

The Decline of French Philosophy

I would like to thank David Miller for inviting me to speak at the Existentialist Society, as he has done several times in the past as well. I have a very fond memory of my first presentation to this Society, "The Phenomenology of Technology" in 1995 at the Royal Society lecture theatre, more than three decades in the past, which even has some relevance with today's presentation. I may also mention that 132 years ago on this day that anarchists carried out a bombing at the Foyot Restaurant on Rue Condé, Paris. It was part of a series of "propaganda by the deed" by anarchists against class enemies at the time and the restaurant was popular among politicians and their paymasters. In this case the bomb, placed inside a flower vase, only managed to permanently injure one person, Laurent Tailhade, a fellow anarchist sympathiser, poet, and a good friend of the famous art critic, curator, collector and anarchist Félix Fénéon, who was deemed responsible for the bomb. The bomb did, however, leave a rather sizeable hole of more than 1m in diameter in the restaurant wall.

As part of an ongoing campaign of fratricidal actions by anarchists against anarchists, by intent or accident, I hope we can avoid that today. Instead, I rather like to think of the Existentialist Society, along with several others similar groups located in Melbourne, to be more akin to the French Republic of Letters, or perhaps even more appropriately, a version the salons hosted by Marie Geoffrin, Julie de Lespinasse, and Suzanne Necker and others. I especially want to emphasise that the salons were no mere leisure gatherings for educated members of society and fine artists. They were a weapon of the Enlightenment, civil and critical working spaces, for what one could call the public sphere, and would directly lead to the French Revolution. This description is important in understanding today's presentation; "The Decline of French Philosophy", as the salons and the Republic of Letters are the beginning of critical French philosophy whose output and insight provided a leading trajectory for over two centuries from the mid-1750s onwards.

It is necessary to begin with some working definitions that are elaborated from the presentation's title; "Decline", "French", "Philosophy". By "decline", we understand that something has become fewer, or has lessened. But I also want to incorporate this in a narrative and historical

sense; modern French philosophy has an origin, it has a development, it has an apogee, it is now experiencing a decline, with the possibility of either a gradual fading away with a whimper or with a steadfast revival. The definition of "French" is no simple matter, either. It does not seem quite right to limit the description to those ideas and writers whose origins are in the borders of France only. Apart from the overseas territories, there are the contributions from intellectuals from French colonies or other countries under French control as France, to this day, is ruled with imperialist intent. Further, there are, of course, French speaking regions of Europe and Canada which are part of other countries, notably Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada. For the purpose of this presentation, I will be more inclusive rather than exclusive, and define French philosophy as those works and ideas expressed in the French language, carrying "l'esprit de francais". For what it's worth, a transcript of this presentation will appropriately be provided in English and French.

Finally, there is the matter of "philosophy"; the University Outreach Officer for the International Society for Philosophers and as an incorrigible collector of stiff pieces of cardboard, it is perhaps unsurprising that I have a fairly formal personal definition of what constitutes philosophy; that is,

ontology, epistemology, and logic. These three subjects are really the origin of all other knowledge and notably a great deal of what is called "philosophy", and especially "existentialist philosophy" is more properly allocated under the relatively new discipline of "positive psychology", the study of what makes life worth living. I will, for the purposes of this presentation and in particular to this Society, include "positive psychology". If you like, in a contemporary sense, the presentation could be titled: "The Decline of French Philosophy and Psychology" and certainly some French psychology will be a particular point of concern. Disciplines change of course, but as the famous Wikipedia game illustrates, everything leads to philosophy.

With these definitions in place, it is appropriate to engage in a somewhat whirlwind tour of the important contributions of French philosophy. Your presenter is a self-confessed francophile, albeit a critical one. There can be no doubt of my long-standing Francophile tendencies when it comes to the fine arts, cuisine, republican politics, French philosophy, at least from the Enlightenment to the Situationists. I admire the gentle spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the grand knowledge and scope of Denis Diderot, and the courage of the entire body of "les philosophes" who took on the

absolutism of the monarchy, the dead hand of the church and helped establish the modern public sphere through salon gatherings that, scandalously, were hosted by women patrons, "les salonnères". In the nineteenth century, positive philosophy would find leadership with Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte and Hippolyte Taine, as respective contributions to idealised visions of society with technology, the application of the scientific method to sociology, and, remarkably, a positivist approach to the arts. It is important to here to also recognise the enormous contributions to the history and philosophy of science by the physicist Pierre Duhem who was very influential on 20th century positivism and, by way of contrast, one must also mention the systematic eclecticism of Victor Cousin.

