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Modern French Philosophy

From Existentialism to Postmodernism

Robert Wicks

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For Ingryd Valentina and Gladys

MODERN FRENCH PHILOSOPHY: FROM EXISTENTIALISM TO POSTMODERNISM

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Preface

Much of twentieth-century French philosophy can be understood as a quest for freedom, stimulated b the problem of understanding one's place in the world as both an individual and as a social being. Th quest was peculiar, though, because it was formulated against a confusing background, namely, a array of scientific and technological developments that appeared inconsistently to be both supporti and threatening to human well-being. The present study, unlike most surveys of this period, wi highlight underappreciated continuities, as well as recall familiar discontinuities, between the vario segments and strata of twentieth-century French philosophical thought. The hope is to develop a mo satisfying understanding of modern French philosophers, by revealing a greater coherence to th intellectually vibrant time period than is usually noted.

It often happens that wide-ranging histories of philosophical thought sacrifice detailed analysis argument for expository flow, and are formulated at a level of generality that precludes readers fro appreciating the argumentative nuances of the philosophical theories under consideration. In light this often-encountered condition, the present critical and integrative exposition of twentieth-centu French philosophical thought aims to achieve balance in a different way: as a rule, we will exami key arguments from each author, and these will be situated within a broader exposition of the author viewpoint. The resulting narrative atmosphere will compare to a helicopter excursion: sometimes w will ascend to survey the extensive landscape; sometimes we will descend to cruise along the treeto for a closer and more rapid view; often we will stop to explore carefully, and with some patience, th intellectual gardens and shapes of the tiny flowers of thought. We will continue in this way until w reach the end of the century, when we will look back to formulate a surrealistic and freedom-center meaning that will comprehend the survey.

French philosophical thought during the twentieth-century is more varied and thematical interesting than some other comparable segments in the history of philosophy, for the influenti writers were confined neither to academic settings in general, nor to university philosop departments in particular. And yet, all of the writers were deeply reflective in spirit. We will consid the ideas of psychoanalysts, artists, novelists, linguists, essayists, literary critics, anthropologis sociologists, and political activists, in addition to those who worked in academic philosop departments. A remarkable feature of French philosophical thought during this period, is that i representatives come from every intellectual avenue, influencing the entire scholarly scene, and mu of the popular intellectual scene. As a testament to their stature and recognition beyond the Fren national boundaries, several of these thinkers, namely, Henri Bergson, Albert Camus, and Jean-Pa Sartre, were awarded or were offered, Nobel Prizes in Literature, which indicates their notable pla within the wider French, European, Western, and worldwide cultural settings.

The historical and descriptive categories that have applied traditionally and conveniently to o complicated subject – 'French thought,' 'twentieth-century thought,' 'existentialism,' 'structuralism 'poststructuralism', and 'postmodernism,' among others – are useful and familiar schema designations. As rigid and abstract terms, however, they also tend to mislead us into overlooking th complexity, multidimensionality and multi-interpretability of the cultural and philosophic

phenomena at hand. To take a small example, consider how conventional calendar markings such a
‘1900’ and ‘2000,’ along with related designations such as ‘twentieth-century French thought’ o
‘twentieth-century European thought,’ can generate the expectation that major calendar divisions wi
match significant cultural and intellectual transitions. We can easily question, though, whether ther
are any clear ‘joints’ within the cultural sphere which naturally correspond to calendar divisions,
only because so many momentous discoveries and important historical events happen unpredictabl
by accident, and on arbitrary dates.

At the same time, conventional manners of marking time are not without substantial influenc
Most people organize their lives according to determinate calendars, and cultural transitio
sometimes issue from the template of calendar divisions in the manner of a self-fulfilled prophec
one acts and anticipates the future, as if a major event ought to happen, simply because the calend
indicates the arrival of a new year, decade, centennial or millennium. The European calendar is o
among many alternative ways of measuring time, and to the extent that our expectations rest upon th
particular structure, they rest, and also noticeably float, upon a socially constructed foundation.

Adding to the complication of understanding a long-term philosophical episode such as mode
French philosophy, is how historical change can be slow and subtle: a cultural group could be living
the dawn of a new era without having a clear awareness of their world-historical place, merely becau
it is too early to realize the significance of what is happening. The widespread social implications th
accompanied the discoveries of the wheel, gunpowder, the stirrup, Roman and Gothic style arche
interchangeable parts, the telescope and microscope, the photographic image, the telegrap
antibiotics, the telephone, the motion picture, the motor vehicle, the steel girder, the airplane, th
television, atomic energy, and the computer, among other innovations, were not clearly imagine
when these items first appeared on the social scene. The full significance of some historical even
emerges only with long-term hindsight, and examples abound of individuals whose later cultur
influence remained unanticipated by the majority of their contemporaries.

Such interpretive restrictions temper every study of the present kind, which aims particularly
comprehend the highlights of philosophical thought in France during the twentieth century. Prevailin
intellectual categorizations have been adopted, hoping that this does not prevent us from appreciati
some of the wider, along with the more subtle, currents that helped shape the century’s philosophic
concerns. In contrast to a strongly interpretive, abstract, and topical history of the period, th
following pages present a selection of philosophical authors who frequently speak for themselves,
allow a more open-ended and revisable conception of the time period. Excerpts from the ma
philosophical texts of each selected author will be quoted and summarized to convey the author
crucial propositions, and these expositions will be augmented by critical reflections. The authors wi
speak for themselves as much as possible, to set the context for drawing independent themat
connections between the ideas as they appear in the original texts.

