

# Modern French Philosophy

---

Vincent  
Descombes

---

# MODERN FRENCH PHILOSOPHY

---

Vincent Descombes

Translated by L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding

Cambridge University Press

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA  
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

Originally published in French as *Le Même et L'Autre*  
by Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1979 and  
© Les Editions de Minuit 1979

First published in English by the Cambridge  
University Press 1980 as *Modern French Philosophy*  
English translation © Cambridge University Press 1980  
Reprinted 1982

Printed in Great Britain by  
Fakenham Press Limited, Fakenham, Norfolk

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Descombes, Vincent  
Modern French philosophy.  
1. Philosophy, French – 20th century

I. Title

194 B2421 80-40768

ISBN 0 521 22837 9 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 29672 2 paperback

## Foreword

A generation ago few students (or even professors) of philosophy on either side of the English Channel knew very much about the philosophy that was being produced, studied and debated on the other side. Nor for the most part had they any interest in seeking to find out. Indeed, they felt in general fully justified in their ignorance by a settled conviction of the frivolity, superficiality and lack of any rigorous intellectual value of that of which they were accordingly more than content to remain ignorant.

Now – happily – times seem to be changing. On both sides of the same Channel signs are multiplying of a serious desire to learn about what has been and is going on on the other side, and even to participate in it; and, beyond the often still persisting incomprehension, there is an increasing return to the goodwill of mutual recognition and respect.

It would be wrong to exaggerate. It takes more than the few proverbial swallows to make a summer; and reciprocal ignorance, fortified by all the weight of recent tradition and the inertial power of institutions such as the academic syllabus, is still formidable enough. Moreover, in a situation in which ignorance has been for so long so entrenched it becomes genuinely difficult for anyone, however inquiring and however ‘open-minded’, to know exactly how to set about remedying his situation. One needs a guide – if at all possible, a native guide, one with expert knowledge of his own terrain, but yet capable of real communication with the strangers whom he leads into and through it.

Vincent Descombes sets out in this book to act as just such a guide through the territory of contemporary French philosophy.

No one could be better equipped for such a task. He has taught in Canada, travelled in the United States and even paid more than one visit to Oxford. He is also, and above all, a leading member of the new generation not indeed of 'new philosophers' but, quite simply, of French philosophers as such. For the past few years he has been teaching at the University of Nice and is now moving back to the University of Paris; he has already two books to his credit before this one;<sup>1</sup> he is a member of the editorial committee of the monthly review *Critique*; and this, his third book, although written on the commission of the Cambridge University Press and directed explicitly towards the English-speaking reader, has already proved a philosophical best-seller in its original French version, published<sup>2</sup> in natural slight advance of the necessary English translation.

As Descombes himself would be, and indeed is, the first to stress, his is to be taken simply as one man's view of the terrain. Not only is there and could there be no such thing as the one true and definitive view; not only might other French philosophers take other and equally legitimate views of the context within which they find themselves; Descombes himself for different purposes, or even for the same purposes fifteen years back or fifteen years hence, might view or have viewed his terrain differently, paying more attention to some philosophers and less to others than he has done from his perspective at this particular moment.

It should go without saying, but may be said nevertheless, that if this book is already to be read more as a guide than as an introduction to a certain central range of contemporary French philosophy, it in no way sets out to function as an introduction to philosophy as such. Its tacit presuppositions are not very exorbitant; simply – so to speak – a certain limited knowledge of the history of philosophy and of its dominant themes as they have appeared, above all, in the writings of the ancient Greeks and in those of the principal philosophers of the period delimited by the names of Descartes and Kant. Clearly, a certain knowledge of Hegel would also be of considerable help; but by those with the necessary basic grasp of the preceding period, the essentials of

<sup>1</sup> *Le platonisme* (Paris, P.U.F., 1971); *L'inconscient malgré lui* (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> By Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1979.

what is here relevant can for the most part be gleaned from the text itself.

The nature of these dominant themes may be recalled through the re-posing of certain familiar questions. What, if to speak in this traditional way may be accepted as intelligible, is the nature of Being? Is it all – that is to say, the universe, the complete or incomplete totality of things actual and possible – of one kind, of two kinds, or more? If it is of one kind alone, does that mean that consciousness must in the last resort recognise itself to be all that there is? If so, who or what could the owner (or the subject) of such a consciousness be taken to be? Or is consciousness able or even bound to consider itself as no more than a derivative special instance of something that, as such, is not conscious at all? If, on the other hand, Being is of two kinds (or more), how can consciousness coherently represent itself as being aware of something altogether outside – other than – itself? Yet how, without reference of some sort to this essentially other than itself, can consciousness come to be self-aware of its own identity as such, let alone aware of its continuing identity through different moments of (historical) time? And how, without the peculiar ‘negating’ ability of consciousness to distinguish between what *is* and what might have been but is in fact *not* the case, could the objective world be conceived of as having any particular or recognisable character at all?

