its embodiments might be, then the sense in which 'we', Hume, Kant or anyone else can consistently regard his own work or texts as 'his own' can only be very incomplete, partial and provisional. As productions of thought they, along with all other texts of whatever apparent significance, must all be considered to be the work of the one thinking subject – and hence, moreover, all related to each other as such.

By this time – by this line of thought – we have arrived at a position of recognizably Hegelian outline. In fact, Kant himself, in his incomparable efforts to pick up and, again and again, to reknit the ravelled threads of his own thought, had by the time of his old age travelled, in his *Opus Postumum*, a notable distance in this direction. But, of course, Hegel did not, as he himself had supposed, represent the crowning achievement of philosophy in the sense of its finality or end. Of subsequent thinkers some have raised primary objection to, for example, the exceedingly abstract (mentalist or 'idealist') nature of his characterization of the relations between the subject and object of experience. But while seeking to bring both subject and object 'down to earth' by identifying the subject with, say, man as a natural species or, in a different version, the proletariat, and the object with physical, or physical and social, nature, many have retained his vision of the

subject as a transitionally dispersed but ultimately to be reintegrated unity; from this point of view the consciousnesses of individual men might be regarded as nothing but so many facets of this dispersion. Others, on the other hand, have objected primarily, or at least equally, to this assumption of overall unity, that is to say to the thesis according to which subjects in the plural (and as plural appearing, therefore, as objects for each other) have to be understood, together indeed with everything that is object as such, in the light of their ultimate reunification within the totality of the subject as One. For them, on the contrary, dispersal, diversity and irremediable lack of any guaranteed overall synthesis or unity have to be accepted as the condition of human thought, language and life.

The dissolution of the bonds of ultimate, systematic unity does not necessarily take us back, however, to a plurality of subjects each unproblematically located within the limited integrity of its own individual consciousness and secure at least in the possession and mastery of the meaning of its own thought. If, for instance, the possibility of a subject or agent conscious of itself as such is bound up with that of its own self-expression or articulation through concepts: if the possibility of the formation and meaningful employment of concepts has to be understood as in effect the possibility of language: if language has to be seen as essentially social or public in terms of its own primary possibility: and if the meaning of what is said or thought at any one moment lies as much in the ways in which it differs from what *else*, within the whole open range of possibilities that language may provide or suggest, *might* have been said or thought as in the words that have in fact been pronounced in the thoughts that have in fact occurred: then the networks of relations, both social and conceptual, on which the practical and constitutive possibility of language depend, or in which they consist, must always precede in order of both logical and temporal priority the formation of any individual consciousness as such. The subject, and *a fortiori* the subject as individual consciousness, is thus displaced from its role as source and author of meaning. It has to learn to look upon itself as a secondary or derivative phenomenon dependent for its own self-conscious existence on those networks of meaning that precede it – networks which are themselves, moreover, never completable, never closed, never definitively systematizable into

assured and self-consistent unities. And if the meaning of 'my own' situation and 'my own' discourse resides primarily in such a ramifying network of relations, then there must always be more to this meaning than can possibly be made determinate or meet my own eye at any particular moment. It is only by an optical illusion that the meaning of 'my own' discourse, works, thought or texts can be regarded as being properly my own.

Philosophy in the English-speaking world has not in its mainstream development, of course, reacted to the Kantian dilemmas by following through on the paths opened up by the fathers of German Idealism and characterized subsequently by the reactions to which this speculative form of philosophy gave characteristic rise. This is not, very evidently, to say that the problems of self-identity, of self-knowledge and of other minds have not remained high on the agenda. But by and large – for once again broad generalizations cannot pretend to accuracy of detail – the dominant 'Anglo-Saxon' retreat from and consequent bypassing of the entanglements of transcendental philosophy, whether in the form of an attempted renewal, updating and refinement of the Cartesian tradition or, on the contrary, in that of a rejection of private consciousness as the basis of meaning and experience, has tended to take it robustly for granted that the world is inhabited by recognizably individual human beings, that 'we' are those beings and that it is such beings as 'us' who, under whatever influences, are, nevertheless and for example, the authors of the articles and books that 'we' write. One can and must ask, no doubt, on the basis of such an assumption, how it in fact comes about that 'we' use the concepts of 'self' and 'person' that we do. What is their precise – or imprecise – meaning? What is their basis in the facts of experience as it is and how, were this experience to become very different from what we now understand it to be, might concepts such as these also be expected to change? But these are to be understood as problems, however difficult, of conceptual analysis; I may be deeply unconfident as to the accuracy of my analysis of the concept (or concepts) of self-identity, but, even if I have, like Hume, to confess myself in the end unable to give any adequate account of what I may be justified in taking myself to mean when I refer to 'myself' or to what 'I' may think or have done, I may still take myself to be justified in affirming that it is I who has thought or has done it.

Indeed, it is tempting to add, this is surely the only reasonable assumption to make. It is only on this assumption that I can ever regard myself as responsible for anything that I may think, say or do; and only on this assumption that I can ever engage in any self-conscious learning process whatsoever. We might even seek to return via this route to Kant and to say with him not only that this assumption is reasonable but that, from the perspective of self-conscious thought, it is, *qua* assumption, inescapable. (Though it must also be noted that if we return to the Kantian form of the assumption, we return likewise to the Kantian problems concerning the nature of the subject to whom conscious thought has to attribute itself.)

