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Frontismatter, table of contents, and Introduction

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FRENCH PHILOSOPHERS IN CONVERSATION

This collection of conversations eavesdrops on contemporary themes in French intellectual life. The short question-and-answer format of the dialogue provides an ideal introduction to the often daunting work of modern French philosophers. Such well-known figures as Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Serres are joined in this book by thinkers whose writings are only now beginning to make an impact on the English-speaking world: Michele Le Doeuff and Monique Schneider.

In a readable and accessible way Raoul Mortley has drawn out the ideas, personalities and society of these interesting and important thinkers. Each thinker represents one or more strand of the Parisian philosophical scene, and feminism, phenomenology, literature, semiotics, psychoanalysis and communication are just some of the subjects covered in this book.

French Philosophers in Conversation will appeal to everyone interested in modern thought and the major impact thinkers from France continue to have. This is a genuinely 'friendly' book which introduces an interesting and potentially difficult area to the widest possible audience.

Raoul Mortley is Dean and Professor of Philosophy at the School of Humanities, Bond University, Australia. He spent nearly a decade in France studying the history of philosophy and was at one time the Director of Research in Philosophy at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. During this period he researched and conducted the interviews which constitute this book.

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**FRENCH
PHILOSOPHERS IN
CONVERSATION**

Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray,
Le Doeuff, Derrida

Raoul Mortley



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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 EMMANUEL LEVINAS	11
<i>Select bibliography</i>	23
2 MONIQUE SCHNEIDER	25
<i>Select bibliography</i>	44
3 MICHEL SERRES	47
<i>Select bibliography</i>	60
4 LUCE IRIGARAY	63
<i>Select bibliography</i>	78
5 MICHELE Le DOEUFF	81
<i>Select bibliography</i>	91
6 JACQUES DERRIDA	93
<i>Select bibliography</i>	108

INTRODUCTION

The French have had a long and proud tradition of philosophy, from the medieval Sorbonne onwards. The best-known French thinker for the Anglo-Saxon world is probably Descartes, and this reflects the specific conditions of Anglo-Saxon philosophy: but seeing things through the French education system one would gain a different impression.

Philosophy is part of the literary culture of this most literate of peoples: it reaches the general reading public and penetrates the educational scene more deeply than in other countries. Philosophy is taught in senior secondary schools, and the names of the well-known philosophers are known by people quite removed from the world of institutional education.

It is virtually impossible to capture the tenor of six figures as diverse as those represented in this book. But it is clear that contemporary French philosophy in general has a reputation for radicalism. It is true that many continue to work in a Cartesian way, that is in the rigorously logical and analytic way characteristic of Descartes, but these are not the names that have become well-known abroad. It is in the issues addressed, and the manner in which they are treated, that contemporary French philosophy seems to whet the appetite. The critics are many: 'facile and superficial' is the description of contemporary French philosophy by a contemporary French philosopher. 'Theatrical' is the term chosen by an eminent German philosopher. And it is true that the outsider can be struck by the attention to style, to demeanour, and to public persona, which characterizes (and characterized) some contemporary practitioners. There is also the arcanum style, by which obscurity and mysteriousness serve to bolster the sense

of an organized sub-group to which only the initiates belong. It is easy to be disgraced.

Thus the social face of contemporary French philosophy is worthy of a study in itself. But there is real substance to be found, despite the flair, and one point that must be made is that French philosophy has always been closer to literature than it has been in English-speaking countries. The *salon* is different from the common room as a place for interaction, and different in respect of those whom it brings together. Sartre wrote both works of philosophy and novels, as well as works which are both literary and philosophical at once: *Words*, his autobiographical work, is an example of the latter. Michel Serres, who is interviewed in this book, combines perfectly the philosophical and the literary in *Les Cinq Sens*, which was awarded a literary prize in Paris in 1986 (see Chapter 3). The literary conscience weighs heavily in French philosophy: the link between the two disciplines is thought to be natural and important. Some remarks made by Monique Schneider (see Chapter 2) seem to count against this, but this is about a specific context, and it is generally true that the philosopher in contemporary France pays more attention to the art of seduction and attraction than does his/her equivalent in Britain or America. It is this very aspect of French philosophy which appeals to students, and to a broader social group than is normally the case.

