THE DECLINE AND FALL OF FRENCH 
NIETZSCHEO-STRUCTURALISM

Eternal return

The most impressive achievement of some French philosophers currently classified as "post-structuralists" has been to have exported abroad, mainly to America, a set of doctrines and ideas which, for the most part, can be fully understood only within their French context, and which had already fallen into disrepute or begun to face indifference in the country from which they originated by the time they reached the other side of the Atlantic. Such episodes of difference are not uncommon within the history of ideas, especially when communication between continents or countries is slow. For instance Comtean positivism reached Brazil at a time when it was already out of fashion in France, and more recently many German philosophers wondered why their French colleagues seemed to be so concerned by their sudden rediscovery of Heidegger's well-known Nazism. When transferred into a different cultural atmosphere, ideas gain new life, to the surprise of those who thought that they were dead. But are these the same ideas? Is the American Derrida the same as the French Derrida that we read as students at the end of the 'sixties? Is the American Foucault the same intellectual hero as the man whom we worshiped during the 'seventies when he was lecturing on Discipline and Punishment and was involved in leftist groups? Is the Lyotard who is the subject of a Lyotard Reader more readable in English than in French? Like the Ship of Theseus, each of these floating edifices has been built out of various planks distinct from those of which they were constituted at their origin, to the degree that it is even possible that all the planks have been removed and replaced by new ones. And perhaps, as in the case of the Ship of Theseus, the question "Is it the same?" does not make much sense.

I shall not try here to assess the various changes which these ideas have undergone in crossing the Atlantic, for I lack the sociological expertise necessary to understand why such and such a topic can, in the American context, strike one note while it strikes another in France. I suspect that the difficulty that we have in identifying the various meanings of some post-structuralist doctrines in their respective environments has to do with one of their essential features: their extremely contextual character, the fact that they do not make sense unless they are variously interpreted by the various groups of readers that they attract, depending on the context and set of interests shared by these readers. Hence also their success: the vaguer and the more contextual an assertion is, the easier it is for people to appropriate for themselves its supposed meanings. The
phenomenon is well known from politics, and in philosophy it is as old as the
Sophists. My main concern, however, will not be the changes in these doctrines,
but with what remains the same. After all, the partisans of post-structuralism
can point out that the very fact that they started a new life outside their eco-
logical origin shows that there is something of lasting value in them, precisely that
core of doctrines which remains the same. Unfortunately, however, this very
core of doctrines seems to be of no value at all.

I propose here to focus upon a limited set of doctrines in French post-structu-
ralist thought, namely those which their authors have borrowed from
Nietzsche. Most of the French post-structuralists have claimed to be
Nietzscheans, and it is this marriage of structuralism with Nietzscheanism
which gives its particular tone to much of French contemporary thought.
Nietzsche is what Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and many poetae
minores of French post-structuralism have in common. It might be said that
there are as many Nietzsches as there are interpretations of him by those writ-
ers, and that it is a distortion of their thought to rank them under this single
heading. This is true, and it is in a sense normal, given the Protean character of
Nietzsche’s thought. But it is not my intention to consider the various particular
interpretations of Nietzsche given by French Nietzscheans, but only to consider
what I believe to be their common core. Although it is true that Nietzscheanism
amounts rather to a Zeitgeist of the whole period from 1960 to 1980 in France
than to a distinctive set of doctrines,1 still we should resist the suggestion that it
is impossible to abstract a set of basic ideas and theses from different writers
and to discuss them in careful fashion. Of course Nietzscheans dislike their phi-
losophy being reduced to a series of axioms or principles, for this seems to them
to be both cumbersome (the real thinker, we must never forget, dances) and
treachery (there is always more to a philosophy than a set of axioms, and to
think otherwise is to misunderstand deeply what philosophy is). But we should
not be impressed by such a priori denials of relevance, for it is precisely these
denials which put the Nietzschean in the position of being immune to criticism.

I shall allow myself another distortion, and take as more or less paradigm-
atic of what I shall call Nietzscheo-Structuralism (NS for short) the views of
Gilles Deleuze, whose recent book Qu’est-ce que la philosophie? happens to
contain many of the views which are here at issue.2 Deleuze is, it seems to me,
the least well known of NS philosophers. This is an injustice, since he is, in a
sense, the most systematic and the one who tried to articulate the most rigor-
ously—if I may say so—the philosophical views of Nietzscheo-Structuralism and
to push them towards their more extreme consequences, indeed to their utmost
incoherence. So this paper will be, for a large part, an indirect commentary on
Deleuze’s book. It is very likely that what I have to say is neither original nor
new, but it seems precisely to be old and banal thoughts to which French Nietzscheans are blind.3

