

# Philosophy's malaise

## Philosophy and its history

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For as long as philosophy has existed it has been intimately concerned with and profoundly perturbed by its history – a history from which it would very much like to unburden itself, without really knowing how.\* In order to specify the character of this discomfiture we will borrow Kant's distinction between the two forms that 'subjective' knowledge can take, according to whether it is acquired *ex principiis* or *ex datis*. Because it treats *principia* as though it were dealing with *data*, the history of philosophy is characterized by a complete blurring of this distinction. There is a permanent lag between questions of right and matters of fact, which, because it challenges rationality – whether philosophical or otherwise – introduces a malaise. In response to this challenge, Merleau-Ponty put forward the thesis of the 'everywhere-nowhere'. This thesis makes it possible to understand why, when what is at stake is philosophy – which can be encountered as a whole in each philosophy, even if under the form of its negation – the traditional dilemma of inside and outside, which translates the above challenge, ceases to be pertinent. Under these conditions, how can we remedy the malaise in philosophy? By striving to live with it – that is, by turning it into the object of an inexhaustible curiosity. When all is said and done, this should constitute the very task of the history of philosophy.

### ABC

Having roused the philosophers of Antiquity, the so-called 'master argument' was at the heart of Leibniz's reflections and still preoccupies philosophers concerned with logic today. It can thus be said to traverse the entire history of philosophy. It is known, according to the complete formulation attributed to Diodorus Cronus, solely on the basis of a passage from the

*Discourses* of Epictetus (II, ch. 19). This is how the 'master argument' is presented by Epictetus:

The Master Argument appears to have been propounded on the strength of some such principles as the following. Since there is a general contradiction with one another between these three propositions, to wit: A) everything true as an event in the past is necessary, and B) an impossible does not follow a possible, and C) what is not true now and never will be, is nevertheless possible, Diodorus, realizing this contradiction, used the plausibility of the first two propositions to establish the principle, nothing is possible which is neither true now nor ever will be. But one man will maintain, among the possible combinations of two at a time, the following, namely C) something is possible, which is not true now and never will be, and B) an impossible does not follow a possible; yet he will not grant the third proposition A) everything true as an event in the past is necessary, which is what Cleanthes and his group, whom Antipater has stoutly supported, seem to think. But others will maintain the other two propositions, C) a thing is possible which is not true now and never will be, and A) everything true as an event in the past is necessary, and then will assert that an impossible *does* follow a possible. But there is no way by which one can maintain all three of these propositions, because of their mutual contradiction.<sup>1</sup>

The interest of Epictetus' manner of presenting the problem is that it generates three types of solution: 'A) everything true as an event in the past is necessary, and B) an impossible does not follow a possible, and C) what is not true now and never will be, is nevertheless possible.' Once we have recognized that it is impossible to have A, B and C simultaneously without falling into insoluble difficulties, these three solutions can be schematically presented as follows:

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1. A and B, but not C, which says that ‘something is possible, which is not true now and never will be’, meaning it is not required that all possibles realize themselves (this is the solution opted for by Diodorus himself);
2. B and C, but not A, which says that ‘everything true as an event in the past is necessary’, since it is not possible to make it so that what has taken place did not take place (this is the solution opted for by Cleanthes);
3. A and C, but not B, which says that ‘an impossible does not follow a possible’, which is the basic pre-supposition of reasoning by *reductio ad absurdum* (this is the solution opted for by Chrysippus).

In a work devoted to this subject, Jean Vuillemin exploits this schema with the aim of bringing the entire history of philosophy – confronted with the examination of this single problem whose universally discriminating character has been postulated from the outset – under the framework of what he calls an ‘a priori system’.<sup>2</sup> From this point of view everything happens as though the various historically registered philosophical doctrines were called to occupy the slots of an ensemble which ideally pre-exists its filling out, and which, by providing the conditions for their logical formatting, allows their content to attain a kind of atemporality.

Now, when Epictetus carries out the detailed presentation of this schema, he has a very precise goal in mind, as he explains immediately after this presentation by developing the main theme of this chapter of the *Discourses*. He supposes that someone asks him which of the positions thereby configured he considers most worthy of being retained, a demand which he refuses to satisfy, declaring: ‘I have received the following account ... for this reason I am no better than the grammarian.’<sup>3</sup> In other words, Epictetus claims that his only purpose was to reconstruct the present state of the question, by adopting the point of view of the one who today we call a ‘historian of philosophy’. For Epictetus this does not entail the need to take a personal position on the substance of the question. That is because, were he to break his reserve in this regard he would, by the same token, be deprived of the distance indispensable to survey the question objectively – or, as we would be tempted to say, to survey it without a philosophical state of mind. In order better to characterize this attitude which he has forced himself to adopt, and which he energetically refuses to abandon – something that does not prevent him, as we shall see, from finding no justification at all for it – Epictetus refers to the type of information that one

can reasonably hope to draw from the attentive reading of an author like Homer, for instance, regarding the subjects he has dealt with: ‘When asked, “Who was the father of Hector” he replied “Priam”. “Who were his brothers?” “Alexander and Deiphobus”. “And who was their mother?” “Hecuba. This is the account that I have received”. “From whom?” “From Homer” he said.’<sup>4</sup> This information can be corroborated by any reasonably attentive specialist of Homer’s work.