Crossing the two centuries one witnesses Henri Bergson's contributions to psychology, the unconscious, memory, and multiplicity. Into the twentieth century, there is the mathematics and physics of Henri Poincaré, the perceptual phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which would add to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, and all of which would contribute to the fascinating and unique "French epistemology" in the philosophy of science. There is also the incredible contributions to feminism by Simone

de Beauvoir and her companion, Jean-Paul Sartre. Both, along with Albert Camus' ontological absurdism and the incredible and inspiring personal standards of Simone Weil, raised and established existentialism as the most powerful force in the world of philosophy at the time, demanding the primacy of existence over essence, authenticity in behaviour and thought, and recognition of the tension between people as objects and subjects.

Then there is the field of semiotics, or to use the French-preferred term, semiology, the study of signs, symbols, interpretation and meaning whose origins are from Ferdinand de Saussure. From semiology, there is also the development of structuralism, a semiological method for character interpretation and narrative analysis (especially the role of synchronic and diachronic meanings) for cognition, behaviour, and culture. This would be employed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, Roland Barthes in semiology, Louis Althusser for structuralist Marxism, Pierre Bourdieu in sociology, Jean Piaget in developmental psychology, and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis - more on the latter soon!

The mid-20th century, the 1950s and 1960s, represent the apogee of modern French philosophy. In the wake of the Second World War the existential question of authenticity had a particular resonance; when times

are dark and hard, the inner lights of bravery and moral character shine strongest. It is easy to tend toward authenticity when one's life is relaxed and comfortable; it's another matter entirely when your country is under military occupation by Nazis. As Europe rebuilt, France was able to acquire prestige on the Security Council in the United Nations, whilst at the same time local people in French West Africa, Indochina, and elsewhere were overthrowing the yoke of colonialism and imperialism, which was largely supported by French philosophers, especially and notably those associated with the existentialist school. French nationalists of different stripes - reactionaries, conservatives, liberals - were less supportive in different degrees. As expected the conservatives and beyond to the Right were often outright violent toward the independence movements, and still are. For liberal nationalists the reaction could generate some wry humour: "But you are part of the greatest civilisation in history", they would say to their non-European subjects, "why don't you want to be French?"

A conflict between the old France and the new post-war period reached a crisis point in the famous events of May, 1968, where the combination of massive workplace strikes and occupations were mixed with widespread

student protests. In this case, unlike the French Revolution, the establishment forces were successful in retaining power at least in part by the failure of French Communist Party to adopt a revolutionary posture. They did achieve a ten percent increase in salaries and a 35% increase in the minimum wage, and in doing so, their price of compliance was established - it barely covered the lost wages during the strikes.

The events and especially the failures of May 1968 had a devastating effect on the French intellectuals. Structuralism devolved under Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida into post-structuralism and deconstructionism, respectively. Foucault's historical analysis of power, institutions, and behaviours are notable and laudable, but philosophically the inquiries are marred by methodological vagueness and ethical relativism, and sociologically, agency is neglected leaving a one-sided view of power, ultimately becoming unable to differentiate between truth, power, and knowledge. From Derrida we find a useful method to apply dialectics, especially to literary analysis, Derrida would engage in intentional obfuscation through using words with ambivalent meaning. This playfulness, *jouissance*, would be a feature of post-structuralist and post-modernist thought and there is a great deal of insightful, poetic, and

even therapeutic value in such behaviour. However, at some point it is necessary to actually speak in a clear and honest manner. As ordinary-language philosopher John Searle accurately said in a famous debate with Derrida: "the low level of philosophical argumentation, the deliberate obscurantism of the prose, the wildly exaggerated claims, and the constant striving to give the appearance of profundity by making claims that seem paradoxical, but under analysis often turn out to be silly or trivial."