Meaning Torpedoed

Nietzschean-structuralism began its career in France in about 1962, when Deleuze published his justly acclaimed Nietzsche et la philosophie. Nietzscheanism had already had a long history in France, where it had been appropriated before the Second World War (curiously enough) both by reactionary thinkers of the Action Française and by revolutionary anarchists such as Bataille and his group.4 Bataille’s Nietzsche is a mystic, who discovers, through the criticism of all religions and philosophical systems (and especially Hegel’s, as interpreted by Kojève) the experience of madness and of nothingness.5 How could this pure irrationalism be coupled with the prima facie pure rationalism of structuralists such as Levi-Strauss? Presumably because both Nietzsche and the structuralists agreed on the fact that in any form of human activity or thought the point of view of the subjects of the activities and thoughts has no authority over its meaning or significance. It is in this sense that Nietzsche’s name came to be associated with Marx and Freud, as, in Ricoeur’s words, “masters of suspicion”, and as critics of the subjective point of view of actors on their own activities. It is a banality that there is a difference between the objective meaning of a given phenomenon (for instance a social phenomenon) and the consciousness which people have of that phenomenon. The structuralist then has to interpret this meaning. For instance, myths have a meaning which is different from the meaning that people give them, literary texts have a hidden structure which is distinct from the surface structure that people read in them. The structuralist uncovers this structure. But from this purely positivistic idea the NS philosopher extrapolates the thesis that there is no single, objective, or “correct” interpretation. There are always interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations, and so on. As Michel Foucault expressed it in his seminal paper of 1964 “Marx, Nietzsche, Freud”, the three axioms are: 1) interpretation has become an infinite task, 2) if interpretation can never be ended, it is because there is nothing to interpret, 3) interpretation has to interpret itself ad infinitum. Structuralism had been presented from the start as a doctrine about meaning and about the discovery of the “true” meaning of structures through structural or linguistic analysis. But the radicalization of structuralist hermeneutics by NS produced the opposite result:

Thesis 1. There is no such thing as meaning.
Now, *prima facie*, this thesis should not be unfamiliar to an analytic philosopher. According to Kripke, this is the “meaning scepticism” for which Wittgenstein argued in his “rule following considerations”.

It could also be compared to Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation: there is no “fact of the matter” about meaning. But meaning scepticism, and meaning nihilism are two different things. On Wittgenstein’s view (or on Quine’s) it does not follow from the fact that meaning is indeterminate that there is no such thing as meaning at all, or that there are no rules to follow. In general it is not the case that, from the fact that a concept is vague, it follows that it does not mean anything or that it cannot be used. But this inference is constantly made by NS philosophers.

Ironically enough for Nietzscheans who want to “overcome Platonism” in philosophy, the inference rests upon a very Platonic view of concepts, according to which concepts must have sharp necessary and sufficient conditions for their application, so that wherever these conditions are not fulfilled (i.e. almost everywhere) the relevant concepts become empty or contentless. This view of concepts has been discredited in most contemporary philosophy of language from Wittgenstein to Kripke and Putnam, and also in psychology. If they wanted to argue that understanding a language is a matter of interpretation, Nietzscheans would have been better inspired to look at Davidson’s theory of interpretation, which, to some extent could have given them some justifications for their views (although it does not lead to such nihilism about meaning).

Of course the NS is unaware of these developments, and of many other developments in contemporary philosophy of language. In spite of the pretension of NS to produce a critique of meaning, it is surprising how uncritical about the notion of meaning those philosophers have been who pretended to base their basic insights on this very notion.

**Being torpedoed**

If there is no such thing as meaning, why should we look for meanings, why should we interpret? Because meanings and interpretations are the product of basic forces. This leads to:

**Thesis 2.** Nothing exists but forces.

Thesis 2 is the positive ontological counterpart of Thesis 1. So what is there for Nietzschean-Structuralists? In one sense, forces can be understood as *instincts*, in a biological sense, according to a traditional reading of Nietzschean naturalism. But this would conflict with the idea that there are no facts, only interpretations. Interpretations, however, have to arise against something which is independent of them. They have to be interpretations of *something* when they
are not interpretations of interpretations. But this something cannot be a fact, it cannot be an entity or set of entities which inquiry might isolate. Forces are not simply instincts or affects, which would be at bottom dispositions or habits. Rather they are transformations of an ultimate reality which Deleuze variously calls "pure multiplicity", "pure Difference", "the Diverse" (in *Difference and Repetition*), "body without organs" (in *Anti-Oedipus*), the "plane of immanence" or "nature" or "chaos" (Deleuze, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, ch. 2). This pure multiplicity pre-exists, it is there before anything can be thought. This is the way Deleuze interprets Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht*. As Deleuze says, the will to power is not something which the will wants; it is *what* wants in the will. It is a purely affirmative force. But this affirmative original force, which is a pure *qua*le, coexists with other forces, which are not active, but reactive. Thus there are two kinds of forces, both active and reactive. The task of philosophy, for the Nietzschean, is to let the active forces triumph against the reactive ones. In morals, in particular, it is to fight against the reactive forces of resentment of the weak and to promote the active forces of innocence and irresponsibility of the strong. At the level of thought, we find a similar dualism. From the pure *apeiron*, pure difference, or field of forces human thought extracts an Order, an Identity, or a Sameness, and thus loses its True Nature. Only a thought which would respect *Difference* as *Difference* would be an authentic thought about what there is. The history of human thought, and the history of philosophy in particular, is the history of the various attempts to find an order within things which are, in their very essence, chaos, pure difference or "delirium" (indeed Foucault's analysis of *Las Meninas* at the onset of *The Order of Things* carries just this message).

Thus philosophers divide into two camps: those who try to negate pure *Difference* and to transform it into identity in thought or concept, through the discovery of a transcendent order (Platonism) or through dialectics (Hegelianism); and those who are, according to Deleuze, able to think pure *Difference* as it is in itself and to let the affirmative forces go, such as Spinoza or Nietzsche. Deleuze, however, believes that most philosophers are able to approach more or less the very essence of *Difference* itself (a Good Thing), but in one way or another they miss the target, and reinterpret it as an Identity (a Bad Thing). Thus Leibniz comes close to *Difference*, but interprets it in terms of some form or order in the mind of God, Kant discovers the diverse in intuition, but he "folds" it unto concepts, etc.12 The scheme, as you will notice, is similar to Heidegger's insistence on the fact that the thought of Being *qua* Being (the Ontological *Difference*) lies hidden in Onto-Theology and has to be unveiled.