Returning to the master argument, which has provided this comparative exercise with its starting point, Epictetus adds the following reflection, thereby raising the discussion onto a plane that is no longer simply technical but partly moral:

If I am a vain person, I can astonish the company, especially at a banquet, by enumerating those who have written on the subject. ‘Chrysippus also has written admirably on this topic in the first book of his treatise *On Things Possible*. And Cleanthes has written a special work on the subject, and Archedemus. Antipater also has written, not only in his book *On Things Possible*, but also a separate monograph in his discussion of *The Master Argument*. Have you not read the treatise?’ ‘I have not read it.’ ‘Then read it.’<sup>5</sup>

Today this display of erudition, whose facetious character is emphasized by its cumulative aspect, can make us think of the innumerable masses of details which concern, in the last instance, only specialists, who aim above all to impress one another and to occupy the most favourable positions in their disciplinary field. These details bear little or no relation to the core of the questions at stake, tending rather to discourage those who would want to engage themselves in their treatment. They saturate current publications in ancient philology, with their flaunting of secondary or tertiary literature, which end up making us completely forget the allegedly primary literature that gave these texts the occasion to exist and proliferate. Epictetus demands of such specialists, whose principal effort seems to be that of inculcating the one whose credulity they exploit by putting him in the position of knowing necessarily less than they do about the question, and of not having already exhausted the immense documentary material with which scientific publications nourish their footnotes – these indigestible notes akin to the table talk of sated diners – and this is what he wanted to get to all along, that they answer the following question:

And what good will it do him [to know all this]? He will be more trifling and tiresome than he is already. You, for example, what have you gained by the reading of it? What judgement have you formed

on the subject? Nay, you will tell us of Helen, and Priam, and the island of Calypso which never was and never will be!<sup>16</sup>

One could not state more clearly the manner in which such a practice of philosophy metamorphoses it into fiction, emptying philosophy of its real substance after it has severed it from its authentic interests.

In the rest of the chapter Epictetus explains, on the basis of this detour through the master argument, that the true Stoic is not the one who, having studied the doctrine in books and having perhaps compared it to others, is capable of quoting the list of solutions that have been provided for such and such a problem – a problem whose effective stakes remain alien to him and which he has more or less lost sight of in the course of the comparative exercise. Rather, the true Stoic is the one who, faced with the problem in practice, placed at the very heart of the storm that unleashes the elements of the problem in a manner impossible to ignore, reacts to it by reaching his own opinion and finding the requisite attitude. This is the attitude which, putting erudition aside, marks out the personality of the true sage, the one who has been able to make the philosophy that he defends in his own name effectively his, by incorporating it, instead of turning it into a neutral and aseptic, and ultimately anonymous, object of consultation. Now the master argument, which deploys its premisses on a purely theoretical plane – in which hypotheses that draw the core of their interest from the way that they are formulated are coldly confronted – is precisely, by its very nature, alien to the demands of a practical philosophy that pursues its ends in a wholly other way and refers to entirely other types of criteria.

It is striking, let us note in passing, that the main source for a problem that has become classical in philosophy, such as the one of contingent futures – which constitutes the typical example of what one could call a speculative problem that consists in confronting a paradox whose elements the pure understanding is required to disentangle – treats it as not belonging to the order of preoccupations of true philosophy. This effectively relegates the problem to the level of a historical curiosity, the mere preoccupation with knowing what Diodorus said, and how, in the manner of his saying it, he managed to set himself apart from positions of the types defended by Cleanthes and Chrysippus. This is a problem which, rightly, does not interest a great deal of people, even though it has already caused rivers of ink to flow.

We have begun by dwelling on this rather particular point with the intention of highlighting that it is not

only recently that philosophy has experienced difficulties with regard to the historian's take on problems, or that it has felt the need to demarcate itself from such an approach in the hope of preserving the authentic character of its own stance. Of course, no one is obliged to adopt Epictetus' extreme position and equate theoretical and practical philosophy, whose reciprocal relation is certainly more complex. Still, it must be admitted that philosophy faces difficulties with its own history, which is the occasion of a rather severe malaise. This malaise could even be the index, or the symptom, of what constitutes its problem *par excellence*, the one in relation to which it defines itself as philosophy – even if this means trying to find a solution for the problem while regularly failing to do so, which in turn reasserts the problem and reinforces its urgency. The first thing to be done, then, is to identify the nature of this difficulty – that is, to understand the fundamental problem which lurks within philosophy interrupting reflection, in the double sense that it both provokes and blocks it.

### Original and reflected history

It is immediately clear that the difficulty in question presents itself in a twofold guise, due to the polysemy of the word 'history'. Like all forms of rational activity, philosophy 'has a history', first of all in the sense that it presents itself as an activity of thought in the process of development, an activity that has already begun and that – to the extent that each of its realizations situates itself in the prolongation of the efforts that preceded it – also presents itself as permanently needing to be continued, making it unfinished, or even unfinishable. But philosophy also 'has a history' in the sense that, whatever its allure, be it progress, decadence or errancy, this development of its activity is accompanied by a movement of reflexive reprise. In the first place it takes the form of a remembrance, which, at a given moment in its own 'history' – as a matter of fact in the midst of the eighteenth century, on bases that had been laid in the previous century when the idea of modernity started to take shape – began to take the guise of an organic knowledge, structured in the mode of an autonomous discipline, with its specialists, its formative lineages, its corpus, its interests, its proper methods and objects, which in turn fully became something like contents of thought. The second sense doubles the first, upon which it is apparently dependent. Strictly speaking, we can conceive that history in the first sense, original history, may take place in the absence of history in the second sense, reflected history. It seems this is what actually

took place up to the epoch of which we have been speaking, but not the reverse. We are nevertheless allowed to ask whether during the entire period in which it was not systematized, reflected history did not accompany the development of original history in other forms, as could be verified, for instance, in Plato and Aristotle.