The selection of representatives from twentieth-century French philosophical thought has bee
determined according to the variably weighted criteria of respective historical influence, philosophic
depth, comprehensiveness of vision, contemporary relevance, available writing space, and possib
future relevance, in conjunction with a desire to illuminate thinkers who have been partially obscure
by traditional conceptualizations of the philosophical era. The authors chosen vary in the degree
which they embody these criteria, but underlying this study is a conviction that the Dada ar
Surrealist movements of the early twentieth century exercised a strong, and still-underappreciate
influence upon French thought throughout the century. For this reason, the study begins with a sho
account of Dada and Surrealism, focusing upon their intellectual aspects as expressed in their vario

manifestos. The influence of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis is also of important note within th
context.

Owing mainly to the limitations of space, some twentieth-century French thinkers do not appear
the following pages with chapters of their own, such as Louis Althusser, Georges Bataille, Simone d
Beauvoir, Guy Debord, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Lévinas, Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Mauric
Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and Simone Weil. My hope is that these theorists will nonetheless b
rendered more understandable, if only indirectly, since the ideas represented by the authors in th
present volume constitute either a close background or an immediate development of their respectiv
theories, and therefore an intellectual entrée into their outlooks. In two instances, I have chosen
include Emil Cioran and Teilhard de Chardin in place of more mainstream figures, because the
effectively represent the extremes of individualistic nihilistic pessimism and global social optimis
in the early part of the century. During any turbulent times, de Chardin’s hopefulness continu
inspiringly to remain both psychologically intriguing and refreshing. And Cioran unforgettab
expresses the dismal view of life whose hard realism touches, if only briefly, upon everyone at som
point in their experience.

This study originated as a guide for students of twentieth-century French philosophy at Th
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and this book would not have been written had it not been for their academic presence and dedicatio
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Auckland, New Zealan
May 200

Introduction: Time, Progress, and Disillusionment

To appreciate twentieth-century French philosophical thought, we can begin by recalling that a gener feeling of progress inspired the nineteenth-century Western cultural spirit. Although the roots of th attitude trace back to the biblical idea that the world is unfolding benevolently according to a divi purpose, in more recent times this sense of cultural advancement was intensified by the seventeent and eighteenth-century developments in scientific and technological thinking. Together these helpe stimulate the industrial revolution of the mid-to-late eighteenth century and they contributed reinforcing a stronger awareness of historical development that emerged near the end of that century.

The wider themes of twentieth-century French philosophy reveal how the nineteenth-century fai in human progress became tempered, if not close to undermined, by the tragic experience of tw World Wars, and by the grim realization that dehumanization and authoritarianism can also follow i the wake of technological progress. Twentieth-century French thinkers became keenly aware of ho both rationalistic and irrational styles of thought can be disfigured to undermine human dignity, eve though these thinkers frequently retained enough optimism to look back upon the nineteenth centu in an effort to find inspiration for social improvement and liberation from what they perceived to b increasingly oppressive authoritarian regimes and doctrines. With such hopes, French thinkers ofte cited the works of German-speaking theorists such as Karl Marx (1818–83), Friedrich Nietzsch (1844–1900) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) – theorists whose influence emerges repeated throughout the complicated history of twentieth-century French philosophical thought.[1]

Among the late eighteenth-century theoreticians who expressed the optimistic view that huma society is inevitably progressing towards a more perfect condition was the Marquis de Condorc (1743–94),[2] who believed that progress towards a thoroughly democratic condition is inherent human nature, and that scientific and technological advances will inevitably assist this progres Condorcet also maintained that we can discover the rational principles of human nature through th science of psychology, arguing that the tools of mathematical probability are the best f understanding human behavior.

Similarly, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) – the founder of 'sociology' and an advocate of a now familiar position which he labelled 'positivism' – believed that the quest for knowledge is essential progressive and scientifically aimed.[3] In the 1830s, Comte claimed that the development of huma knowledge involves a gradual process of demythologization whereby cultural expressions of what ultimately true pass through three stages: first, there is the 'fictitious' or theological stage, typical many religious outlooks; second, there is the 'abstract' or metaphysical stage, typical of mo traditional philosophical expression; third, there is the 'positive' stage, which is expressed by the mo advanced scientific views of the time. For Comte, religion transforms into philosophy, and philosoph gravitates into science. Anthropomorphic and mythological visions tend to become more precis logical, observation-based standpoints, and literary modes of expression tend to solidify in literalistic ones.[4]

With an optimistic spirit akin to Condorcet and Comte, among the most famous and influential

the nineteenth-century thinkers who expressed a faith in human progress, and who also significant influenced twentieth-century French thought, was the down-to-earth materialist and theorist communism, Karl Marx (1818–83).[5] According to Marx, human beings organize themselves in social groups, and inevitably enter into interpersonal relationships that stem from their elementa and natural activities of producing food, providing shelter, creating tools, making clothes, transportin goods, etc. – relationships which when taken as a whole, constitute the economic structure of th social organization. Marx believes that this economic structure of the society is basic, and that we ca understand a good part of any society's legal system, religious system, philosophical system, forms o art, and forms of politics – the society's ideologies, as he called them – as expressions of econom conditions and relationships within the society.[6] In his later years, Marx developed an extensiv mathematically grounded economic theory, and believed that upon its basis, he could scientifical understand social tendencies and thereby foresee the potentials for social transformation an progress.[7]