We should not quarrel with this crazy NS ontology as such. In a Carnapian vein, I would be prepared to say that everyone is free to adopt the ontology that pleases him.13 Thus if Deleuze, or anyone else, wants to say that the ultimate
nature of reality is made of a Something which looks much like Eduard Hartmann's Unconscious (of which, as Brentano pointed out, nothing can be said, or, as Ramsey would have said, nothing can be whistled either), then we can let him say that. But I would say in a Quinean vein that we should care about the consequences and the cost of these ontological views. One of the peculiarities of NS in the history of recent philosophy is that its upholders are prepared to defend this ontology at any cost, even at the cost of the most implausible of consequences.

Truth torpedoed

First, there are epistemological consequences, the most striking of which is:

Thesis 3. There is no such thing as truth.

What does or could this mean? This thesis is, in a sense, a corollary of Thesis 1: there is no truth because there are only interpretations. But it is also a corollary of Thesis 2: truth can only be an effect of a certain kind of "dis-course", something which a particular interpreter claims to have attained or to be seeking, but which is only the product of his interpretation, and therefore of the forces which he tends to represent. What is the difference between Thesis 3 and a form of idealism according to which there are no facts, only thoughts and statements about facts? In a sense there is little difference. The idealist Léon Brunschwig, whose views were quite influential in France during the first part of the twentieth century, used to say that Egypt is just the history of Egyptology. Some years later, the philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard held that realism and empiricism are necessarily false doctrines because there are no facts investigated by science, only theoretical constructions. Indeed the structuralists of the sixties were also prone to adopt the view that the nature of reality is determined by the structures—social, linguistic, and otherwise—which are, according to them, all-powerful in our thoughts and activities. Thus philosophers trained within this context would be prepared to accept the idealistic thesis about truth without discussion or argument. Of course idealism is not in itself an absurd doctrine, but the "argument" which underlies the NS idealism is fallacious: from the fact that reality is thought by us, or that it is in some sense "structured" by our thoughts, it does not follow that there is no reality at all about which our thoughts could be true. The NS philosopher, however, is not really trying to put forward an idealistic view about truth, although Thesis 3 comes close to it. What he wants to say is that, as Nietzsche himself said, the very concept of truth is mistaken as a philosophical concept ("Truth is a kind of mistake"). Someone who uses this concept should be suspected of trying to
impose on us a mistaken view of things, indeed his _own_ view (_We_ are good, _they_ are bad). So he has no claim to objectivity. Here the Nietzschean might say either of two things: either the person has no claim to objectivity or truth because there is no such thing as truth, in which case we are led back to the idealist “argument” above, or he wants to speak in the name of a different sense of objectivity, which is given to him by his genealogical method of interpretation, in which case Thesis 3 is just self-defeating, as many have remarked. What the Nietzschean Callicles wants to criticize is the _value_ of truth. But, to use one of his favorite jokes, his criticism must have a truth-value. Typical logician’s maneuver! How cheap! But if it is so cheap, why shouldn’t there be a cheap and easy response to this objection? The only response which the NS seems to have is illustrated, for instance, by Deleuze (Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?, ch. 6). Asking for truth and coherence, willing our statements to have a truth value, either the true or the false, he says, is the typical logician’s move. But logic itself is not normative. Logic, like truth, is something which is willed, like power. Logic is an “effect of truth”; as such it is suspect. So we should not obey logic, because the logician wants to be obeyed: he wants to be the master, like Humpty Dumpty. He wants to be in power! What a villain! But we Nietzscheans resist! We are the true résistants! I caricature only slightly. Once again the NS philosopher is mistaking the value of truth and objectivity, and the normativity of these values and of logic, for a _Wille zur Macht_ on the part of the logician or philosopher who invokes these values. The Nietzschean is right: logic imposes certain obligations—the obligation to think logically, according to the canons of correct reasoning—but this obligation and these canons are not at the service of any cause. They are indeed “weapons” that the Nietzschean is free to use or to stop using, but only, in the latter case, at the cost of incoherence. I have here nothing more to say than what Aristotle says against the Sophists in Book G of the _Metaphysics_. The only thing the Nietzschean has to say about logic is just the childish view that logic is as sort of police-force of the mind. Frege is the Torquemada of philosophy. The basic confusion could also be denounced in the name of a different view of logic, namely Wittgenstein’s. According to Wittgenstein, the “hardness” of the logical “must” is but the effect of conventions that we have chosen. This, it seems, should be grist for the Nietzschean’s mill. But it is not. For Wittgenstein never says that, from the fact that logical rules are conventions, it follows that they are _arbitrary_, and that they could be obeyed or disobeyed at will. They are the products of our “form of life”. And Wittgenstein was utterly opposed to the idea that we could change our logic. Nietzsche’s naturalism _could_, in some respects, be interpreted in that way. But this is not the way the French NS interpret him. Instead they prefer to hold the absurd doctrine that logic does not rule anything except those who are stupid enough to be abused by it.
In his more lucid moments, however, Deleuze does seem prepared to say that the objection he has against truth is not that the concept of truth is an illusion, but that the traditional definition of truth is mistaken. But this is an entirely different matter from what Thesis 3 asserts. Deleuze seems at times ready to entertain the idea that he could be defending a different concept of truth from the classical one, and that there could be a deeper logic than truth-based logic. But he never defines it: sometimes he alludes to intuitionistic logic, sometimes he seems to recreate an intensional logic, sometimes he just equates truth and utility in a pragmatist vein (see below). In general, the Nietzschean is just not interested in the topic of the definition of truth (why should we try to define truth, if truth is a mistake?). This topic, however, has been the object of much attention in the twentieth century. Philosophers have been discussing, for example, whether truth has to be defined as correspondence, coherence or warranted assertability. They have suggested deflationary theories of truth, according to which truth would be only a redundant concept expressible by such truisms as "p" is true if and only if p'. But none of the problems the NS philosopher addresses concern these topics. When Richard Rorty suggested his so-called "pragmatist" view of truth, according to which truth is but a "compliment" which we pay to our assertions, he expressed some form of Nietzschean doctrine. But although he broadly approves of the Nietzschean move, Rorty is more conscious of what is at stake than the French Nietzscheans. They just seem to presuppose that truth, if it is to mean anything at all, must mean something like correspondence (cf. Deleuze, Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?, ch. 5, "science aims at reference", see below). But as any philosopher working on these topics knows, all the difficult issues about truth turn on its definition, not on the fact that one is "for" it or "against" it.