The question then arises of whether this duplication takes place according to a relation of conformity or full concordance, as we could expect from approaches that are strictly parallel to one another, or whether instead it introduces a lag between the two movements, a lag which opens up a distance between them. Something like a gap, a space in which a contradiction can appear – that is, an occasion for disorder: this would be what, at base, poses a problem in the history of philosophy, once the latter is simultaneously grasped under both forms, original and reflected. Consequently, the real difficulty is not that of understanding that philosophy has a history in a single sense – which is a feature not just of philosophy but of all activities of knowledge, not to mention other human undertakings – nor of understanding how it came to have a twofold history, which, under potentially multifarious forms, also concerns all activities of knowledge, none of which can enduringly exercise itself in a completely spontaneous way without turning back on itself. It is above all the difficulty of justifying the conditions whereby these two histories relate to one another, given that they coexist in a relation of either agreement or disagreement, proximity or distance, such that they either corroborate or perturb one another, or at the very least hollow out a void between them in which an unthinkable unthought comes to lodge.

Let me try to reformulate this difficulty in another way, leaning on the account proposed by Kant in the oft-quoted analysis of the transcendental methodology of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which examines the architectonic of pure reason. Kant begins by noting that every kind of knowledge can be examined from two points of view, one objective, the other subjective. Objectively, it is identified in itself relative to the content to which it relates and according to the modalities in which it relates to it. Subjectively, it is characterized as a function of the conditions of its acquisition by the subject that retains it, as being not only a knowledge in general, stated in the third person, but a knowledge [*connaissance*] which the subject has made its own because it effectively knows [*sait*] it – that is, possesses it in the first person. Apprehended from this second point of view, knowledge, Kant explains, can itself take two forms: either it is rational

knowledge, *cognitio ex principiis*, or it is historical knowledge, *cognitio ex datis*. *Cognitio ex principiis* finds its justification in itself, to the extent that it is developed solely on the basis of its initial principles, outside of any other element of appreciation, according to the modalities proper to an *ars inveniendi*. The validity of *cognitio ex datis*, on the other hand, is authenticated with reference to external elements – in this case, the acquisition of knowledge consists in the assimilation or integration of these elements to subjective ratiocinating consciousness, which has not spontaneously drawn them from its own functioning, but had to ‘learn’ them, by subjecting itself to the rules of an *ars docendi*. It is through this *ars docendi* that *cognitio ex datis* has been instructed, in the framework of a structure of teaching of which these external elements have themselves been the instruments.

The particularity of philosophical knowledge – one can speak in this respect of a veritable paradox – is that its *principia*, once engendered as such by the philosophers who are their authors, can take the form of *data*, susceptible, once instituted, of being taken up again just as these authors have left them. This seems to blur the distinction between the two forms of knowledge: knowledge *ex principiis*, which naturally takes place in the framework of an original history wherein it is formed by its own dynamic, and knowledge *ex datis*, which situates itself in the framework of a reflected history, offering an image that more or less conforms to a model with which the first provides it and whose reality it transposes onto another plane. To put it in yet another way, in the particular case of philosophy, a form of knowledge can objectively be *ex principiis* (i.e. rational), while subjectively being *ex datis* (i.e. historical): this is what happens for instance when I become aware, on the basis of elements of information that are provided to me in its regard, and that are almost entirely borrowed from a bookish culture, of a previously constituted system of thought.

Kant takes Wolff’s system as his example – and this example, for its part, is not innocent, because a dogmatically inclined system is, better than any other, open to an apprenticeship of this kind. But this does not stop one from referring to an entirely different kind of example, like Diodorus’ aporia, as Epictetus’ does – a system that I try to understand by assimilating its premisses as completely and faithfully as I can, premisses that present themselves to me as factual givens and not as principles of law. What exactly, in the case of philosophical knowledge, is the difference between factual data and principles of law? It is that the first pre-exist in forms that are no longer susceptible to

being transformed, since they are nothing other than what their given existence makes them be, and only offer themselves to be appraised or registered such as they have thus been given; whilst the second, principles of law, which relate to a rational examination, are open by the same token to a critique that makes them appear as not already entirely constituted in their definitive form, but still in the midst of elaboration, and as such susceptible of being modified, or even suspended or suppressed. Factual data are intangible, since only the conditions under which they are communicated are, if the need arises, discussable or falsifiable; whilst principles of law can be criticized at any point and if needs be rejected as such for the sake of other principles. In the case of historical knowledge, we are dealing with a receptive, which is to say passive, form of thought, which is assigned to the one who learns from another, that is the student whose sole task is to acquire already elaborated items of knowledge without needing to take part in their elaboration or to take responsibility for it. In the second case, we are dealing instead with an activity of thought that presents a truly active dimension; that is, an activity able in a spontaneous manner to invent magisterially – which is to say to produce according to its own logic, without having to follow the lessons of a master – new truths, instead of being content with replicating and reiterating them as already fully formed and offering themselves to be identically repeated, without any possibility of a rectification that would irremediably alter them.