But Karl Marx was not only an economically focused social theorist. He began as an advocate human freedom who dedicated his writings to the elimination of exploitation and self-estrangemen For Marx, it is of utmost importance that human beings feel at home in the world, and he believed th social conditions and social systems that interfere with this realization should be revealed for th dehumanizing systems that they are. Hence his continuous criticism of the capitalistic system exploitation and the institution of private property, which he believed alienated workers from th products of their labor, and alienated people from one other. As a remedy, and as what he believed t be a foreshadowing of the future, Marx formulated a communal social vision wherein ownership factories and the means of production is shared by all of the workers, wherein exploitation eliminated, and wherein people have the freedom to develop their potentialities, whether these involv writing poetry, going fishing or working at a craft. In Marxist thought, revolution and rebellion are p into the service of human freedom, community, social harmony, and the feeling of being at home i the world.

In conjunction with Marx, further overtones of progress reside in the more sober evolutiona biology of Charles Darwin (1809–82). In *The Descent of Man* (1871) Darwin claimed that huma beings, having risen to the summit of the organic scale, have reason to hope for a still higher destin in the distant future, even though our bodily frames carry the stamps of our less-exalted origins in th lower primates. Each of these theorists – Condorcet, Comte, Marx, and Darwin – shared the gener view that the scientific mode of inquiry, as one based on detached and objective observation, an guided by the use of logical or mathematical reasoning, is the main intellectual discipline for proper understanding the individual human being and human society. In association with their faith scientific method, they variously recognized a developmental, or progressive dimension to human li in particular, to life in general, or to the universe as a whole.

During the initial years of the twentieth century, up until the First World War, advances i theoretical physics, the visual arts, and mathematical logic[8] – radical advances that undermined man centuries-old assumptions – further supported the nineteenth-century anticipation that the twentie century would mark a genuinely new and culturally-advanced era.[9] For instance, the scientif revolution in theoretical physics blossomed at the beginning of the twentieth century, even though had some of its important sources in the mid-nineteenth-century work of the mathematician, G. F. I Riemann (1826–66). Riemann's achievement was to be among the first to develop a coherent, not t mention revolutionary, non-Euclidean geometry that took as its model, not the relationships betwe

straight lines drawn on a flat surface, as had been the tradition since the times of Euclid, but th
relationships between the straight lines drawn upon a spherical, as opposed to a flat (i.e., Euclidea
surface.[10]

It took some time for Riemann's geometrical theory – first formulated in 1854[11] – to be applied
problems in theoretical physics by far-seeing scientists such as Albert Einstein (1879–1955), but th
applications of Riemann's non-Euclidean geometry were astounding, not to mention paradoxical
challenging to the imagination. In the history of physics, it was momentous to discover that this no
Euclidean geometry of curved space – a geometry that had been initially not much more than
mathematical curiosity – more precisely describes our physical universe, in contrast to the Euclidea
geometry of flattened space.[12]

With respect to reinforcing the idea of progress, this realization led to a revolutionary transition
theoretical physics at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely, from the Newtonian conceptio
of physical relationships that had developed in the 1600s[13] to a more contemporary relativistic
Einsteinian conception.[14] Physicists began to speak of a single entity called 'spacetime,' instead
two independent entities – 'space' and 'time' – and they no longer assumed that space and time wer
absolute and invariant. As is known, the sublime power of this new model of the physical univers
eventually contributed to the capacity of the human being to recreate the atomic energy of the su
upon the surface of the earth, thus marking a double-edged, Promethean advance in power f
humanity. Upon discerning the almost godlike possibility of harnessing atomic energy, the faith in th
effectiveness of scientific styles of inquiry was further strengthened.

Comparable in cultural magnitude, and similar in imaginative spirit to the early twentieth-centu
revolution in theoretical physics, was a revolution in the visual arts that stemmed from the French a
world. This, in particular, was the development of the cubist style of painting by Georges Braqu
(1882–1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) which challenged the longstanding tradition
Renaissance perspective.[15] Rather than representing objects as seen from a single observation poi
taken at a single time, Braque and Picasso painted objects as seen imaginatively from several points
once, generating a multi-aspected, fragmented image, where an object's front-view could b
immediately juxtaposed to, or combined with, a side-view or back-view in a mosaic-lik
disconcerting fusion. By coalescing together in a single, tension-ridden image, a set of multip
perspectives upon an object taken at different times, the Cubists artistically represented what it wou
be like to see an object all at once, as if one were somehow located at a vantage point which stoo
above the passing of time from moment to moment.[16]

The enthusiastic attitude sparked by these, and other scientific and artistic developments, was soo
questioned. Although the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century optimism that science would help crea
a better world initially shaped the twentieth-century spirit of the times, there soon arose a distin
uneasiness about the positivistic promise of scientific, and especially of technological, advanceme
in light of a further observation: scientific thinking also has the capacity to dehumanize people and
turn them into mere cogs in the social machine. Such reservations towards science and technolog
were not altogether new,[17] but they intensified significantly as a consequence of the devastation of th
First World War, where men fighting on horseback in the nineteenth-century style battled alongsid
armored units, aircraft, machine guns and poison gas.