Knowledge torpedoed

The second epistemological thesis, which follows from (3) is:

Thesis 4. There is no such thing as epistemology.

At least here we find some sort of analysis by implication: an essential component of knowledge is truth, but since (Thesis 3) there is no truth, then (Thesis 4) there is no such thing as (pure) knowledge. The reasoning is parallel to that which leads to Thesis 3: there is only a will to truth, and thus a will to knowledge. So there is no theory of knowledge at all, but only a genealogy of the knowledge instinct. This view is most clearly expressed by Foucault in "Nietzsche, la généalogie et l'histoire". There Foucault proposes his programme of replacing "epistemology" by "a doctrine of the perspectives of affects" (per-
spectivism) and a genealogy of such perspectives, in Nietzsche’s sense of a “genealogy of morals”. Trace the origins of the instincts and of the affects which lead to the desire for knowledge and you will have said all there is to say about knowledge. To this programme belongs Foucault’s notion of an *Archaeology of Knowledge*. If you try to read this book as a kind of method for a new style of history or philosophy of science, then you will not understand anything. Foucault’s use of notions like ‘statement’ or ‘discursive formation’, although they *seem* to belong to a rather traditional vocabulary, will be misunderstood if read in a classical perspective. If, however, one reads Foucault’s work as a treatise about the *effects* of discourse, about what Foucault conceives as the decipherment of attempts to gain power through the appropriation of truth, then it becomes understandable. Foucault’s great achievement has been to exploit the epistemology of French historians of science like Canguilhem as a hermeneutic weapon against all knowledge. Canguilhem himself was not completely innocent of this possible reading of his work. For instance in a famous paper called “Qu’est-ce que la psychologie?”, which influenced a whole generation of French philosophers, he attacked psychology by articulating the suspicion that this science might be bent to the service of social order. Foucault took up the idea and applied it to medicine, psychiatry, criminology, sociology, etc., “Knowledge is power, power knowledge.” Truth is willed. But *of course*. Knowledge is power. *Of course*. But it does not follow that knowledge and truth are *only* that. In his last books on the history of sexuality, Foucault claimed to be criticizing the “desire for truth” which was present, according to him, from the Greek notion of *parrhesia* to the Christian concept of an avowal in such practices as confession. He cleverly cultivates the ambiguity already noticed above, between a criticism of truth as a philosophical concept and a criticism of our attitude towards truth. Fregé-Torquemada would have a name for this: this is just psychologism, the confusion between truth and the recognition of truth. Such is the genealogist’s way. Thus it comes as no surprise that Foucault ended his career by calling himself an historian, although he allowed himself the liberty of using hermeneutics, conceived as the unveiling of instincts (sexual instincts of course), an instrument of research which no genuine historian is willing to allow himself.

The traditional task of epistemology is to evaluate our claims to knowledge. For the Nietzschean, this can only mean that knowledge is praised, or desired. This systematic confusion of judgments of truth with evaluative judgments, and in turn of evaluative judgments with the expression of desires, is basic in NS. Once again, the thesis *can* be of interest when properly understood: the American philosopher Richard Rudner once said that “the scientist qua scientist makes value judgments”, and Hilary Putnam argued, against positivism, that truth and objectivity are relevant not only to fact-stating discourse but also to
evaluative and normative judgments. They are epistemic values. But here too the Nietzschean makes a fallacious inference: from the fact that truth and objectivity are values for the scientist, it does not follow that fact-stating discourse reduces to evaluative discourse and that evaluation is only the expression of a desire. To state or to assert that France is hexagonal is not necessarily to praise it for having this shape. The confusion could be illustrated in many ways. For instance, when they discovered (belatedly) the work of J. L. Austin, the French NS retained from it mainly the view that since you can do things with words, every fact-stating assertion is always a disguised order, an injunction from the speaker for the hearer to do something. Therefore (sic!) scientific assertions, which purport to say the truth, are in fact performative utterances enjoining us to obey the orders of the Big Brother of Truth. But of course Austin never said such an absurd thing. He just said that an assertion can be an order. “Please, tell me how to derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’. Well, let me tell you first how to derive ‘all’ from ‘some’.”