What we call ‘history of philosophy’ would thus be entirely caught up in this dilemma of activity and passivity, fact and law. It is an apparently insoluble dilemma, which is why it can be perceived as the problem par excellence of philosophy considered as such, a problem which is the symptom of an undeniable malaise. That is precisely what Kant was getting at in the passage from which we borrowed this argumentative schema. In fact, Kant uses it to show that the form of knowledge which, on the grounds of its intrinsically rational vocation, we would be most tempted to relate to philosophy – that is, mathematics – entirely escapes this dilemma. That is why one can, without any problem, that is without perverting its content, learn mathematics and not only *a* mathematics, whilst – in a formula which is well known even though its premisses are seldom reflected upon – one does not learn philosophy, but only learns to philosophize. Why is it not possible to learn philosophy? Because such an undertaking immediately comes up against the need to choose which philosophy one is preparing to learn or teach: effectively, one can at most learn or teach a phil-

osophy, for example that of Descartes or of Spinoza, which is not the same thing as learning philosophy *tout court*. This raises the extremely embarrassing question of knowing what kind of relation there can indeed be between philosophy as such and philosophies considered in the particularity to which the name of their author brings its signature.

There are two equally unsatisfactory solutions to this question. Either one admits that philosophy is what several philosophies have in common, for instance those of Descartes and Spinoza – which implies that it would be possible to extract the principles shared by these two philosophies and on which they would identically rest, principles whose paucity and feeble rational tenor we can easily imagine. Retaining only those points on which Descartes and Spinoza agree and eliminating those on which they disagree, one would, strictly speaking, end up by fabricating a vague rationalist vulgate, but one would certainly not have the elements with which to elaborate a philosophy worthy of the name, which is to say a truly consistent philosophy. Or one admits that philosophy is what cannot be located in any particular philosophy because it transcends the latter’s particularity, in a manner that makes it something apparently ungraspable, definitively unknowable, akin to Kant’s thing in itself, which holds itself behind all phenomena but cannot be presented or found in any of them. We may then hazard the conclusion that what is called philosophy has as much reality as the Kantian thing-in-itself or Descartes’ positive infinite, of which we possess a clear and distinct idea, allowing us to say with certainty that it exists without being able to specify the content of this idea, which, being unanalysable, is also incomprehensible.

Whence the suspicion: what if philosophy didn’t exist, or at least only existed in the form of a *de jure* demand incapable of being transformed into a *de facto* reality? That would explain the inevitable dilution of content that this notion undergoes when we pass from original history to reflected history.

### Everywhere and nowhere

Faced with this dilemma – in which we can glimpse philosophy’s most intimate wound, the index of a difficulty that it will overcome only in an illusory way, a difficulty that permanently summons it and in which we are permitted to discern, correlatively, its *raison d’être* – Merleau-Ponty, in his presentation of an encyclopaedia of famous philosophers that appeared under his editorship in 1956 with the publishing house Mazenod (the text was reprinted in 1960 in *Signs*), proposes the formula ‘everywhere and nowhere’. This

formula serves as the title of the presentation, in which we find a reflection on the problematic relation that philosophy entertains with its own history, or rather with its histories, whose connections are more or less harmonious or conflicted.

Starting with the traditional question, 'How could we possibly see one single philosophy developing through different philosophies?',<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty sets out the main shortcomings of the Hegelian response to this interrogation, a response which, by subjecting philosophies to the dialectic of the already and the not-yet, finally comes down to flattening all of them onto the formalized figure of a single system. Because of its global character, which makes it totally absorbing, this system, whether completed or in the process of its realization, reproduces the particularity of different philosophies by ideally, or even fictively, annulling the properly historical dimension of said particularity. In such a perspective the different philosophies, transmuted into 'moments' of the system, translate its formal dynamic by enclosing this dynamic in a space of pure presence. In this space, every actuality is transcended by the miracle of a becoming or development which, as it progressively advances, suppresses itself qua becoming and takes the form of an accomplishment. Hegel's thesis is effectively that history, as a succession in the course of which different stages negate one another, thus finds in itself the means that allow it to return upon itself and negate itself in the form of absolute negation, the negation which, turning against itself, takes itself directly as its object – which is the condition of its overcoming, of its suppression as a pure and simple negation that is nothing but negation. This rational miracle is also an unfathomable mystery. From its standpoint, Merleau-Ponty writes, 'Truth is that imaginary system, the contemporary of all philosophies, which would be able to retain their signifying power without loss. An existing philosophy is evidently no more than a crude sketch of such a system.'<sup>8</sup> But the failure of such an enterprise reveals at the same time its obverse: the exploded, definitively fragmented reality of what we call philosophy, which escapes any attempt at recollection, and, at the risk of turning into an assortment of opinions, is infinitely dispersed in its manifestations, which can be coordinated among one another only on the basis of their insurmountable differences. Whence the conclusion to which Merleau-Ponty moves: 'There is not a philosophy which contains all philosophies; philosophy as a whole is at certain moments in each philosophy. To take up the celebrated phrase again, philosophy's centre is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.'<sup>9</sup>

It is this conclusion that is distilled in the formula from which we set out: 'Everywhere and nowhere'.