The relationship between philosophy and literature in the mainstream Anglo-American tradition could be described as one of mutual suspicion: philosophers see their discipline as being about knowledge and truth, and that of the *littérateurs* as being about feelings. Literary people see philosophy as diverting into analytic byways, failing to deal with the existential and the subjective. This is the subject of a whole debate in philosophy, but it should be noted that, as Michel Serres points out, from the outset Plato has the two sides in one person: the logician of Parmenides co-existing with the winged charioteer of the *Phaedrus*, which is a dialogue about inspiration, of both a literary and philosophical kind. It is no accident that this dialogue is more or less omitted from discussion in English-speaking philosophy departments, or from the study of Plato, whereas it is well established in French scholarship. The role of the imagination in philosophy is addressed much more in France than it is in Britain. Gaps in the philosophy curriculum

point to a state of affairs in philosophy itself: the absence of Neoplatonist studies in both Britain and America is matched by its presence in France and, to a lesser extent, Germany and Italy. The names of certain Platonist philosophers, such as Damascius, do not even appear in standard reference works in Britain, whereas they are given many pages in equivalent French works. And these Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Damascius, deploy a kind of speculative intuitive method in metaphysics, which we see at work in the continental tradition. A study of the institution of philosophy and in particular the curriculum in the various countries will reveal many implicit philosophical statements being made, and often these are statements of the most important and fundamental kind. As is often the case in philosophy, the fundamental principle remains hidden; what underlies these curriculum choices is a set of claims about priorities and method in philosophy.

It is clear that English-speaking philosophy is closer to science than is French philosophy. The exception here is Michel Serres, who is consciously involved with scientific method and progress: interestingly, he is also one of the most literary of the group selected for this book. (This would be no surprise to Lucretius.) There are others actively involved with both philosophy and science: Michel Paty, both physicist and philosopher, is one who works in the philosophy of science in the Anglo-American sense. But he and others like him constitute a minority and do not get the fanfare and attention of those represented in the present book. By and large, French philosophy does not link itself with science in the areas of physics, artificial intelligence, or in methodological questions; in the matter of biology, however, the position is somewhat different. Nor is the kind of regular conjunction of physics and philosophy or mathematics and philosophy which is found in Anglo-Saxon philosophy found so much in France.

The most important influences on French philosophy at the present time are German. The three 'Hs' are well-known as the preparatory diet: Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. Most of the group interviewed in this book read German more than they do English: to the names above, we should of course add those of Nietzsche and Freud, and these five provide a genuine context for the development of French philosophy. The entry of Heidegger into the French world is discussed by Levinas, who

himself played an important role in this process. Heidegger is identified with both left and right in France, through different extensions of his work. His apparently pro-Nazi sympathies placed him in the dubious category for many years after the war, although in present-day Paris he is very widely read. Levinas, and also Beaufret, are the two names most associated with the importation of Heidegger into France from Freiburg. Hegel's route was partly through forms of Marxism, and partly through an influential teacher in Paris, Koyré. Husserl and phenomenology came with the influence of Heidegger.

One of Derrida's seminal works, *Differance* (in *Margins of Philosophy*) is developed very much in response to a structure established by both Hegel and Heidegger. This is partly the French method - of beginning from a text and philosophizing from there into new areas - but it is clear that the starting point is the German tradition. A sensationalist book appeared in 1985, by Alain Renaut and Luc Ferry, entitled *La Pensée* 68, which claimed that all that was famous in contemporary French philosophy was but German philosophy dressed up: Foucault, Althusser, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze - all the big names are included. Foucault is categorized under 'le nietzschéisme français' and Derrida under 'l'heideggerianisme français'. A kind of reductionist exercise is carried out in the interests of a socio-political statement rather than a serious analysis, and a real point is overemphasized. There is little point in saying dramatically that Athenian philosophy was really Eleatic, or stolen from Samos, because Plato stood in the position of responding to and developing Parmenides and Pythagoras. These revelations have obviousness about them. But there is a point to remember, and that is that most French philosophers, if they know any foreign language, probably know German before they know English.

This particular legacy means that ontology is very important in contemporary writing. There is a certain very traditional side to Heidegger which has echoes of Thomism, and which reaches right back to Parmenides: the fundamental question is perceived to be about the nature of being, in what it consists, and how it conducts its existence. The concern of Heidegger for Being, and Being-there (*Sein, Dasein*) is well known: Hegel describes a saga of Being which resembles a historicizing of Parmenides' Being, which is no longer

immobile and timeless, but evolves and develops in a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The spectre of a hidden world of being, obscure but full of authenticating presence, is a fundamental influence in the French philosophical world. It comes into the Hegelian reading of Freud provided by Lacan, and is the most important element in the filling out of Freud's ideas into a philosophical theory. The presence or absence of the phallus can then come to point to a presence or absence of being in the sense described above: the idea of 'lack' can receive a full development in what are virtually cosmic terms. This conflation of the different streams has given Freudian theory a great impetus in Paris, and is responsible for the specific character which it has there. It leads to a universalization of Freud into all the areas of existential concern, and a reading of him in terms provided by the existentialist writers.

The psychoanalytic philosophy of Monique Schneider has its affinities with the Lacan school, but she pays attention to matters which are not the habitual fare of the French. Her analysis of language, cast in the ontological-cum-psychoanalytic framework which we have observed, is based on a mixture of Wittgenstein, Freud and other insights. She is more *analytic*, in the British sense, within her own framework. By the same token she is very conscious of the symbol and of meaning: there is a strong semiotic strand in the ontological substrate of her work. The images of Freud are used to explain him: what is inexplicit in his text is highlighted in the quest for explanation.