At least it could be said of NS philosophers like Foucault that they have been “new archivists”, in Deleuze’s words: they have produced new approaches in the history of science by linking it to the sociology of science and by drawing attention to unnoticed connections between fields which the traditional philosophers of science had kept apart. But, with many others, I fail to see what’s so new about the succession of separate epistemata and the pure relativism which follows therefrom. The fact that Kuhn’s work (The Copernican Revolution dates back to 1960, six years before The Order of Things) may lend itself to such a relativistic interpretation is no proof of its value. More importantly, if we look at what the NS really has to say about science, we will be surprised to discover that it comes down to pure positivism and operationalism. This is explicitly argued (for once!) by Deleuze in chapter 5 of Qu’est-ce que la philosophie? There he tells us that science, unlike philosophy, produces no concepts, but only mathematical functions (“fonctions”). In a Comtean spirit, Deleuze claims that science produces laws, through an ideography whose model is the differential calculus and whose aim is to hook a symbolism to phenomena without trying to find real properties in things. In doing this, science does not move away from the basic nature of being which for NS is, let us remind ourselves, chaos. Scientific functions are “partial observers” on chaos. Thus the true science is a form of “chaology”. (Deleuze, Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?, pp. 122-127) It should not be surprising that the contemporary scientific interest in chaos is in this way recruited to the service of a purely irrationalistic world view. What is surprising is that the apology for chaos, indeterminism, etc. comes along with a positivistic view of scientific theories according to which such theories do not try to elucidate the nature of reality but are only instruments to produce “effects”. I am happy to emphasize the fact that NS, in the
end, in this way pays homage to vulgar pragmatism, positivism and instrumentality, for analytic philosophers in France have so often been accused of being just poor dull positivists and pragmatists. Ironically enough, these accusations are made in the name of a disinterested search for truth, which the positivist or pragmatist is supposed to reduce to usefulness and interest. But as we have seen, the NS is not afraid of being incoherent. He is just afraid of not having the last word.

Consciousness explained away

I come now to what is perhaps the most well-known of NS doctrines, the criticism of consciousness and subjectivity, which, because it is so well-known, I shall comment upon only briefly. It is closely linked with Thesis 1: the conscious subject has no authority over his own thoughts, and to Thesis 2, which leads to:

Thesis 5. Consciousness and subjectivity are just effects (of affects)

As I have said already, this thesis is one of the basic structuralist theses, and the NS can claim no originality in this regard: Althusser, Lacan, Levi-Strauss and other avowedly non Nietzschean thinkers have all proclaimed the "death of the subject". The trouble, as many have remarked, is that the obituary covers many dead. It's rather a family vault. 'Consciousness' sometimes means the Cartesian cogito or the Thinking Substance, sometimes the personal subject which lies behind all representations, sometimes it means representation itself, sometimes moral conscience (from the Genealogy of Morals), the subject of rights, etc. Although the popular and newspaper versions of Nietzscheanism, and sometimes even the more sophisticated ones, confused all these, Deleuze has been careful to distinguish the "classical age" of "representation" as the reign of the individual, the romantic age as the reign of the personal subject (the Self), and modernity as the age of the democratic individual. Post-modernity, as is well known, will be the happy age of the dissolution of the subject. Structuralism also pervades the history of philosophy. But whereas structuralist historians of philosophy like Guéroult confined their objects of study to particular philosophical systems, Deleuze cross-analyses them by multiplying the various figures which are going to act as structures of thought and which are exemplified in many systems (Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?, ch. 3). Never mind if some thinkers or sets of ideas do not fit these classifications. The exceptions are there to confirm the rules. Strangely enough, Deleuze's reconstructions of the history of philosophy have an Hegelian character: he wants to make everything fit into his scheme, and does not allow any contingency in the history of ideas.
And why, in spite of all his attempts to find layers in the realm of subjectivity, do we have the impression that his criticism of consciousness and subjectivity is so massive that it often amounts just to some sort of handwaving in a critical direction? After twenty years of criticism of subjectivity we still do not know exactly what was being criticized all along. In fact the criticism has been so ineffectual that it has been easy to promote various “revivals” of subjectivity, of persons, and so on. Lacan already warned us: the subject is like the joker in a game: it cropped up here, it will come back there. Well, one might say that just the same thing happened within contemporary analytic philosophy: after a period where logical behaviourism, functionalism, materialism and “no-ownership” theories of the self in various forms have dominated the scene, philosophers are now “rediscovering” consciousness, the self, subjectivity. There is, however, a slight difference: those philosophers are dealing with difficult problems: of the nature of qualia, intentionality, the part played by the individual and by the environment in the nature of thought. Some analytic philosophers have held the thesis that an individual has no authority over his thought. But when an analytic philosopher like Dennett tries to build a theory of consciousness which would get rid of the various traditional characteristics of subjectivity, qualia or mental substance, he actually tries to construct such a theory, not only as a philosophical, but also as an empirical, scientifically informed, theory. For the analytic philosopher, there is no “deconstruction” without construction. There is all the difference in the world between doing something (or trying to do something) and saying that one does it.