By the same token, the logic of the 'everywhere and nowhere' makes relative, and ultimately even indifferent, the separation between 'inside' and 'outside'. What we call particular philosophies, such as they appear in the space of original history – each seemingly sufficient unto itself – are really closed entities, on the model of a pure inside that would shut itself off from any intrusion or contamination by an outside, with the latter diagnosed as representing a threat of alteration. In reality, what makes a historical philosophy into a figure of thought resembling no other, to be apprehended in its unsurpassable singularity, what makes it in all senses of the word 'unique', is also the principle that disturbs and destabilizes it from the inside, imposing upon it a limit that is its own, the limit that it itself fixes by drawing it out of itself. This limit is also the cause of all its troubles – that is, of the questions that can be posed with regard to such a philosophy, questions that account both for its difficulty and for its interest. There would not, or would no longer be, any grounds to be interested in a thought that appears self-evident, presenting no difficulties of any sort, and about which there is no reason to interrogate oneself. Behind their apparent closure, the most systematized philosophies thus conceal a profound malleability and permeability that troubles them, opening them to expectations that they interpret as external to their own order, while they themselves, through their own logic, call upon the severe necessity of these expectations, without which these philosophies would not be what they are.

That is why it is incorrect to say that different philosophies take place in History with a capital H, which would constitute the field wherein they globally develop. Rather, it is their own history which lies within them or comes to them, a history to which they offer a temporary place of welcome, a more or less stable or fortuitous shelter, which under no circumstances can take the form of an inaccessible fortress, impenetrable to any external assault – had such a thing ever really come to pass, we would certainly know about it. From this point of view, the *Kampfplatz* discussed by Kant – which is the terrain on which historical philosophies face off, displaying their weapons, which are in principle their arguments – is also the space in which they confront their real conditions of existence, some, if not most, of which belong to the order of the non-philosophical, from which these philosophies can never completely subtract themselves. In fact, it is difficult to see how the philosophical could exist independent of the dialogue

it continually entertains with the non-philosophical, a dialogue that represents alterity-to-self, this intimate difference which is precisely what makes of the philosophical something unique and incomparable, albeit not something totally separate. The fact that philosophy is permanently exposed to appearing in the guise of something in which it does not truly recognize itself and which involves an element of undecidability is doubtless a threat to its existence, and the source for it of a painful malaise – but it is also the matter from which philosophy's existence draws its substance and its sustenance. It needs it imperatively, in order to drive the movement whereby it launches itself towards new figures of its realization.

The paradox of philosophy, mentioned at the outset, can thus be stated in the following manner: the philosophical is fashioned using the non-philosophical,



under conditions which mean that the philosophical is permanently exposed, or even called, to undoing itself and returning to a non-philosophical state, following the double game, which we have already identified, of *cognitio ex principiis* and *cognitio ex datis*. Philosophy undergoes the ordeal of this alternation, which provides it with the plot of its history, on the two planes of its original and its reflected history. This is an alternation wherein the exchange of the philosophical and the non-philosophical, which keeps philosophy's truth in perpetual balance, is indefinitely effectuated. That is why, in such a context, the well-known thesis of the end of philosophy – with its multiple and even contradictory occurrences – is just one of the provisional forms taken by the exchange between the philosophical and the non-philosophical, a form to which it is consequently impossible to accord a definitive character. If philosophy has ended or is ending, which can be legitimately argued, it is because it is never done ending, as well as retracing its steps, at the risk of moving on the spot or getting lost. By the same token, philosophy never stops erasing its traces as soon as they are made, or at least it never stops trying to. That

is why everything happens as if philosophy had never begun, which makes it necessary for its undertaking ceaselessly to start again from zero. From this point of view, the fact that philosophy has a problem with its history and is thereby ill at ease with itself is no longer a cause for surprise but rather appears as its normal condition of existence, inasmuch as it is possible to speak of the normal form of a paradox. Philosophy is present even in the figures that seem to signify its absence by confronting it with the risk of that which it is not. There is thus no reason for philosophy to be afraid of its own history, even if it is revealed that philosophy is definitively not allowed to live in peace with its history, that is to produce and represent itself to itself as a completed form in which its secret would be elucidated and its enigma dissolved, sapping for evermore the discourse of history and reducing it to the status of futile babbling.

Consequently, one will say that even though history produces philosophy, it never succeeds in explaining it completely, unless it metamorphoses into philosophy, for example by becoming a philosophy of history. In the text already quoted, Merleau-Ponty writes along the same lines that 'historical "explanation" is a way of philosophising without seeming to, of disguising ideas in things and thinking imprecisely. A conception of history explains philosophy only on the condition that it becomes philosophy itself, and implicit philosophy.'<sup>10</sup> It is this capacity of philosophy to play on the two modes of the explicit and the implicit, and, following Merleau-Ponty's formula, of 'disguising ideas in things' – but also, and why not, of disguising things in ideas – that allows us also to understand why never having begun philosophy also never has to end. One does not leave philosophy. It is in this sense that philosophy is 'everywhere and nowhere', inside and outside, equally where it is presented and where it is absent, absent to itself, to what it was and to what is not it – which Merleau-Ponty once again interprets in the following manner: 'Philosophy is everywhere, even in the "facts", and it nowhere has a private realm which shelters it from life's contagion.'<sup>11</sup> By 'life', we must understand here the life of facts, a life which elevates the productions of philosophy, that is to say its principles, to the rank of facts: facts which are principles, principles which are facts. Let us say so again, there is no serious reason to be surprised or scandalized by this. If philosophy is exceeded by its history, it must not forget that it is in permanent excess of it as well, since it manages to impose upon history its own significations and its problems, which draw their signifying value from being and remaining in

expectation of their resolution. That is why the modality proper to the assertions of philosophy reveals itself to be interrogation, an interrogation which philosophy turns towards both the inside and the outside, against itself and against the external elements that produce philosophy by disturbing it.