Philosophically, we can locate the seeds of distrust towards scientific thinking that sprouted lat
during and after the First World War, to the beginnings of the nineteenth century and the emergenc
of a closer attention to the sheer passing of time. For during the late 1700s and early 1800s, a mo

distinct awareness of time's passing led to a more intense sense of the train of history, and a sharpe
sense of history's linear progression. With this intensified sense of time came an accompanyin
difficulty in conceptualizing time's passing in rational, logical or mathematical terms. The earli
calculus of Newton and Leibniz did much to achieve this understanding, but it could do so only b
regarding time atomistically as a series of infinitesimal points, rather than as a pure flow. A way t
understand time in a manner that captured its continuous nature remained resistant to mathematic
reason, and this was noted by the first theorist in our survey, Henri Bergson.

In reaction to what boiled down to the problem of understanding the nature of flowing time, ear
nineteenth-century theorists such as G. W. F. Hegel quickly developed a new style of logic tha
modeled itself on the melting together of opposites (e.g., in the way metals are fused together in a
alloy). Other theorists, finding the idea of a logic grounded upon the blending of opposites to be eith
too much in conflict with mathematical thought, or, at the other extreme, still too insensitive to th
seemingly non-logical reality of human emotional life, rejected Hegel's attempt to understand time i
a rational, and yet fluid and 'living' manner. Having found Hegel's middle-ground objectionabl
some theorists adamantly retained an allegiance to the more traditional mathematical forms
rationality in conjunction with a commitment to the idea of historical development, while othe
rejected the idea that history has an ultimate goal at all, advocating instinct, emotion, and chao
aligned with a conception of time as a force of destruction and endless revolution.

So during the nineteenth century, alternative ways to understand the nature of time issued from th
growing awareness of time's passing, and these ways were embodied in the scientific rationalism an
empiricism that remained committed to mathematical reason and the scientific method of th
eighteenth century, in the dialectical rationality that took both idealistic and materialistic forms, an
in a more extreme anti-rationalism that appeared as romanticism, instinctualism, and mysticism. A
representatives of these diverse intellectual forces – sometimes appearing in a complicate
intermixture – we can associate the three thinkers mentioned above who significantly influenced th
course of twentieth-century French philosophy: Sigmund Freud, who embodied the scientif
mentality tempered with an awareness of the importance of human instinct, Karl Marx, who
dialectical materialism preserved the idea of a harmonious goal for human society, and Friedric
Nietzsche, whose intense respect for life and instinct led him to challenge the value of pure
rationalistic and mathematically centered approaches to the world.

On the whole, the nineteenth century preserved a prevailing faith in human progress along with a
accompanying enthusiasm for scientific inquiry as a way to achieve this progress. But this faith
progress was never total, since almost from the very start of the industrial revolution, dehumanizin
forces were also associated with the forces of science and technology, and the notion of time itse
remained puzzling. As the century wore on, a gradual questioning of the unqualified value of scientif
inquiry increased, giving rise to more distinctively intuitive and poetic ways of understanding th
nature of existence. So upon arriving at the initial years of the twentieth century, we witness a growin
ambivalence towards science, for almost simultaneous with one of the greatest advances in theoretic
physics was one of the most devastating of wars – a war fueled by the newest technologies
destruction.

Throughout twentieth-century French philosophy, we find an ambivalence towards scienc
expressed in a series of reactions against scientific, and especially technological, thinking – reaction
which, ironically enough, sometimes ground themselves upon mechanical models of analysis th
reflect the very technological mentality under criticism. We encounter repeated pleas for greate
social responsibility, side-by-side with expressions of futility in recognition of human irrationali

and the overall irrationality of the world. Numerous rejections of authoritarianism in gener punctuate the century, some of which are accompanied by an appeal to be guided by the authority o 'language itself,' and some of which deny the absolute validity of all theorizing, while y acknowledging an inexpressible reality beneath the appearances.

PART 1

SURREALISM, EXISTENTIALISM, AND VITALISM

1

The Surrealistic Setting: 1916–38

It is a recurring historical phenomenon that individuals who find themselves initially located society as outcasts, radicals, subversives, criminals, and other kinds of non-mainstream types, ofte later become legitimated and honored as culturally vital heroes who once stood among the avan garde. Once-obscure poets, novelists, and playwrights emerge to assume places at the center of th prevailing literary canon, fringe-party political revolutionaries rise to become world-historical head of state, once-underappreciated musicians move into fashionable current to begin a previous unimagined cultural sound, and people who were once frowned upon by the social elite becom overnight sensations as they are ushered into the limelight. On the negative side, the publ recognition of protest-groups sometimes undermines the protesters by rendering their caus legitimate, as they slowly become redefined, digested, assimilated, and disarmed by the terms acceptable language and acceptable media.

Such was the dual fate of the Dada artistic group which originated in the midst of the First Worl War, during the end of 1915 and the beginning of 1916. This artistic circle established itself in Zürich Switzerland, as an attempt to raise a voice against the ongoing war in Europe, not by arguin positively for peace, but by protesting against the general cultural scene – one that they perceived be responsible for the war. The Dadaists comprehended the established cultural atmosphere, as note in the introduction above, in reference to an alienation-generating amalgam of rationalistic thinkin science, and technology that adhered to the preservation of order, systematicity, and methodicalit They opposed the standing arrangement of the social (dis)order during their time, and they believe firmly that European cultural values were not worth preserving, given how they were fueling the w that was then devastating Europe.