Th(s)inking Philosophy

I have mainly presented negative themes, for NS presents itself mainly as a critical enterprise. Deleuze presents Nietzsche’s philosophy as a kind of continuation of Kant’s critique of metaphysics, a hyper-critique. But is there anything positive in these views, any happy message? Yes, there is. Once philosophy has escaped the various obnoxious attempts to reduce it to science, logic, religion, metaphysics, marketing, it can finally espouse its true essence, which is art. This is a classic Nietzschean theme which, more than any other, defines the NS enterprise, and which indeed is one of the basic beliefs of French philosophers during the second half of this century: philosophy is closer to art — to literature in particular — than to science. Nietzsche wanted “philosopher-artists”, who are able to dance (“A big ass is a sin against the Holy Spirit”, says Ecce Homo) and to affirm the positive forces against the deadly systems of reason. Thus Deleuze’s heroes are more often writers than philosophers: Kafka, Kleist, Mallarmé, Proust, Beckett, Malcolm Lowry, Antonin Artaud, Lewis Carroll (the author of Sylvie and Bruno, not of a Logic, but of funny logical examples), etc.
All are treated as authors of philosophical ideas and concepts. I myself learnt a lot about contemporary literature by reading Deleuze. Now Deleuze is careful nor to propose the overly simple thesis that philosophy and literature are identical. On the contrary he insists on the specificity of philosophy with respect both to science and to art: science creates functions, art creates conceptual personae (e.g. Don Juan; Deleuze, Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?, ch. 3) and (in painting) blocks of sensation based on percepts and affects (Qu’est-ce que la philosophie? ch. 7). Philosophy does something different:


At last this seems to be an acceptable thesis! But it all depends upon what it is taken to mean. Deleuze rejects all traditional conceptions of concepts (Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?, ch. 2, et passim). Concepts are not to be defined by their extensions, but they are not intensions in the Carnapian sense of rules determining extensions either. They are “intensions” but in the sense of intensities, “centres of vibration” (p. 2), “forms or forces”, but not functions (p. 137), made up of percepts and affects, “blocks” (ch. 7), “chaotic states” of the brain. Concepts are Protean entities: they are but reflexions of the original chaos. In other terms they are anything but representations, meanings, extensions, intensions, criteria, stereotypes, paradigms, or whatever. Needless to say, you can do anything with a concept. Even a bird can come close to doing something with concepts.34 I have already noted above how Platonistic this supposedly anti-Platonistic view of concepts can be. The NS believes that once he has rejected the view that a concept might represent, within a unity, a class of entities which fall under it, and that once he has assimilated concepts to variations of affects, which have no stable meaning—thus being close to metaphors (a Derridean theme)—he has thereby undermined all classical theories of representation. Let us agree with him that the classical view of concepts is false. But he is mistaken on the proper strategy to show this. The correct thing to do is not to assert the opposite view according to which concepts are pure multiplicities and diversities, but to deny the premise on which the classical view rests, namely the idea that concepts must have strict necessary and sufficient conditions of application.35 Now I admit that, in a sense, this is what the deconstructionist does: for instance, by asserting that concepts are closer to metaphors than is usually thought, Derrida “undermines” the classical view of concepts. But Derrida also asserts that concepts are, in their essence, metaphorical.36 On the contrary, on the view of concepts alluded to here (concepts as stereotypes), it does not follow from the fact that concepts and metaphors share, so to speak, a common core of vagueness, that they are both “metaphorical”.37 From the fact that wheat
bread and rye bread come from a cereal which has similar genetic roots, it does not follow that they are the same bread.

Although he insists on the difference between philosophy and art, Deleuze is faithful to Nietzsche in considering philosophy as a kind of artistic enterprise. At the basis of value judgments are aesthetic judgments. Philosophers create concepts, just as artists create works. Philosophical concepts are supposed to have the same sort of singularity as works of art. Indeed they are objects not of discussion but of admiration. When faced with a beautiful philosophical concept (say, Kant’s notion of a *noumenon*) you should just sit back and admire it. You should not question it. Although, for the NS, philosophy is a critique, it has nothing to do with discussion or dialogue (Deleuze, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*, pp. 15, 138), and it has nothing to do with conversation, either (thus Deleuze disagrees with Rorty). Discussion is just a narcissistic practice where one reaffirms the opinions of everybody, of the majority. The philosopher, on the contrary, belongs necessarily to a minority.38 The philosopher is always alone. Nietzsche used to say “Why should I care about refutations?” and “That which needs to be demonstrated is of little value”. The NS does not care about arguments, reasons, intersubjectivity, objectivity. Nevertheless, the Nietzschean does not doubt that his concepts are genuine creations. If someone comes along and attempts to show him that he has not “created” any new concept, or that he is wrong, he will just ignore him. Like the child who plays with time in *Zarathustra*, he is right because he said it. He is forever vaccinated against any kind of criticism.

I don’t want to break the child’s toy. I shall not spend time trying to show how absurd and self-defeating such views are. This has been done by many others.39 But we should follow the Nietzschean’s advice, and look at the effects and consequences. I shall only point to two of them. First, the view that philosophy stands alone, against all knowledge and forms of speech, in splendid isolation, has produced within the French intellectuals what Musil called a “professional ideology” according to which any criticism directed against philosophers (and especially against NS philosophers) is necessarily the effect of some sort of malevolence, an attack against a Sacred Object. It is just (like the present piece, I presume) a form of nasty polemics. It never occurs to the NS that he might be criticized for good reasons, because there are for him no reasons, no truths (and therefore no falsehoods) to partake, only affects. (At least we have settled a basic philosophical issue: reasons are causes, only causes!) Schizophrenia and paranoia are the only alternatives, as Deleuze’s *Anti-Oedipus* amply shows, and as Derrida’s reactions to Searle and others also shows.