### Interminable analysis

We thus begin to glimpse the rather particular nature of the ‘becoming of philosophy’, a formula used by Gérard Lebrun as the title for his superb study of the difficult relation of philosophy to its history, which concludes volume three of his *Notions de philosophie*, published in 1995 and edited by Denis Kambouchner. This becoming is not just the one into which philosophy is caught up by the need to invest itself in the different figures of philosophy attested by history, which it does at the risk of losing itself as Philosophy in the singular and with a capital P. It is also the becoming into which these different philosophies are caught up inasmuch as it is not obvious that they can be learned in the mode of the *cognitio ex datis*, since they offer themselves to permanent reinvention; as if, under the very form in which they are recorded by their texts, they still betoken a *cognitio ex principiis* from the point of view of which they are the objects of discussions, discussions whose course seems as if it will never come to a close.

Kant, who hoped by the path of critique to bring back peace to philosophy, deplored the fact that the entirety of philosophy’s past history unfolds as though on a battlefield where, in all senses of the expression, it displays its divisions. In effect, this history has been marked throughout its unfolding by spectacular ‘quarrels’: the one between the friends of the forms and the friends of matter, at the time of Plato; the quarrel of universals in the Middle Ages; the *Pantheismusstreit* unleashed in Germany towards the end of the eighteenth century, which resonated in France with a delay of a few decades under the name of the quarrel of pantheism; the quarrel of Christian philosophy in the twentieth century – to mention only a few salient episodes in an epic full of sound and fury, in which, as though discussion were impossible without dispute or diatribe, the bitter voices of discord and invective have never been silent for long. This permanent controversy does indeed cast suspicion on the rational, or even reasonable, character of philosophical activity, which naturally tends to transform its debates into confrontations whose tenor seems more political than scientific, and which privileges violence – in the last instance the conflict among wills – over

intellectual persuasion through proper argument and demonstration. Philosophical activity thus tends to value, or allow to prevail, theses which seem as though they can only be affirmed by opposing and trying to destroy one another. To be more precise, even if at the outset they could be presented as personal squabbles pitting individually named and identified protagonists, these bellicose quarrels later propagated themselves into wider communities of opinion, called to commit themselves to this kind of debate, and summoned to stand under the banner of one side or the other, to choose their camp, in the framework of what became veritable field battles in which there was often little hesitation in forcing the dead to take up arms.

Yet should we be infuriated by an approach which Althusser, who played this card unrepentantly, could define as ‘class struggle in theory’? The opposite of the differend, which would emerge from its resolution, would be indifference, resulting from an artificial neutralization of the labour of philosophical thought, required at all costs to stick to a single path of development – something that would perhaps be tantamount to suppressing it as philosophy. After all, isn’t the most effective instrument that philosophy can resort to in order to make itself understood, by polemicizing against it, that of giving itself a more or less fictive or real adversary, the refutation of which furnishes it with a pretext to highlight the positive aspects of its own approach? Can we conceive Theophilus without Philaethes, this other ‘Phile’ to whom he is intimately bound by the discussion he entertains with him, a discussion which is far more than a controversy between extrinsic and independent positions?

This phenomenon has also preoccupied the history of philosophy, when this appellation has designated more specifically the study of the doctrines of philosophers, a study that has itself given rise to sometimes fierce debates, and that moreover has contributed to restoring to this separate discipline, which the ‘history of philosophy’ has become, properly philosophical stakes that do not merely concern the methodology of the history of ideas. It is thus, for example, that in the second half of the twentieth century the interpretation of Descartes’ thought gave rise in France to two fiery quarrels whose echoes still resonate today. In the 1950s, there was the one between Ferdinand Alquié, advocate of a reading of the cogito that one could term ‘existentialist’, and Martial Gueroult, the partisan of the order of reasons. Aside from its often technical details, this discussion was concerned more generally with the question of knowing whether reading a philosopher presupposes the examination of the personal

genesis of his thought, making this thought into a singular mental experience, or whether its single aim is to reconstitute an impersonal and essential argumentative and demonstrative structure that takes its place within a global typology of systems. Then, during the following decade, there was the somewhat agonizing dispute between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida around the reading of a few lines in the first of the *Metaphysical Meditations*, a discussion that quickly became rather heated, even virulent, and in which, as in the previous case, the community of people taking an interest in philosophy was implicated as witness. Starting from the consideration of what on first impression could appear as a matter of detail, this dispute brought to light far larger stakes concerning the nature of philosophical discourse and the events of thought whose site or occasion the latter represents. The immediate conclusion to be drawn from this is that we will never be done reading and rereading a 'classic' like Descartes, to the extent that his discourse is the bearer of intellectual stakes that far exceed the epoch for which it was written. What in effect is a great philosophical work like the *Metaphysical Meditations*? It is not, at least not only, a repertoire containing a certain number of ready-made ideas that would be deposited within it and in some sense frozen as they await reactivation, a reactivation that would take the simple form of a *cognitio ex datis*. It is a machine for forging ideas and arguments, in the form of an active and living reflection, one of whose most far-sighted forms is the dispute or quarrel – which, from the standpoint of critique, leads us back to the demands of a *cognitio ex principiis*. By this very token, as we have already had the occasion to note, the distinction between these two forms of knowledge is fundamentally blurred.