Put now in these terms, these may be recognised as questions and themes not only of ancient, but also of classical Cartesian and Kantian preoccupation. What Descombes manages to show with admirable economy and verve is how a certain pursuit of these very same themes, handed on and received through the modulations of a further, and double, German heritage, has remained characteristic of the peculiar modern French branch of the great western tradition of philosophical thinking, a pursuit which has been accompanied by a perhaps more idiosyncratically persistent tendency to seek immediate translation of all positions of debate in terms of very contemporary politics.

This does not pretend to be a book that those to whom it is addressed should expect to read with instantly effortless ease. If such a book were to be written, it could scarcely claim to be taken with any seriousness. But nor, in another sense, is it a book that resists its reader. It is, on the contrary, witty, incisive and, in the

deepest sense, remarkably clear. It will almost certainly prove infinitely clearer to the uninitiated – and even perhaps to many of the initiated – than many, if not most, of the texts with which it deals. It repays in any case much more than one reading, not only for its information and its intellectual stimulus, but also for the sheer pleasure to be derived from it. It is, moreover, not only a guide to contemporary French philosophy but at the same time a commentary on and a highly personal contribution to it. It is a contribution that, in its particular manner and perhaps even content, could only have been made in this way – by way, that is to say, of primary address to an audience wholly outside and other than that to which French philosophy normally and paradigmatically addresses itself.

And this too may provide much food for further thought.

*Balliol College, Oxford*  
*April 1980*

Alan Montefiore

## Note on abbreviations and translation

Abbreviations in the footnotes refer to the works listed below. English translations are given if available. Those titles marked with an asterisk are cited by the translators in the text, as is Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. R. McCleary (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern U.P., 1964). All other quotations in translation are their own. All French works are published in Paris.

AD	Merleau-Ponty, <i>Les aventures de la dialectique</i> (Gallimard, 1955); trans. Joseph J. Bien, <i>The Adventures of the Dialectic</i> (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern U.P., 1973)
ACE	Deleuze and Guattari, <i>Capitalisme et schizophrénie</i> , vol. 1, <i>L'anti-Œdipe</i> (Minuit, 1972); trans. as <i>The Anti-Oedipus</i> (New York, Viking, 1977)
CRD	Sartre, <i>Critique de la raison dialectique</i> , prefaced with <i>Questions de méthode</i> , vol. 1, <i>Théorie des ensembles pratiques</i> (Gallimard, 1960) <i>Critique de la raison dialectique</i> , trans. A. Sheridan Smith, <i>Critique of Dialectical Reason</i> (London, New Left Books, 1976)
<i>Dérive</i>	Lyotard, <i>Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud</i> (10/18, 1973)
<i>Disp. puls.</i>	Lyotard, <i>Des dispositifs pulsionnels</i> (10/18, 1973)
DR	Deleuze, <i>Différence et répétition</i> (P.U.F., 1968)
ED	Derrida, <i>L'écriture et la différence</i> (Seuil, 1967); trans. Alan Bass, <i>Writing and Difference</i> (Chicago U.P., 1978)
<i>Eco. lib.</i>	Lyotard, <i>Economie libidinale</i> (Minuit, 1974)
EN	Sartre, <i>L'être et le néant</i> (Gallimard, 1943); trans. Hazel Barnes, <i>Being and Nothingness</i> (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1956; London, Methuen, 1969)*
G	Derrida, <i>De la grammatologie</i> (Minuit, 1967); trans. Guyatri C. Spivak, <i>Of Grammatology</i> (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1976)*
HF	Foucault, <i>Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique</i> , 1st edn (Plon, 1961); trans. R. Howard, <i>Madness and Civilisation</i> (London, Tavistock, 1967)*
<i>Intr. Hegel</i>	Kojève, <i>Introduction à la lecture de Hegel</i> (Gallimard,