The most frequently encountered label that has been attached to the Dada movement is ‘nihilistic the Dadaists have been perceived, and indeed they perceived themselves, as being again ‘everything,’ as they joked, recited nonsense poetry, danced around on stage in absurd costumes, an insulted their audiences. They embodied outrage and negation, gathering together regularly at th Cabaret Voltaire on Zürich’s Spiegelstrasse, where it was possible to witness escapades such as th following:

> On the stage, keys and boxes were pounded to provide the music, until the infuriated public protested. Serner,[18] instead of reciting poems, set a bunch of flowers at the foot of a dressmaker’s dummy. A voice, under a huge hat in the shape of a sugar-loaf, recited poems by Arp.[19] Huelsenbeck[20],[21] screamed his poems louder and louder, while Tzara[22] beat out the same rhythm *crescendo* on a big drum. Huelsenbeck and Tzara danced around grunting like bear cubs, or in sacks with top hats waddled around in an exercise called *noir cacadou*. Tzara invented chemical and static poems.[23]

The Dada scenes conveyed a feeling of chaos, fragmentation, assault on the senses, absurdit

frustration of ordinary norms, pastiche, spontaneity, and posed robotic mechanism. They were scene
~~from a madhouse, performed by a group of sane and reflective people who were expressing the~~
decided anger and disgust at the world surrounding them. The Dadaists organized a steely tone
carnival in their Swiss café, mimicking the chaotic insanity of the First World War in an effort t
criticize it. But in place of bloody violence, they substituted zaniness, absurdity, laughter and jokes, a
they tried to defuse the seriousness of the general cultural chaos. They criticized the cultural scene b
making light of it, perhaps in an effort to psychologically diffuse for themselves the horror it w
generating.

To comprehend the Dada mentality, we can note its close and usually unrecognized coincidenc
with what Hegel described a century earlier as the 'skeptical' attitude. In his *Phenomenology of Spir*
(1807), he wrote the following:

> [The skeptical attitude] declares the nothingness of seeing, hearing, etc., but it sees and hears, etc.; it declares the nothingness of moral principles, and yet it behaves in accord with these very principles. Its actions and its words continually contradict one other … If likeness is pointed out to it, then it points out unlikeness; and then if one indicates that it had just pointed out unlikeness, then it turns around and points out likeness. Its talk is in fact like the quarrelling of obstinate children, one of whom says A when the other says B, and then says again B, when the other says A, and through the contradiction *with themselves* buy for themselves the fun [*Freude*] of remaining in contradiction *with each other*.[24]

In tune with this skeptical and contrary attitude, the Dadaists claimed that in times of war, the sloga
of Dada is peace, and in times of peace, the slogan of Dada is war.[25] Whenever they encountered
positive thesis, they immediately defined themselves against it. And predictably in tune with this for
of skepticism, self-contradictory phrases sprinkle themselves across the Dada manifestos – phras
which proclaim that everything is false, that Dada is nothing, that there is no ultimate truth, th
everything is absurd, that everything is incoherent and that there is no logic. They are phrases th
present themselves in the manifestos as being true, meaningful, coherent, and logical, while they de
all truth, meaning, coherence, and logic.

When conceiving the Dada movement as a form of active-and-antagonistic skepticism, as a form
playful contrariness, and also as a form of intellectual violence, rather than as a kind of hopeless an
indifferent nihilism, this artistic movement's influence upon subsequent French thought is mo
readily perceivable. We shall see, for example, that Hegel's discussion of skepticism also resonate
well with the definitively poststructuralist conception of deconstruction advanced by Jacques Derri
in the 1960s. A Dada influence colors the 1970s writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as wel
And more generally, a skeptical attitude characterizes the wider sphere of twentieth-century Frenc
thought, insofar as there was a continued effort to secure a sense of freedom by taking a stance again
the establishment by saying 'no' to the oppressive status quo, as it was conceived in various guises.

As will also become evident, such 'anti-establishment' sentiments appear not only in Derrid
Deleuze, and Guattari, but in Roland Barthes's view that language itself is oppressively 'fascist' i
how it determines our styles of thinking, in Michel Foucault's 'negative' conception of power as a
external social force of mental and bodily manipulation, in Luce Irigaray's conception of Europea
languages as being inherently sexist and oppressive towards women, and in Jean-François Lyotard
conception of the scientific establishment as a one-dimensional and exclusionary enterprise th
violently silences its opposition by denying people the very vocabulary in which to expre

themselves. The Dadaists' earlier attempt to free themselves from the cultural array that wa perpetuating war throughout most of the European mainland, stylistically parallels later attempts combat the oppressive cultural arrays that were perceived to be damaging the health of the Wester cultural spirit, namely, the forces of capitalism, fascism, sexism, science and technology.