Rather than addressing the critical issues of modern society, such as what the recently deceased Jurgen Habermas achieved in Germany with "Legitimation Crisis", the French intellectuals enthusiastically moved toward ambiguity and often dubious scholarship employed in writings such as Jean-Francois Lyotard's "The Postmodern Condition", which made some especially fascinating claims about quantum mechanics and chaos theory. This text does include a promising and nascent sociology of the computerisation of society which, unfortunately, was not followed-through in terms of political economy, as Lyotard retreated from the libidinal to the sublime, a sad state for a person who had dedicated fifteen years of their life to revolutionary politics in the 1950s and 1960s. Filling this gap Jean Baudrillard, engaging in provocative and idiosyncratic cultural criticism of

new media and the interrelationship of signs (even trying to build a political economy of semiology) and hypereality, but would engage in the sort of grandiose but obscurantist claims, such as statements that "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place", and even more improbably that postmodernism represented the end of labour, production, and of political economy. The same criticism that Searle made toward Derrida can be applied here; Baudrillard is often more of a celebrity than a scholar.

Perhaps the most important influence on many questionable French post-structuralist and post-modernist thought is Jacques Lacan; the single-most important thinker who has a casual relationship to the decline of French philosophical thought. A domineering, intelligent, manipulative, and charismatic figure, celebrity Lacan was expelled from the International Psychoanalytic Association, nominally for deviating for fixed-length sessions, which would eventually be reduced to ten minutes (without a pro-rata reduction in exorbitant fees) stood . He would physical assault on his patients and, if they were to his liking, seduce them, and had a suicide rate among his patients that was abnormally high. He would call himself a "Master" to his students and, as an example of great irony, broke a long-

standing friendship with a collaborator who wrote an article on narcissism and failed to quote him.

A deliberately obscurantist writer, Lacan would shift his meaning of words he used whilst at the same time arguing that he was engaging in a form of structuralism claiming "the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious the whole structure of language", whilst also arguing that he represented a "return to Freud", apparently unlike other psychoanalysts.

Lacan conflated and confused the unconscious with the pre-conscious, and almost entirely derived his linguistic knowledge from Saussure, even when the rest of the world in linguistics moved on to others, such as Chomsky (Chomsky considered Lacan, "a charlatan"). Lacan, impressed with mathematics but with evidentially no knowledge of the subject, developed "mathememes", with striking inconsistent abstract symbolic representations as simple equations or topological descriptions that made little sense, whether from a mathematical or psychoanalytic point of view, with notorious examples being "Signifier/Signified = Statement" and "[The] torus really exists and it is exactly the structure of the neurotic. It is not an analogon; it is not even an abstraction, because an abstraction is some sort of diminution of reality, and I think [the torus] is reality itself",

and the comparison the square root of minus one (an irrational number) to the symbolic phallus (an unthinkable concept). As much as Althusser should have kept his hands to himself, Lacan would have done better to get his hand off it.

Lacan had a particular influence on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari whose two volume "Capitalism and Schizophrenia" argued that schizophrenia, rather than a mental illness, was instead a "process of deterritorialization" that allowed liberation from capitalist and Oedipal mental structures. Concentrating on the first volume here, sometimes they literally refer to the illness, sometimes a metaphor, and often as a wilful irrational or transgressive metaphorical mode of thought. In the literal sense, they saw this "process" as illustrative of experiencing raw, unfiltered intensities, and Guattari in particular developed "schizoanalysis" to analyze desire and subjectivity. Written in 1972 and 1980 (the latter volume a fascinating example of verbiage applied to cultural studies) these claims are just outright wrong; we know more about schizophrenia now than we did fifty years ago; we know that it is often a debilitating mental illness, one that has a high genetic influence, and one that is quite treatable with medication. The illness does not provide a raw and

unfiltered view of reality, but on the contrary, is characterised by a neurological filtering that generates hallucinations which often produce terror in the recipient. It is, understandably, extremely rare for an actual schizophrenic to see their illness as emancipatory in the long run. The opportunity is also taken here to take issue with Deluze's other major contribution to philosophy; his approach to identity and difference. This started very well with Deluze noting that identity is often given priority over difference. Deluze makes the useful contribution that identity depends on difference but, being too clever by half, concluding invert the incorrect primacy to claim that difference has priority over identity. This sort of approach, where a binary opposite is appropriately criticised and then replaced with something equally wrong, seems characteristic in the decline of French philosophy.