The phenomenological method, of describing being as it really is and as it really appears, is most clearly present in Levinas. But it must be said that this kind of approach is everywhere in the type of contemporary French philosophy to which we refer. A kind of step-back, look, and an attempt at redescribing what is and what emerges, is a common manoeuvre: this clearly has its links to the phenomenological tradition. And equally close to that tradition is the sense that the essence of being may be hidden, subject to some arcanum principle, and that our ordinary construction of reality will have to be reconstructed on the basis of a speculative act of the imagination. This last point should be emphasized, since the reconstruction of the ordinary perception of reality is what the scientist does in day-to-day investigation and theorizing. But here, the kind

of new look at reality which takes place is a product of the metaphysical imagination, and this brings us back to the proximity of the literary in French philosophy. The creative act of the philosophical imagination is not so different from that of the literary or poetic imagination.

The focus on the imagination is itself an important theme. Thus Michèle Le Doeuff (see below), who has many strings to her bow, pursues the enquiry into the philosophical imagination in all aspects of her work. Her view is that metaphors and images, and their absence, tell much about the real basis of the philosophical writing in question. This is not unlike the theory that attaches to the role of paradigms or models in the thinking process, which forms part of the Anglo-Saxon philosophy curriculum. But there are important differences: first, the *imaginaire* is not merely indicative of driving modes of thought, but is often a sign of unconfessed and dissimulated ideas. Second - and Le Doeuff focuses on these - it is the gaps in the philosophical discourse which may be more revealing than the continuous text. Thus if an author interrupts his narrative to recount a dream (the *somnium doctrinae* of one of her articles), then the interruption may be more telling than the main text itself. And it is telling not just about the author's specific frame of mind but about knots which remain to be untied in the systematic form of what is being expounded. Again there is the sense of something hidden: that the ostensible agenda is not the real agenda.

This arcanum principle then, that the hidden is the essence, is one of the chief distinguishing features of such philosophy. It is in stark contrast to the respect for the formal and the explicit which characterizes the analytic tradition, whereby the real game is said to be the overt game, the one which all parties ostensibly agree to be the real game. It is rather like a court-case in which the lawyers and all orthodox observers agree that the legal contest is what is at stake, whilst the parties involved see themselves in an entirely different struggle. Some kind of 'real' issue may be involved, such as the settling of old scores, and the law may be the mere instrument of this concealed issue. A kind of charade is carried out, in which from time to time there emerge hints of what is really at stake. (And of course the charade and the real are not on entirely separate tracks, since they tend to have an involving effect on each other.)

Luce Irigaray represents an increasingly strong voice in the philosophy of human relations: her particular feminism turns on what may be said to be the legitimate difference between men and women. Opposing the homogenizing tendency which characterizes some feminism, Irigaray looks both for fraudulent attempts to characterize difference, and for sound qualitative descriptors. The discourse provided below in response to certain written questions illustrates both the conspiracy to agree on certain false characterizations of femininity, and the way in which women may accept and internalize such judgements: the flight of women from taking the subject's position in the sentence is an example of this.

The themes of difference, identity and opposition are often linked in some way. Feminism raises the issue of the tendency to polarize, to conduct thought by setting up oppositions, rather than identities or relations. The question of difference, which Irigaray teases out over and over again in different ways, is a very traditional one. For Aquinas, difference is the ground of relations, and does not stand in opposition to identity. This goes back to *alteritas* and *heterotes* in Roman and Greek philosophy, and eventually back to Parmenides and the Pre-Socratics: how can difference coexist with being? How can an entity be, if it harbours difference with itself? What is the relation of the unity in a thing, to the difference which is also present. These are urgent issues in French philosophical writing, and they find expression in social philosophy and metaphysics alike.

The issue re-emerges with Derrida's idea of 'différance', which substitutes an 'a' for the usual 'e'. This is Derrida's way of signalling an enquiry into the real process of differing. Starting from an active sense of the adjective 'different', and basing his enquiry in the traditional French manner on a text to be clarified (in this case Koyré on Hegel), Derrida looks for a sense of 'differing' which lies between the active and the passive. A temporal meaning is discovered: in French 'différer' means both to delay and to refer. The process 'différance' is that by which a delaying/referring action takes place, such that 'différance' becomes the axis of language, the way it works. Language works not by a series of rigid edicts handed down by its authors, who move it about at will and with total control over it. It works rather by itself, in being in this differing process. Quite simply, 'différance' refers to the generation of a

series of relations, which is in fact the consequence of common-or-garden difference. This discussion develops in the context of the ontology of Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure and the ancient Greeks ('Differance', in *Margins of Philosophy*): its effect on literary theory is well-known, because it ascribes a kind of self-sufficiency to text. Text 'differs': the difference among words gives birth to that process which relates them, and weaves them into patterns. And this process is in language itself, which thereby creates its own meaning. The subject is not the prime mover as author, or reader if it comes to that. And this leads to another common theme: the disestablishment of the subject. The score is still being settled with Descartes in the French tradition.

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