Let us approach this difficulty from yet another angle. In 2000, the medievalist Michel Zink organized, in the framework of the activities of the Collège de France, a symposium whose proceedings have been recently published under the title *The Work and Its Shadow: What Can Secondary Literature Do?* The object of this meeting was the notion of *Sekundärliteratur*, a notion that was initially forged in the framework of German university studies to designate any textual production dependent on a pre-existing textual basis, reputed as 'primary' in relation to it – the question remaining open, of course, as to whether this primaryness can enjoy an absolute standing or whether it is instead merely relative. In the introduction to this volume, which gathers together texts devoted to a theme of apparently only very limited interest, con-

cerning first and foremost the practices and problems of erudition, Zink justifies the title he's chosen in the following terms:

Secondary literature is like the shadow projected by primary literature: if the latter disappears, so will the former. The shadow does not exist without its object. We could even say that it lives in the shadow of primary literature, and even that primary literature puts it in the shadow. The shadow does not exist without the object, but it prolongs the object, confers upon it in turn its reality. Peter Schlemihl learnt it to his detriment. And when painting became able to represent shadows, it made a decisive step in the representation of the real.<sup>12</sup>

Works about which one does not speak or no longer speaks, and which do not fuel or no longer fuel a new textual production that would entertain its living memory – its flame, so to speak – are as if they never existed. Having fallen to the status of dead letters, they risk being lost forever. Hoffmanstahl wrote an opera libretto based on the story of the woman with no shadow, whose body, as transparent as a crystal, is devoid of the possibility of bearing a posterity. Whence the glory and the misery of secondary literature: a subordinate, or even slavish, literature, without which the mastery of the primary literature on which it rests would have no way of being exercised and would remain of the order of an unrealized potentiality, doomed to remain as such.

In order to treat this stimulating question, Zink called upon specialists of literature (like Fumaroli and Compagnon), sociologists (like Bourdieu and Casanova), art historians (like Bonnefoy), but not philosophers, a surprising omission on his part. For who more than philosophers is affected by a problem such as this? As if permanently burdened by the past history of their discipline, represented in the great doctrines that for them play the role of primary literature, but in relation to which they cannot fail to ask whether they are not themselves already secondary literature, philosophers do not know how to get rid of this problem, nor what to do with it. The dilemma of either living with them or without them is apparently insurmountable and constitutes one of the limits against which the philosophical enterprise interminably butts – whence, as we have seen, its malaise. Does not one of the main accusations levelled against *continental philosophy* rest on the supposedly verifiable fact that it has been unable to decide this dilemma, allowing itself to be embarrassed by the weight of an omnipresent reference to traditions of thought that are the manifest symptom of the absence of an effectively living and autonomous

thought? The latter would be a thought, carried out in the present, of a reasoning activity faced with real problems, that is to say problems entirely posed on their own *ex principiis*, an activity which should be able *de jure* to do without any memory, since the latter is bound to slow down or even completely hinder its advance.

This suspicion – which in the first place concerns the very practice of philosophy and presents the latter's attachment to history as the symptom of a veritable illness, and not simply an episodic malaise – equally concerns, on the secondary plane assigned to it, the work carried out by the historians of philosophy. This brings us back to our initial problem. The following question arises: by outliving their authors, and projecting their shadow or their images on history, which leads them to don the guise of general figures of thought connoted as -isms – as is the case, for example, with Descartes when he becomes the warning or pretext for 'Cartesianisms' more or less faithful to the initial spirit of his avowed and declared thought, as it was formulated by him *ex principiis* – are philosophies not doomed to function outside of themselves, in a mode that could be called non-philosophical, to the extent that it escapes the criteria defining its original legitimacy, and, far more than to the demands of a *cognitio ex datis*, responds to those of other principles that renew its content either totally or in part? And is it not the historical fate of philosophy, or at least of philosophies, to become something non-philosophical, or otherwise philosophical, which would perhaps be the form par excellence of their accomplishment? We could then speak of a becoming real of philosophy, and it would be fair to say that philosophies, even when they believe they are interpreting the world, have contributed – perhaps unbeknownst to themselves – to its transformation. This is so even if such a transformation does not go, at least not entirely, in the direction they would have predicted. Moreover, this is the reason why, even when they come from the remotest past, all philosophers partake fully in our present, in which they are integrated as though they were our contemporaries, in forms which are therefore not only those of antiquarian remembrance, melancholically turned towards a past transformed by its lack of actuality.

This takes us back once again to Merleau-Ponty and his reflection on the fact that philosophy pursues its enterprise 'everywhere and nowhere'. This leads him precisely to re-examine the case of Descartes, in relation to the scission introduced into Descartes' thought by the sequence of his interpretations, carrying him away in the movement of his own becoming.

This scission is the one that takes place between, on the one hand, the Cartesian mode of thought that we represent to ourselves as being that of 'Descartes *en soi*', whether it be that of the system or that of an intellectual experience carried out in the first person, and, on the other, 'Descartes for us', the Descartes of history, infinitely deployed and dispersed by the successive attempts at elucidation or exploitation of this thought. This is a history which, as contradictory as it may appear to us, is nevertheless the index of Descartes' fecundity and constitutes, always in the present, the reality of what we gather, more or less legitimately or fictitiously, under the name of Descartes. That is what Merleau-Ponty means when he writes:

Sartre once contrasted the Descartes who existed, lived that life, spoke those words, and wrote those works – an unshakeable block and indestructible landmark – and Cartesianism, a 'wandering philosophy', which necessarily escapes our grasp because it changes endlessly in the hands of its inheritors. He was right, except that no boundary marks the point where Descartes stops and his successors begin, and there would be no more sense in enumerating the thoughts which *are in Descartes* and those which *are in his successors* than there would be in making an inventory of a language. With this reservation, what counts certainly is that thinking life called Descartes, whose fortunately preserved wake is in his works. The reason why Descartes is present is that – surrounded by circumstances which today are abolished, and haunted by the concerns and some of the illusions of his times – he responded to these hazards in a way which teaches us to respond to our own, even though they are different and our response is different too.<sup>13</sup>

That is why 'that thinking life called Descartes', to take up Merleau-Ponty's fine formula, is for us today the object of a reflection which exceeds it and makes it more a motive for perplexity than a reassuring reference, appropriately enclosed in the limits that would preserve its perfect self-coherence. Descartes claimed to have attained certainty by emerging triumphant from the ordeal of doubt: that does not stop his certainties from being doubtful for us, in the sense that we will never be done interrogating their content. Now this difficult, even tragic, and in any case paradoxical condition is the one shared by all philosophers worthy of the name, philosophers who commune in the uncertainty of their certainties, which is also the certainty of their uncertainties. Let us quote Merleau-Ponty one last time:

Even if we consider only one philosopher, he swarms with inner differences and it is through

these discordancies that we must find his ‘total’ meaning. If I have difficulty finding the ‘fundamental choice’ of the absolute Descartes Sartre spoke of, the man who lived and wrote once and for all three centuries ago, it is perhaps because Descartes himself did not at any moment coincide with Descartes. What he is in our eyes according to the texts, he was only bit by bit through his reaction upon himself. And the idea of grasping him in his entirety at his source is perhaps an illusory one if Descartes – instead of being some ‘central intuition’, an eternal character, and an absolute individual – is this discourse, hesitant at first, which is affirmed through experience and use, which is apprised of itself little by little, and which never wholly stops intending the very thing it has resolutely excluded. A philosophy is not chosen like an object. Choice does not suppress what is not chosen, but sustains it marginally. The same Descartes who distinguishes so well between what arises from pure understanding and what pertains to the practice of life happens to map out at the same time the program for a philosophy which was to take as its principal theme the cohesion of the very orders he distinguishes. Philosophical choice (and doubtless all other choice) is never simple. And it is through their ambiguity that philosophy and history touch.<sup>14</sup>

What Merleau-Ponty calls ‘the programme for a philosophy which was to take as its principal theme the cohesion of the very orders [Descartes] distinguishes’ is the very programme that Merleau-Ponty himself took up qua original philosopher who places himself within the approach of a *cognitio ex principiis*, remaining at the same time an attentive and demanding reader of Descartes, in whom he does not just see the object offered to a *cognitio ex datis*. That is because he reasons from Descartes – that is, on the basis of the problem or network of problems that for us bears the name of Descartes. He does so by attempting to measure what constitutes the properly immeasurable character of Descartes, the immeasurableness that impels his discourse beyond his initial explicit choices and turns it into a discourse replete with implicit indications, a discourse susceptible to having a history that would endlessly repeat its enigmas, exploring the secret which, doubtless forever, must remain hidden beneath the name of Descartes.

To conclude what aims to be the most faithful, albeit fatally incomplete, evocation of a problem, and not the presentation of its eventual resolution, inasmuch as the latter can be rationally envisaged, let us refer to the analysis of the ‘Becoming of philosophy’, proposed by Gérard Lebrun. Lebrun examines the project of a ‘philosophizing history of philosophy’ such as, it seems, it was formulated for the first time by Kant in

some working notes written in 1793. He then excavates the antinomies that the realization of such a project inevitably confronts. This seems to put the representation of the becoming of philosophy on the side of what could be termed a merely ‘philosophized’ history of philosophy. A recognition of this kind seems reason enough to despair. What is the philosopher left with to sustain an interest in the history of philosophy and in philosophy itself such as it presents itself through its history? To such a question, Lebrun proposes what appears as a modest answer: it is the spirit of curiosity, he says, which justifies the attention that we persist in lavishing on the texts of the tradition, and which leads us to see in them something other than an archive indifferent to the need to philosophize – a need which, to satisfy itself, should supposedly be able to do without documents. In effect, we will never be done asking ourselves questions about these texts, which in turn stimulate rather than sap our invention. Yes indeed, philosophy, as revealed by the contradictory movement of its history, is an extraordinarily curious and uneasy thing. Let us repudiate the vain illusion of an intellectual comfort that would put an end to this malaise by satisfying our curiosity in such a way as to exhaust its content. Let us continue to be occupied and preoccupied with philosophy, knowing full well that this undertaking which neither begins nor ends will never reach a verifiable result. Let us never finish entertaining and propagating this malaise within philosophy.

Translated by Alberto Toscano

## Notes

Thanks to John Sellars for the Epictetus references. All notes are the translator’s.

1. Epictetus, *Discourses*, ed. and trans. W.A. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1925–28; vol. 1, pp. 359–61.
2. *Contingence ou Nécessité. L’aporie de Diodore et les systèmes philosophiques*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1982, p. 61.
3. *Discourses*, p. 361.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 361–3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Everywhere and Nowhere’, in *Signs*, trans. R.C. McCleary, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1964, p. 127; translation modified.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
12. *L’œuvre et son ombre. Que peut la littérature secondaire?*, Fallois, Paris, 2002, p. 11.
13. ‘Everywhere and Nowhere’, p. 128.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 131–2.