A former student of and post-structuralist critic of Lacan is feminist philosopher, linguist, and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray. Expelled from Lacan's "Freudian School of Paris", Irigaray correctly identifies Lacan's sexist, symbolic (and sometimes literal) concepts of castration anxiety and the dominance of phallus. They engages a useful analysis of language, gender, identity, difference, and a thorough critique of what they coined as

"phallogocentrism". Nevertheless, the taint of Lacan is also present, making some rather wild and utterly wrong statements about factual matters, for example claiming that Einstein had "accelerations without electromagnetic re-equilibrations", and that the mass–energy relation ($E=mc^2$) is a "sexed equation" as "it privileges the speed of light over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us". They also asserted that fluid mechanics compared to neglected rigid mechanics is neglected in engineering because fluids are feminine. Notably, they made no contributions to fluid mechanics and, if they had done made any serious attempt to study mechanics they would discover that the reason that fluid mechanics has traditionally had less influence is simply because it is much more difficult (mention is made here that high performance computing systems and parallel programming have made fluid simulations notably easier). Mention is also made here of how Julia Kristeva, despite being strongly tied to psychoanalytic and post-structuralist traditions, has managed to avoid both speculative scientific claims or gender essentialism. This is probably due to their strong distinction between the symbolic and semiotic, their anti-essentialist recognition of subjectivity being constantly in a process of transition, and their ongoing rejection of ontological collective identities.

Anthropologist, ethnographer, and philosopher Bruno Latour provides another example of making useful and interesting insights but ending up with provocative but perposterous claims. Initially they made excellent criticism of hiring practises in Africa and their relationship to education, With numerous case studies, "The Social Construction of Scientific Facts", which would become foundational for science and technological studies. However, rather than seeking to improve scientific objectivity, Latour and others began the impossible argument that facts were made, not discovered. Likewise in an attempt to critique the Nature-Culture dichotomy, and especially with regard to non-human actors, Latour went down the path of proposing a "parliament of things", something more akin to the legal fiction of corporate persons but raised to a general societal level; a scientific fact, a legal rule, an aesthetic movement, are all "things" that are involved in a dynamic network. Whilst methodological individualism is clearly wrong (we change our behaviour and clothing in the workplace) there should be no doubt who has agency. Latour, however, brings this into doubt through Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

It is possible to delve even deeper into numerous other examples of French philosophy that have gone awry. In many ways, it is quite easy, and actually quite pleasurable, to engage in an ongoing mockery of what has come out from post-structuralist and post-modernist writers in the past five and a half decades, to trepan their heads, open their skulls, and display to all the empty space where their brain should be. Indeed, much of this has been thoroughly explored in the past as "fashionable nonsense" the evocative English title of the French book - equally evocative in its title - "Impostures intellectuelles" from 1997 by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, who highlight the sort of content that would follow the "The Postmodern Essay generator" produced by in 1996 by Andrew C. Bulhak of Monash University. However, as much as a historical review is important for understanding, it is also important to go beyond philosophical culture war with a vintage of more than 25 years. Criticism by itself does not provide an understanding of why French philosophy went into decline and whether or not there is any possibility of repair, and, quite importantly, it doesn't address what can actually be usefully derived from post-structuralist French philosophy.

Two major reasons are identified here as contributing to the decline of French philosophy. The first is the failure to properly engage with the new post-colonial environment and understanding. French philosophers were, of course, sympathetic and supportive of national liberation struggles from former territories. But raised in an environment where being French holds a cultural primacy, they would fluctuate between quasi-imperial ideals or irresponsible abandonment. This is perhaps excusable at the time, but after so many decades, one would expect that a greater sensitivity to post-colonial philosophy, even if on the principle of justice, should be normal.

Secondly, there is the aforementioned theoretical and political failure of the revolutionary moment of May '68. The failure, which should have led to a sober assessment of the consciousness of the French working-class and a redoubling of efforts by intellectuals to understand, both phenomenologically and with authenticity, that experience and mentality instead went down the escapist and abandonment route. Word-games, playfulness, ambivalence, obscurity, sensuality, and bric-a-brac knowledge would also feature prominently in French post-modernist writers, as it became more of an aesthetic movement. Which is perfectly fine, of course, if it is clearly stated as such. After all, the validation of artistry is sincerity, because truthfulness is beautiful. This artistry can even be applied to

scientific inquiries, as Michel Serres (sɛər) illustrated, with spell-binding and even poetic descriptions of natural phenomena and whose "Le contrat naturel" from 1990 is an early philosophical study on the need to address climate change.