Given that the Dadaists set themselves against whatever happened to come their way – they even s themselves against the art establishment itself –[26] it is no surprise that the earlier Dadaist manifest (c. 1918) are antagonistic to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, which had been growing in popularit At the time, psychoanalysis remained a kindred spirit nonetheless, for Freud intended psychoanalys to be subversive: although its critics pointed out that psychoanalytic theory conservatively located i understanding of the human psyche within the contours of the traditional family unit, psychoanalys still carried an intellectual and revolutionary bite. For perhaps more influentially, Freud maintain that to understand the human psyche, it is essential to understand human instinct, which he believe has a murderous aspect. This Freudian concern with human instinct led to a theory that, for the la Victorian era, involved a radical, upsetting and offensively microscopic and (allegedly shameles attention to sexual energies and social taboos. Psychoanalysis drew attention to what it believed to b the source of these energies, namely, wild and unconscious states of mind, and this aspect of th psyche soon captured the interests of the surrealists, owing to the connections Freud discern between unconscious energies, and creativity, spontaneity, dreams, non-rationality, and liberatio from civilized norms.

Although Freud eventually refined his theory of mind from a two-aspect 'conscious v unconscious' model (*c*. 1900) to a three-aspect 'ego, superego, and id' model (c. 1923), eac component of which could have unconscious aspects, he characterized the core of unconscious life an aspect of the psyche which he termed the 'id'[27] – in a manner that underscored its social threatening nature:

> [The id] is the dark, unapproachable part of our personality … we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of bubbling excitations … it has no organization, summons up no collective will, only the endeavor to produce the satisfaction of instinctual needs in accord with the pleasure principle. Concerning the goings-on in the id, the logical laws of thought have no application, above all the law of contradiction. Opposing movements exist next to each other, without reconciling each other or drawing energies away from each other … In the id, one finds nothing that corresponds to the representation of time …
>
> One can take for granted that the id recognizes no values, no good and evil, no morality.[28]

Even to the Dadaists, the subversive nature of Freud's theory of the unconscious soon became clear, is evident from later Dadaist statements that praise unconscious energies as being inexhaustible a uncontrollable, and that regard creative energies as being among the chaotic and illogic manifestations of life, as they stand in the same spirit as wild tribal dances.[29] In the waning phases the Dada movement, their representatives admitted the importance of unconscious energies, and the own adherence to contrariness and irrationality gradually intermingled with the sentiments of th surrealists, who, as central to their artistic vision, expressly advocated the need for artists to tap in their instinctive, non-rational energies.

Complementing the Romanian Dada-manifesto writer, Tristan Tzara, André Breton (1896–1966) French poet, essayist, critic, and editor – emerged as the main author of the surrealist[30] manifest during the 1920s. For Breton, Freud's emphasis upon dreams, along with the psychoanalyt

therapeutic technique of 'free association,' was of the most striking artistic importance. Seeking t
explore the contents of his patients' unconscious thought-processes more effectively, Freud ofte
asked his patients to relax upon a couch and to associate freely whatever ideas came to mind. This fre
association was done in relation to some given stimulus idea that was perceived to be central to th
person's troubled mental condition. Freud's therapeutic hope was to generate a cluster of association
that would emerge without the interference of the filtering and censorship mechanisms that a perso
ordinarily has comfortably and controllingly in place. His aim was to stimulate the person to 'drean
out loud, to speak from his or her unconscious, in order for obscured and repressed meanings
emerge, thus revealing more explicitly the inner tensions that were troubling the person.

Breton was interested specifically in the nature of artistic creation, and he found the method of fre
association, or 'automatic writing,' to be a method of pure expression. Using it to stimulate his ow
literary creativity, Breton used this method to generate texts, with results that surprised him in th
degree to which they embodied high emotion, a wide-assortment of images, a vivid graphic quali
and periodic levity.[31] By tapping into his unconscious energies, Breton discovered a more authent
mode of artistic expression – one that conveyed a revolutionary quality as well, for given Freud
theory, the unconscious was also regarded as being notoriously free from social constraint
censorship, reason, and moral norms, and therefore, as an energy well-suited to dynamite the values
the established society within which he found himself.

By locating the source of authentic and liberating thought in the unconscious, and by understandin
dreams to be expressions of the same, the surrealists aspired to integrate these unconscious energi
into the social scene at large to illuminate, and also change, the standing social condition. Henc
originated the term 'surrealist' as signifying a resolution and blend between dream and reality in
what was hoped to be a truer, more liberated, daily condition. In a manner to be developed in lat
years by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Luce Irigaray, one of the surrealist
aims was to show that prevailing social norms are mostly artificial and fragile, and are thereb
eminently changeable and reformable. By dissolving the myth that the standing social order
somehow natural, inevitable, and unchangeable, one opens the door for alternative soci
arrangements.

During the later 1930s, the French surrealist movement transformed to adopt communistic ideals
its desire for social reform, and it framed its revolutionary aspirations in the Marxist terms of a
attack upon both capitalism and fascism, identifying the proletarian workers as among the foremo
powers of social liberation. In general, by blending dream with reality, surrealistic thinking aimed t
stimulate a more passionate and instinctively energized consciousness of the ordinarily experience
world, and it intended to use its thought-provoking imagery to demythologize the illusions upon whic
rested the capitalist and fascistic social orders. Such socially reforming aspirations were shared by th
remnant Dada artists who returned to Germany and who contributed a voice against Nazism during th
1930s; later, they were embodied in Roland Barthes's thought of the 1950s, when he attempted t
identify and undercut the myths supportive of French colonialism.