It goes without saying, of course, that even those philosophers most deeply within the influence of the tradition of transcendental philosophy and its varied succession (of further transformation or of rejection that originates from within) are perfectly capable of using the whole range of personal pronouns and of reporting, when called upon to do so, the basic facts of their own everyday lives. What they may find problematic, however, is the 'philosophical' significance of so doing, and particularly problematic, therefore, any attempt to report on 'their own' philosophical activities. But if this has to be regarded as problematic, then any response to a request for such a report by an unself-questioningly first-person narrative could only be taken, if not as a sign of ignorance or refusal of this whole nest of issues, then as a deliberate and philosophically non-neutral device for confronting and dealing with them – and in its own turn, therefore, as correspondingly problematic. Alternatively, one might go to the opposite extreme of avoiding explicitly first-person reporting altogether and of responding by the provision of a sample, as it were, of the work attached to one's name, chosen or constructed in terms appropriate to the request and the context. Or one might seek to work out some more or less complex combination or interplay of these two modes of response, perhaps by way of the construction of a context of response within which the use of the personal pronoun might take on some more clearly delineated significance, which in more general contexts it might lack. In one way or another, at any rate, the subject, being thus problematic, may come to be treated within a text not simply as an object of discussion, but as belonging to the conditions of production of

the text itself. And one way in which the subject (the author) of a text may respond to the problem of its own status in relation to what, before the problem is seen as a problem, may unproblematically be called its own productions, is, precisely, to disappear, to dis-integrate, to disperse into the play of words that gives to these productions *their* own characteristic 'texture'.

Considerations of this nature are not – of course – to be attributed as such to any of the contributors to this book. They may nevertheless form a background against which the subject's loss of confidence in the security of its own access to itself or in its certainty of the meaning of its own conscious thinking, even in the assured reality of its own autonomous status as subject, may be more readily understood. To them may be added those other (but partially related) considerations that lie behind the loss of confidence in the general sense or security of the distinction between stating or reporting and other forms of discursive activity. If I am asked to report on what I do as a philosopher, I also need to know with some reasonable confidence what is to count as a report.

One way in which these two sets of considerations may be connected is by reference to the at first sight unremarkable point that the very notion of a report carries with it that of some sort of distinction between a reporter, that which is reported and the audience to whom the report is addressed (even if in the limiting case this might be no other than the reporter himself). A report is only distinguishable from other forms of discursive activity insofar as it may in principle be either (or more or less) true or false. But how are the notions of truth and falsity themselves to be understood? In the context of a report, at any rate, they must surely have something to do with the degree to which – or the way in which – the report is 'adequate' to that which is reported. But this distinction between the reporter and the reported, even in the case where what is reported is some 'given' state or activity of the reporter, turns out to be but one more version of that earlier overall distinction between the 'subject' and the 'object', and must in consequence carry with it all the same problematic features. Insofar, anyhow, as one is thinking within the tradition that goes back to Kant, the tradition of transcendental philosophy, one is bound to follow Kant in asking how the 'I' that reports can be distinct from and yet at the same time identical with the 'I'

whose state or activities are reported. If truth as 'adequation' or 'objectivity', and truthful or untruthful reporting, only arise as possibilities within the space of a distinction between subject and object, we find ourselves back with the question of how the subject as the principle of synthetic activity constitutive of the context of this distinction itself could ever hope to report on its own productive activity without either distortion or remainder. It may be, as has been most influentially argued, that behind this conception of truth as fidelity to its object must lie the prior activity of truth-as-disclosure, the disclosure of a world in which the subject finds itself already involved in ambiguous relations with an always redeterminable object; but how, in that case, is one to proceed to the disclosure of disclosure itself? Certainly not by way of a subject's straightforward report on the object of its own activity as subject, if the (perhaps cultural) matrix out of which both subject and object emerge must somehow precede them both. Any attempted report on *this* 'state of affairs' must of necessity be always both more and less than a report; and ways must be sought of revealing it other than through 'adequate' statement alone.

In following these (admittedly not very analytically philosophical) lines of thought we have already linked up with the second of my original by-and-large generalizations. 'A significant number of the participants are committed to a view of philosophy as having an indissociable, and perhaps never fully expressible, "practical" dimension. Typically, but not invariably, an acute awareness of this dimension even of their own contribution to this volume may play a problematic part in the fashioning of that contribution.' Of course, the deep but somewhat tortuous route signposted above is not the only one by which one may come to an awareness of this sort. A much more immediately recognizable route to those who have studied philosophy in the analytic tradition might, for instance, pass by way of a reflection upon the implications of speech act theory.

It is by now almost a commonplace that whenever one produces any unit of discourse, of speech or of writing, a word, a sentence, a whole allocution, article or book, one is necessarily doing many different things at once; that is to say, there are many, even an indefinite number of descriptions under which one's action may be brought. Indeed, it is one of the main preoccupations