Second, the systematic denial of what Kant called *Öffentlichkeit* leads to catastrophic consequences in political philosophy. The French Nietzscheans have, from the start, been careful to separate Nietzsche’s views from their
embarrassing association with Nazism and Fascism. Although the ghost is difficult to hide in the closet, and resurfaces sometimes, it would be unfair to charge them with this too easy accusation. I do not doubt for one second that people like Deleuze, Derrida, Lyotard or Foucault, had never had anything to do with such doctrines. On the contrary they have in many ways been in the forefront of the defense of the oppressed and have often taken courageous positions in political and in civic matters. But, to say the least, they did not have the theory of their practice. Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's doctrine of the “strong” as promoting irresponsibility, of culture as a form of drill, has done little to distinguish the apology for the complete autonomy of the individual from an apology for tyranny, the politics of systematically sustaining minorities as minorities, such as homosexuals, victims of psychiatry, prisoners, dissociated from a defense of democracy, became quite often indistinguishable from the defense of private interests and desires. The politics of neo-Nietzscheanism is but one episode in a long story of political failures of French intellectuals since the Second World War, one which has been commented upon so many times that it is not necessary to insist upon it here.

**Back to Zero**

Foucault once said “Le siècle sera deleuzien”. And indeed it has been, to a large extent. It is not an exaggeration to say that, since Nietzscheo-Structuralism has been influential in France for more than twenty years, at least twenty years have been lost, a time during which the most elementary ideals of philosophy, and indeed philosophy as a professional academic enterprise, have been systematically downgraded and made the object of contempt and suspicion. I have not talked here of the deep crisis of the university during the same period. The NS cannot, of course, be held responsible for that. But the best defense of academic ideals is not to attack them, as the NS did. I anticipate the reactions: who defended philosophy, the freedom of speech and thought more than those writers? Again, their sincerity is not to be doubted. But the least that we might expect from a philosopher is some form of responsibility for what he says. The NS have expounded the absurd doctrines outlined above without batting an eyelid. Have I myself indulged in polemics and caricature against thinkers who are painstakingly trying seriously to think through the basic issues of modern philosophy? But who is serious? Thieves are the first to shout “Stop thief!” Did I beg the question against them by presupposing that meaning, truth, being or knowledge are secure and firm notions which are in no need of being questioned? Not at all. Indeed those notions have constantly to be called into question. But what the NS “experience” has taught us is that the proper way to question them is not by turning the tables, by overthrowing the idols. I have
suggested that there are much more effective ways of criticizing traditional philosophical ideals than by emptying space. But the NS philosophy leaves everything as it is. The wheels of its criticism turn in the void.45

From the start, Nietzscheo-structuralism has failed on its own terms, like the House of Usher. But its decline has been slow. Français, encore un effort?48

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NOTES

1. I have been much helped in characterizing this atmosphere by the papers in Ferry and Renaut (eds), Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas nietzscheens, with which I fully agree, and especially Descombes’ paper, “Le moment français de Nietzsche”, pp. 101-128. See also Ferry and Renaut, La pensée 68, Paris: Gallimard, 1986. Eng. trans. French Philosophy of the Sixties, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990.