Contrary to the surrealist's communistic intentions of the 1930s, there are conflicting revolutionar
tendencies in at least one major style of surrealistic expression, namely, that which portrays a
imaginary scene in a manner that makes it look 'real,' as we find in contemporary virtual realit
technology, surrealism's twenty-first-century grandchild. This surrealistic style does not obviousl
render our perception of the ordinary world more realistic, as the communists would have surrealis
serve their interests; rather, it substitutes an artificial reality of different content for the ordinari
lived world, by constructing an unnerving blend of dream-imaginary states and the scenes typical

daily life. Just as René Descartes once questioned the veridicality of his immediate experience ar
wondered whether he might in fact be dreaming, as he actually sat before his fireplace, this virtua
reality-centered, or ‘photorealistic’, style of surrealistic expression can undermine our confidence th
what we are experiencing here and now is the true, natural, or actual world.[32] Here, for instance, t
artists intentionally confuse artistically generated forms with naturally occurring forms such that
the end, a world which appears at first to be natural, can be revealed to be a gigantic stage-set, ar
bodies that appear to be living and breathing, can turn out to be robots. The Dada movement
predilection for the bizarre and the insane comes into play within this form of virtual reality,
photorealistic, surrealism.

This mode of photorealistic–surrealistic portrayal can nonetheless be appreciated as a revolutiona
style of expression on those occasions when it stimulates people to question a particular politic
regime or social situation that has been previously accepted as ‘normal.’ This is the result desire
although they often use other means, by thinkers such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Irigaray – a
of whom argue that our daily world is more artificial and socially constructed, than it is natural
given. The photorealistic–surrealistic style can, as noted, also foster a more private, idiosyncrati
disconnected and alienated relationship to the prevailing social world, for it can simulate a world
madness. And yet, when its devices are known and recognized as such, it can also be used in a merel
entertaining and healthy way, as it plays less deceptively upon the difference between illusion ar
reality.

Despite its various employments, the influence of the surrealistic mentality in popular cultu
throughout the twentieth century – especially in the form of ‘photorealistic’ surrealism – can be see
to have continued long after the art-history-named movement entitled ‘surrealism’ transformed in
an allegiance with communism during the late 1930s in France, and after its representatives migrate
to other countries during the Second World War. If we consider the art-form of the motion picture, fo
instance, examples are present in the 1950s that offer a blend of dream and reality, and even mo
numerous examples of the surrealist spirit emerged thereafter to accumulate to the present day. All
which requires us to consider the extent to which surrealistic thinking runs throughout twentiet
century French philosophy.

To appreciate the presence of this surrealistic spirit in Western popular culture in general – or
whose intensity appears to be sharply increasing – we can consider movies such as *Forbidden Plan*
(1956), *Kwaidan* (1964),[33] *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), *Solaris* (1972/2002), *The Sacrifice* (198
Jacob’s Ladder (1990), *Lost Highway* (1997), *The Matrix* (1999), *Existenz* (1999), *Vanilla Sky* (200
A Beautiful Mind (2001), *Memento* (2001),[34] and *Mulholland Drive* (2002),[35] all of which portray ho
the world of daily life and the world of imagination can be brought into such a close coincidence, th
one’s confidence in what counts as ‘real’ becomes undermined. If such a condition is globalized, ar
one hypothesizes that an entire cultural condition can be describable as ‘surrealist’ (or in mo
contemporary terms, ‘hyperrealist,’ following Baudrillard), then one can wonder, taking Freud
psychoanalysis as the inspiration, whether estimations are in order about whether some governi
aspects of the social condition are operating at a stronger level of fantasy and imagination – ar
hence, at a greater level of confusion and misapprehension of what is objectively happening – tha
previously has been the case.

That the former can be true, that the standing social condition can be regarded as containing notab
disoriented and disorientating aspects, is a central theme expressed by the psychiatrist and soci
phenomenologist, R. D. Laing (1927–89). He wrote in *The Politics of Experience* (1967) that t

process of socialization whose result is the accepted definition of normality, can be construed as a s of ~~variously structured processes that deform human experience, rather than actualize it~~ into condition of maturity and fulfillment. Which is to say that, given the lead of our above examples, wh is accepted as ‘normal’ in a photorealistic–surrealist culture, namely, inversions, confusion transformations, and blends between the rock-hard, physically tangible world and the imaginary wor of social construction, can be regarded as ‘abnormal’ when seen from a more down-to-earth conditio for the latter standpoint tempts one to conclude that the contemporary powers of imaginatio fabrication, and rhetorical ‘spin’ are operating in excess. Those who can perceive the social order being disconcertingly ‘surrealistic,’ are in a position to understand the degree to which the soci order has been artificially constructed, just as a psychiatrist can understand ‘from the inside’ th mental states of his patients, but also contrast those states with his or her own states of mind which a presumably more reflectively perceived and soberly understood.

In the pages that follow, we will note the influences of Dada and Surrealism upon key twentiet century French thinkers, and implicitly introduce the question of whether present-day, early twenty first-century Western culture, to the extent that it displays surrealistic qualities, remai therapeutically open to the style of demythologizing social criticism that was advanced in the 1950s 1990s by thinkers such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, Deleuze, Lyotard, and Baudrillar With this suggestion, we will underscore the phenomenon of how an intellectual movement which wa once revolutionary, can become socially entrenched to the point where it has assumed the role of th status quo, and where, in turn, it stands itself in need of criticism and reform. By pointing out th surrealistic undercurrent in twentieth-century French thought, some illumination, and a potenti critique, of twenty-first-century surrealistic–hyperrealistic culture can be brought to the surface. In th latter respect, this fundamentally historical survey and analysis of the various French theorists serv as a signpost for social criticism in the spirit of those French theorists. By wondering about the degre to which mainstream Western society has become surrealistic, we can begin to discern the degree artificiality, and thereby, the degree of potentiality for revolutionary reform, that characterizes ou present cultural situation.