If there is a clear advantage and contribution of post-structuralist and post-modernist philosophy that has lasting usefulness, it is certainly their understanding of the post-industrial setting and the appeal of cultural hedonism, sometimes celebrated, sometimes criticised. It is certainly a philosophy that has appeal in contemporary advanced capitalism. Even Baudrillard, who is one of the most determined and illustrative writers of the debasement of grounded meaning in contemporary society, comes from a nostalgic worldview where facts existed, and truth-claims in reference to facts were the means of verification debate, rather than temporary media announcements in a superficial post-truth world.

The situation is not entirely grim for French philosophy. There is a real need to return to material phenomenal conditions, rather than idealism; to take into the account of hermeneutic interpretation and linguistic pragmatics, rather than semantic word-games; to investigate political

economy and moral philosophy rather than cultural criticism; abandon out-of-date psychoanalysis and attempts to build a language around the unconscious which, it must be mentioned, there is no empirical evidence, and move towards investigations that are grounded in psychology reality, such as implicit biases, hidden motives, vested interests, and aesthetic theory which, of course, does have provable therapeutic value. One can start, as a sort of bridge, with Catherine Malabou, comes from the deconstructionist and post-structuralist tradition and certainly writes in that style (or code, if you like), but applies these concepts to materiality, and informed by neuroscience develops the concept of plasticity of the subject, the experience of transformation and what it means to be transformed, in the brain, through trauma, through biological process.

There are French philosophers who are taking the aforementioned approaches. Among linguistic pragmatic philosophers, one includes the foundational work of Oswald Ducrot with their investigations in argumentation and presuppositions. François Recanati, whose contributions on context-dependence in language, thought, and speech-acts are extremely valuable, especially in truth-conditional pragmatics.

Notably, Recanati started in the Lacanian community but left it, finding it

devoid of meaning, and began to focus on ordinary-language philosophy. Anne Reboul combines philosophical theory with empirical work in pragmatics, with well-developed studies in the evolution of language in reference to individual cognition and for community integration. Jacques Moeschler provides formal pragmatic accounts of connectives, semantic implicatures and other critically important elaborations of formal pragmatics, asking the blunt question "Why Language?" Pascal Engel has engaged in pragmatic encroachment, epistemology, and the intersection of logic, semantics and pragmatics.

From the existential-phenomenological approaches, Claude Romano focuses on the transformational effects of major life events and, as a contrast, Renaud Barbaras studies the phenomenological generation of meaning throughout life. Jean-Luc Marion provides marvellous descriptions and understanding of "saturated phenomena", our experiences and consciousness where our senses are overwhelmed, and Marc Richir developed a "phenomenology of the inapparent", the vague and chaotic fringes that exist just below the surface of clear conscious apprehension. Emmanuel Falque explores the finite limits of phenomenology and

existential experiences of the embodied subject, and Francois Raffoul focuses on the ethical dimension of our "event" of being-in-the-world.

Finally, as an engagement between critical theory from the Frankfurt School and French philosophy, Emmanuel Renault (not to be confused with the famous chef with a similar name) provides investigations into social pathologies, the suffering caused by social conditioning, and, combining post-structuralist influences with critical theory, explores the notion of recognition. Stephane Haber investigates political emancipation, disempowerment, and alienation under capitalism along with epistemology, and, as one of those rare individuals, Yves Cusset, as a professional philosopher and professional comedian (their dress sense is certainly in the spirit of the latter), provides insightful contributions on the philosophy of rational communication, art, and humour.

All of these thinkers show that the French philosophy contains more than just the seeds of revival. They have taken a very different approach to the more well-known post-structuralist and post-modernist thinkers, and, in terms of shock value, their works are usually less controversial, but they are often more provocative in a practical manner. In an environment where

post-structuralism and much of post-modernism has runs its course, founded on false assumptions an culminating in embarassment rather than usefulness, the time is certainly right for new developments in French philosophy that both include the traditional contributions of authenticity and experientiality that we receive from the existentialists and phenomenologists, the clear-sighted rationalism of ordinary language philosophy and pragmatics, and, with an emancipatory intent, an informed approach to the new cultural, technical, and political environments of our time.

Lev Lafayette. A presentation to the Existentialist Society, March 4, 2026