- 1947); trans. James H. Nicholls Jr, ed. Allan Bloom, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York, Basic Books, 1969)\*
- LC I and LC II Althusser, Balibar, Estabiet, Macherey, Rancière, *Lire le Capital*, vols. I and II (Maspero, 1965) (2nd edn. Althusser and Balibar, *Lire le Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster, Reading 'Capital', London, New Left Books, 1970)
- LS Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Minuit, 1969)
- Marges Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Minuit, 1972)
- MC Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Gallimard, 1966); trans. A. Sheridan Smith, *The Order of Things* (New York, Random House, 1973; London, Tavistock, 1974)
- NPh Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (P.U.F., 1962)
- OG Husserl, *L'origine de la géométrie*, translation and introduction by Derrida (P.U.F., 1962); Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry'. An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavy (Boulder, Col., Great Eastern, 1978)
- PM Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Maspero, 1965); trans. Ben Brewster, *For Marx* (London, New Left Books, 1969)\*
- PP Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Gallimard, 1945); trans. Colin Smith, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, New York, Humanities, 1962)\*
- SC Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement* (P.U.F., 1942); trans. Alden Fisher, *The Structure of Behaviour* (Boston, Beacon, 1963)\*
- SNS Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Nagel, 1948); trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus, *Sense and Non-sense* (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern U.P., 1964)\*
- VP Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène* (P.U.F., 1967); trans. David B. Allison, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern U.P., 1973)\*

Throughout the present work, the word *l'étant*, itself a rendering of the Heideggerian *Das Seiende*, has been translated as '(the) be-ing'.

In Chapter 1, Section 8, 'The Question of Enunciation', the word *énonciation* has been translated as 'enunciation', and the word *énoncé* as 'statement'. The verb *énoncer* has been translated as 'to state' or 'to enunciate', according to which of the two cognates (*énoncé*, *énonciation*) it distinguishes. Where this distinction is not in play, *énoncé* and *énoncer* have sometimes been rendered as 'utterance' and 'to utter'.

In general, where the word *moi* is not preceded by the definite article, it has been translated as 'myself'. *Le moi*, however, has been translated as 'the self' or as the Freudian 'ego'.

The translators wish to thank the author for his clarification of numerous points, and also E. McArdle for help and suggestions throughout.

# Contents

Foreword by Alan Montefiore	vii
Note on abbreviations and translation	ix
Introduction: Philosophy in France	1
<b>1 The humanisation of nothingness (Kojève)</b>	<b>9</b>
The interpretation of Hegel	9
The search for a concrete philosophy	16
The objection of solipsism	20
The origin of negation	23
The end of history	27
Negativity	32
Identity and difference	36
The question of enunciation	39
APPENDIX: Nothingness in <i>Being and Nothingness</i> (Jean-Paul Sartre)	48
<b>2 The human origin of truth (Merleau-Ponty)</b>	<b>55</b>
The soul and the body	57
The earth does not revolve	59
Does the dark side of the moon exist?	62
The phenomenon	65
The phenomenology of history	69
<b>3 Semiology</b>	<b>75</b>
The intellectual scene in 1960	75
Structuralism	77
What is a structural analysis? (Serres)	82
Communication	92

Structures	100
The humanist controversy	103
<b>4 The critique of history (Foucault, Althusser)</b>	110
Nihilism	110
Marxism in peril	117
Superstructures	126
Introduction to the problem of power	131
<b>5 Difference (Derrida, Deleuze)</b>	136
The radicalisation of phenomenology	136
<i>La différance</i>	142
Originary delay	145
The search for a transcendental empiricism	152
Critique of the dialectic	156
<b>6 The end of time (Deleuze, Klossowski, Lyotard)</b>	168
Authority	168
The fin-de-siècle disorder	173
The tale (of the end of the tale) of the end of history	180
Final remarks	186
Index	191

## Introduction: Philosophy in France

Can the colour of time be described? Who could say what the atmosphere of a period was?

At the outset of this survey I should define its inevitable limits.

French philosophy is the philosophy which is articulated in French, even when it is to state Greek, Latin, English or German thoughts in this language. French philosophy was born when Descartes undertook to reply, in French, to Montaigne's *Essays* with his *Discourse on Method*, followed by three *Essays with this method*. But it was more than French philosophy that appeared with Descartes's challenge to Montaigne. According to the most considerable authorities, for once in agreement – Hegel and Heidegger for example – the pursuit of a truth that has the character of absolute certainty marks the inauguration of modern philosophy.

The following pages are intended to be an *introduction to contemporary French philosophy*. A survey of French philosophy as a whole would start with Descartes (replying to Montaigne). A survey of modern philosophy would begin in the same way. The title of the study whose first page you are reading now proposes a more modest undertaking: to acquaint a reader whom I assume, for the sake of hypothesis, to be as exterior as possible to French philosophical traditions and modes, with the language and issues of what is known as philosophical debate in France today.