2

Henri Bergson, Philosopher (1859–1941)

Life and works

Henri Bergson was born in Paris on October 18, 1859: his mother was English and his Polish fath
was a composer and music teacher. During his youth, Bergson received an education of excelle
quality, and after graduating from the prestigious École Normale Supérieure[36,37] at the age of twent
two, he was appointed to teach philosophy in a *lycée*[38] in Angers. For nearly the next twenty year
Bergson taught in various *lycées*, mainly at the Lycée Henri IV, where he worked from 1890 to 189
(ages 31–39). When Bergson was thirty-nine, he was appointed to teach at the École Norma
Supérieure, and two years later (1900) he became a Professor of Philosophy at the Collège de Fran
(founded in 1520), where he worked until his retirement in 1921 at age sixty-two. During the course
his career, Bergson wrote a series of philosophical works which became widely known, and whic
eventually brought him the status of being one of the most highly respected philosophers in France.
connection with this achievement, he was awarded the 1927 Nobel Prize for Literature. At the age
eighty-one, Bergson died from pneumonia on January 4, 1941 during the German occupation
France, after having stood for hours in line in the cold weather, as he waited to register with th
authorities as a person of Jewish heritage.

Evolutionary theory and Bergson's ambivalence towards science

Bergson accepted the evolutionary theory of his time to the extent that he regarded the human intelle
as having emerged from the adaptations of our primate ancestors to their natural environme
Specifically, he maintained that the human analytical intellect is primarily a bodily capacity f
solving practical problems, such as those involved in finding food and in securing a means
protection from environmental threats. This practical and puzzle-solving feature of the intellect
workings led him to question whether this capacity of the human mind is naturally well-suited f
other, more speculative, activities, such as apprehending the ultimate truth of the world.

Bergson believed that the intellect, along with the styles of scientific–mathematical inquiry th
issue from it, may help us physically survive, but he was skeptical about its effectiveness in acquirin
knowledge of the universe's core realities. He wondered whether the mathematical, analyti
practically oriented intellect – the kind of intellect that would be useful if one were an engineer –
appropriate for philosophical knowledge. There was a serious question in his mind regarding th
power of the analytical, logical understanding with respect to its ability to answer questions about th
nature of reality.

Bergson's philosophy consequently explored the powers of the calculating, practical-problen solving intellect (he is comparable to Immanuel Kant in this respect)[39] to discover exactly what kin of knowledge the intellect can provide. He reasoned that if analytical thinking is not powerful enoug to illuminate metaphysical problems, then we must find some other way to grasp the basic truths existence, if they are accessible at all. To begin his inquiry, and to distinguish more precisely betwee the discursive intellect and that part of the mind which he believed can allow us to appreher metaphysical truth, Bergson contrasted two kinds of knowledge, namely, absolute knowledge ar relative knowledge.

Knowledge: absolute vs. relative

According to Bergson, there are two ways of knowing a thing:

> If we compare the various ways of defining metaphysics and of conceiving the absolute, we shall find, despite apparent discrepancies, that philosophers agree in making a deep distinction between two ways of knowing a thing. The first implies going all around it, the second entering into it. The first depends upon the viewpoint chosen and the symbols employed, while the second is taken from no viewpoint and rests on no symbol. Of the first kind of knowledge we shall say that it stops at the *relative*; of the second that, wherever possible, it attains the *absolute*.[40]
>
> When I speak of an absolute movement [i.e., absolute knowledge of movement], it means that I attribute to the mobile an inner being and, as it were, states of soul; it also means that I am in harmony with these states and enter into them by an effort of imagination.[41]
>
> It follows that an absolute can only be given in an *intuition*, while all the rest has to do with *analysis*. We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it.[42]

The above remarks assert that we can acquire absolute knowledge of something only when we ent into it, as opposed to merely circling around the outside of it. We can acquire this knowledge when w become the thing itself, or are that thing in some sense, such that we perfectly coincide with Supposedly, such absolute knowledge does not use symbols, representatives or substitutes of the thir we wish to know; absolute knowledge is a direct, immediate, internal, experiential and intuitiv knowledge of the thing itself.

Bergson's conception of absolute knowledge might seem to be easily understandable ar achievable, and it has implications for how we should address philosophical questions. It implies, l believes, that answers to philosophical questions will not be found in any book. Philosophical answe will only be found in having a certain kind of direct experience that is recognizable as authenti truthful, revealing, and foundational. In this connection, he introduces the idea of sympathy (or, mo precisely, empathy) as a means of grasping absolute truths. If one can empathize with another bein fully, then one becomes that other being, understanding from the inside what it is like to be that bein and thereby dissolving all alienation and feelings of otherness with respect to that being. Achievin this coincidence in sentiment is to achieve absolute knowledge of the being in question.

As we can see, Bergson's focus upon empathy differs from the attempt to understand somethir

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