2. I have reviewed this book in Lettres philosophiques.

3. It might be said, therefore, that I am here guilty of misusing a form of “paradigm case argument” that so many French thinkers themselves use: taking one author as representative of a whole trend of thought (e.g. Rousseau as the paradigm of “logocentrism”) and extending some doctrines from one writer to other writers. I am well aware, for instance, that most of what I attribute here to Deleuze cannot readily be attributed to, say, Derrida. It is obvious, in particular, as Prof. Gracia remarked in his comments on this paper at the Wingspread Conference, that Derrida would never accept the dogmatic “theses” (1)-(6) below as I formulate them, and that he has probably never accepted them. So I am quite ready to accept that what I describe here does not apply to Derrida in general, although I put forward some connections between the Nietzschean theses (1)-(6) and some of Derrida’s views. The Nietzscheanism characterized here would better be called “vulgar Nietzscheanism”. But it is not obvious, in spite of many denials, that “sophisticated Nietzscheans” such as many French philosophers of the period 1960-80, including Derrida, do not come close to the vulgar form of the doctrine. Be that as it may, Deleuze, in the book examined here, fosters his own sophisticated form of vulgar Nietzscheanism in a quite “metaphysical” tone, and most of the time he puts forward just the doctrines (1)-(6) that are here listed. Much of this exegetical problem comes down to the distinction which one must make between Heideggero-Nietzscheanism (Derrida) and
what one might call Metaphysical Nietzscheanism (Deleuze). The fact that there are big
differences between the two does not mean that there is no connection between the two.
4. Cf. Taguiéff, "Nietzsche dans la rhétorique réactionnaire". On Bataille and his
group, Le Collège de Sociologie, see D. Hollier, Le collège de sociologie, J. M. Besnier,
La politique de l'impossible, and Bataille, Oeuvres Complètes, tome I, Paris, Gallimard,
1971. Some French Nietzscheans, like Blanchot, come from both the reactionary and
the revolutionary tradition.
5. Bataille, L'expérience interieure and Sur Nietzsche. On Kojève, see Descombes,
Modern French Philosophy, ch. 1.
7. See Wheeler, "The Indeterminacy of French Interpretation", where Quine is
compared to Derrida. See my comments on this paper in "Interpretation without Hermeneutics: A Plea against Ecumenism".
9. Cf. Smith and Medin, Categories and Concepts. On the confusion made by the
Nietzschean between understanding and interpreting see in particular Descombes, "Le
moment franzés de Nietzsche".
10. I have analyzed some similarities between Davidson's theory of interpretation
and hermeneutics in "Interpretation Without Hermeneutics".
11. See Pavel, The Fend of Language.
12. See in particular Deleuze, Leibniz, le pli.
13. We could even formulate another principle of tolerance: the crazier an ontology
is, the more tolerant you should be about it.
14. See for instance A. Comte-Sponville, "La brute, le sophiste et l'esthète", p. 69,
and also A. Boyer, "Héritarchie et vérité", p. 24.
15. Deleuze, Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?, p. 132. Here my impression is that
Deleuze is attacking the views put forward in my book La norme du vrai (see his quotation
on p. 134.) But I may be slightly paranoid about this, which of course only confirms
his views.
16. "C'est une véritable haine qui anime la logique, dans sa rivalité ou volonté de
supplanter la philosophie" (Deleuze, Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?, p. 133). On pp. 136-
139 Deleuze assimilates the "image of thought" which is proposed, according to him, by
logic, to a model of opinion or doxa, an "orthodoxy". I am quite happy to be considered
as a representative of common sense. "Critical commonsense", as Peirce called it, is
not an option Deleuze considers.
17. See the epilogue of my book La norme du vrai.
18. See Deleuze, Différence et répétition, ch. IV, and Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?,
p. 123.
19. Rorty accepts, for instance, Foucault's idea that truth is but an "effect of power";
see his "Réponse à Jacques Bouveresse".
20. Foucault, L'archéologie du savoir. Deleuze approves. See his Foucault.
21. Canguilhem, "Qu'est-ce que la psychologie?". The influence of this paper on
Foucault, and in turn on historians of science such as Ian Hacking, has been enormous.
22. Foucault, La volonté de savoir and L'usage des plaisirs.
24. See Deleuze, *Rhizome*. The confusion is also present in Derrida’s commentaries on Austin. I do not insist on this, since it has been dealt with at length in Searle’s well known polemics against Derrida.
25. Deleuze, *Foucault*.
27. See in particular Deleuze’s most interesting paper of 1967, “Qu’est-ce que le structuralisme?”, where Deleuze ties together within his own ontology most of the themes of structuralist thought.
29. See in particular Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* and *Logique du sens*.
30. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*.
31. See Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, and also *La philosophie critique de Kant*, together with a curious text, “Sur quatre formules qui pourraient résumer la philosophie kantienne”, where Kant is presented as the forerunner of some of the NS themes: the formal nature of time, the dissolution of the self, the assimilation of the Good to the Moral Law, the discordance between the faculties of the mind in the Third Critique.
32. According to Deleuze, the last “rival” and enemy of philosophy is the marketing and technology of communication: it not only pretends to have concepts, but also to sell them (*Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 15). Simony!
34. “The Scenopotes Dentirostris, a bird from the rain-forests of Australia, throws from the tree the leaves that it cuts every morning, puts them on its back so that their internal face contrasts with the earth, and thus constructs for itself a scenery like a ready-made, and it sings just above it, with a complex song composed of its own notes which it imitates within intervals, while it extracts the yellow root of feathers under its beak: he is a true artist.” (Deleuze, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* p. 174; my translation)
35. Thus Deleuze criticizes (1991, p. 135) the idea that their might be a “logic of vagueness” (e.g. Zadeh’s fuzzy set theory) because it would reduce vagueness to another form of precision (for instance by introducing degrees of truth). One might agree with that. But it does not follow that there cannot be a logic of vague predicates. For instance if the view that there is a second–order (or third order, etc.) of vagueness is correct, then there is a logic of this kind of vagueness (see my paper “Les concepts vagues sont–ils des concepts sans frontières?”).
36. See Derrida, “White Mythology”.
37. For a theory where concepts and metaphors share this core, see, for instance, Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*.
38. See for instance, Deleuze, “Philosophie et minorité”, and Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*.
39. See in particular the papers by Boyer, Ferry and Renaut in Ferry and Renaut (eds), *Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas nietzschéens*, and also Bouveresse, “Sur quelques
conséquences indésirables du pragmatisme", pp. 48–49.
40. See Comte–Sponville, "La brute, le sophiste et l'esthète" and Taguieff "Nietzsche dans la rhétorique réactionnaire".
42. Descombes, WHICH WORK?? pp. 125–126.
43. See for instance, Deleuze and Foucault's Entretien in the issue of L'Arc on Deleuze (1972).
44. See for instance René Schérer's defence of paedophilia in L'omilé perverti, and the manifesto signed by Foucault and others in 1970, "Cent mille milliards de pervers" (censored by the state censorship authorities).
45. I agree here with Soas's excellent paper, "Serious Philosophy and the Freedom of Spirit".
46. I thank the participants in the Wingspread Colloquium, and in particular my commentator Jorge Gracia, for his excellent comments. I thank also Mark Anspach, whose numerous philosophical and stylistic remarks did a lot to improve this paper. A last, cautionary note: I did not pretend to attack French philosophers tout court, but only those French philosophers who have taken more or less the front of the stage in recent years. I am confident that in the country of Descartes, Condillac, Laplace, Cournot, Poincaré, Duham, Cavailles, Herbrand, Granger, Vuillemin and Bouveresse, the resources exist to overcome the unfortunate parenthesis that I have here painted in broad strokes.

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