'Contemporary French philosophy' cannot be identified with a philosophical *period* or with a *school*. It is coincident with the sum of the discourses elaborated in France and considered by the public of today as philosophical. These are the circumstances

(place, dates) which limit the substance of my exposition. It will seem at first that such circumstances are external to philosophy proper. It will perhaps be objected that philosophy, once imbued with the atmosphere of a period, might thereby be reduced to mere *opinion*.

The public is not necessarily the best judge. Its very definition is that it cannot be infallible – a point which should be stressed, inasmuch as our programme undertakes to introduce the reader to *that which was spoken about*, in a given territory and during a given period, or, when all is said and done, to retain only what created a stir among the widest possible audience. This *clamorous* approach to philosophy is necessarily unjust, since it leaves aside whatever – though sometimes worthy of attention – has gone ignored by the public, or has not received attention to a sufficient degree. It must be understood that the texts with which I shall be dealing are not necessarily the most interesting ones to have been published during the contemporary period. It is not even certain that all of them are interesting. For the entire bibliography to be considered falls into four groups:

i. Those texts which everybody quotes and which everybody holds to be worthy of quotation.

ii. Those texts which everybody quotes and which some judge to be insignificant.

iii. Those texts which are quoted by a few, or by only one person, but which these persons hold to be superior to texts in both the preceding categories.

iv. Those texts unknown to everybody except their respective authors.

It goes without saying that these divisions would have no sense in an introduction to *philosophy in general*, where the only standard for the appreciation of a text's philosophical value, irrespective of its audience, would lie in its exposition of the philosophical issue. But in an introduction to the *French philosophy of today*, we may include only writings from groups i and ii. In setting groups iii and iv to one side, we must be aware of the fact that we are eliminating not only the mediocre and the insignificant, but also texts which have a genuine public, at least outside France; and those whose time is, or may be, still to come.

Finally, and as a last limitation, the (happily) restricted space at my disposal does not permit me to refer to all the names and titles

that have been discussed by the public. This work does not purport to be the *Who's Who* of French philosophy, nor even its *Gotha Almanac*. I shall therefore make no attempt to render certain nuances, or the occasional small divergence within a school, and shall offer only one version of each philosopheme. Here again, it will be the version to have received the greatest acclaim, and not necessarily the most ingenious one. Needless to say, I shall refrain from naming those who in my own personal view deserved greater recognition, who will no doubt obtain this recognition in the near future, or should do so some day. The rhetorical criterion in philosophy is undeniably sound and fury.

It remains to state, however briefly, the circumstances of time and place.

How far does what we take to be our present extend back in time? In many respects, we would be justified in beginning with the French Revolution, or even with Descartes. Thus we may as well start with the *present day*. The great undertaking of each generation is to settle the debts handed down by the preceding one. *The sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons*. In so doing, each generation calls into existence the obstacles that are to confront its descendants. So to situate what is for us the present requires that we take two generations into account: the contemporary one, demonstrably active today, and also its direct predecessor.

In the recent evolution of philosophy in France we can trace the passage from the generation known after 1945 as that of the 'three H's' to the generation known since 1960 as that of the three 'masters of suspicion': the three H's being Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, and the three masters of suspicion Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. This is not to say that the Hegelians or the Husserlians vanished abruptly from the scene in 1960. But those who persisted in invoking the three H's, or any one of them, after that date, would have been the first to admit that their position was no longer dominant. In argument, they were thus obliged to take the common *doxa* into account, and to defend themselves in advance against the objections likely to be raised in the name of the new trinity. Our object, then, will be to account for this change. Why were the tutelary figures who had reigned from 1930 to 1960 simultaneously deposed during the 1960s to make way for the new arrivals? It should be noted that the grouping of authorities into successive triads is a rhetorical fact. The objections which the

conscientious historian of philosophy may raise to such patterns do not alter the fact that an entire generation drew the same conclusions from its reading of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, for example. It is also significant that the texts most quoted after 1930 were often difficult of access, either because they had not been translated by that date (the *Phenomenology of Mind* was translated in 1947 and *Being and Time* is still untranslated in 1978), or because they had not even been published (thus, with Husserl, the texts to receive the greatest acclaim were precisely the *inédits*, or unpublished manuscripts, at Louvain). Such circumstances are particularly conducive to productive transformation of the quoted thought by the reader, a transformation that is always manifestly at work in the making of an authority. It should not be believed that the authority a work may carry is the result of its having been read, studied and finally judged convincing. The reverse is true: reading derives from a prior conviction. Works are preceded by *rumour*. As Maurice Blanchot wrote, public opinion is never more purely opinion than where rumour is concerned; opinion is, for instance, 'what can be read in the newspapers, but never in this or that one in particular'; such is precisely the essence of rumour, since 'what I learn from rumour, I have necessarily heard already'.<sup>1</sup> By a kind of Platonic recollection, the text with which *we fall in love* will be the one wherein what we know already can be learned and relearned. Merleau-Ponty recognised this:

We shall find in ourselves and nowhere else the unity and true meaning of phenomenology. It is less a question of counting up quotations than of determining and expressing in concrete form this *phenomenology for ourselves* which has given a number of present-day readers the impression, on reading Husserl or Heidegger, not so much of encountering a new philosophy as of recognising what they had been waiting for.<sup>2</sup>

It is not our business here to inquire whether or not the interpretations which will be given of Hegel, Husserl, then of Marx or Nietzsche are faithful to the thought they seek to render. Clearly

<sup>1</sup> *L'entretien infini* (Gallimard, 1969), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> PP, p. 11.

they betray it, but perhaps this betrayal is only a way of highlighting what Heidegger called the 'not-thought' inherent in that thought.

A final word on the characteristics of the *domain in which philosophical utterance circulates*.

This space has proved remarkably stable, at least until recently when some creakings became audible, induced by the advent of powerful mass media (television, etc.) to add to the networks of communication already established since the end of the last century.

The *university site* of philosophy is marked by its concentric, highly centralised formation. The *lycées* provide the universities with the bulk of their audience in the form of future secondary-school teachers. These *lycée* teachers are, in theory, recruited by the State by means of a competitive examination system. Given that the content of these examinations (*agrégation*, CAPES) is a function of the sixth form (*classe de philosophie*) syllabus, the teaching of philosophy in France is more or less determined by the nature and function of that syllabus. Officially, the Syllabus, this masterpiece of rigour and coherence, is fixed by unanimous consent. In reality, it is the outcome of a compromise between the various prevailing tendencies, and this is why the much celebrated Masterpiece is so frequently overhauled. Charged by some with propagating a reactionary ideology, by others with eliminating whatever still remained of authentic philosophy in the preceding syllabus, successive versions reflect the momentary balance of *political forces*, not only within the teaching body itself, but also in the country at large.

Few people claim to be satisfied with the syllabus as it stands, and many call for its reform. Nobody, however, questions the need for a syllabus of some sort. This cult of the Syllabus, which never fails to astonish foreigners, is explained by the French veneration for the institution of the *baccalauréat*, that incarnation of the egalitarian ideal. As regards philosophy, to sit the *baccalauréat* consists in the following: on the same day, at the same hour and for the same length of time, all candidates are required to commit similarly worded answers to identical sheets of paper in response – until quite recently – to a single question drawn from the Syllabus. These uniform products are then corrected by the teaching body in compliance with express directives unfailingly



provided by the ministry for the occasion. The impartiality of correction is ensured by organising a rota of examiners from town to town, so that no candidate may be known in person by his examiner. Hence the necessity for a single Syllabus, the same for all French *lycées* on the planet Earth and others too, if need be.

The recruitment of teachers, which I cannot go into in detail here, works – needless to say – on similar principles. The *concours d'agrégation* is a veritable initiation rite, severing candidates from everything vaguely deemed to be evil (the provinces, the 'soil', local particularisms) to turn them into civic-minded State missionaries. In this respect, the predominant role of the president of the *jury d'agrégation* is worth stressing. Directly nominated by the minister, he selects the other members of the board, presides over the deliberations, and decides on the subjects for examination (taken from the Syllabus of the *classe de philosophie*); these subjects in turn will determine the syllabus in philosophy departments preparing students for the examination. The very style of French philosophy is perpetually being affected by this chain of events. At the time when neo-Kantianism, in the person of Léon Brunschvicg, presided over the *jury d'agrégation*, the immense majority of students applied themselves to assimilating the thoughts of Plato, Descartes, and Kant, read in that order, as the progression of consciousness towards Mind. But as regards those authors whom neo-Kantianism rejects, such as Aristotle or Hegel, no more than a summary refutation was required.

Teachers of philosophy being civil servants in France, it follows that the discipline has inevitable political repercussions. These are negligible in periods of national stability, but become determinant when the State appears threatened. At the beginning of the Third Republic, university philosophy was entrusted with a mission by the State – to impress upon students the legitimacy of the new Republican institutions. Two doctrines contended for this role: Durkheim's sociological positivism, and neo-Kantian rationalism (deriving from Renouvier, later personified in Brunschvicg). The second was to prevail in the end. Although opposed to each other, both these doctrines teach that mankind, from its distant origins onwards, has not ceased to progress towards the agreement of all human beings upon certain reasonable principles – precisely those on which Republican institutions are based. We shall see how, for