PART I

The Philosophers of the Third Republic (1890–1940)

CHAPTER 1

Fin-de-siècle: the professors of the Republic

> Abandoning the study of John Stuart Mill only for that of Lachelier, the less she believed in the reality of the external world, the more desperately she sought to establish herself in a good position in it before she died.
>
> (Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, IV, 438)

PHILOSOPHY AND THE NEW UNIVERSITY

Writing just after the end of World War I, an acute observer of the French philosophical scene judged that "philosophical research had never been more abundant, more serious, and more intense among us than in the last thirty years".[1] This flowering was due to the place of philosophy in the new educational system set up by the Third Republic in the wake of the demoralizing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The French had been humiliated by the capture of Napoleon III at Sedan, devastated by the long siege of Paris, and terrified by what most of the bourgeoisie saw as seventy-three days of anarchy under the radical socialism of the Commune. Much of the new Republic's effort at spiritual restoration was driven by a rejection of the traditional values of institutional religion, which it aimed to replace with an enlightened secular worldview. A principal vehicle of this enterprise was educational reform and specifically the building of a university system dedicated to the ideals of science, reason, and humanism. Albert Thibaudet highlighted the importance of this reform when he labeled the Third Republic "the republic of professors".[2]

Philosophy was at the center of the new educational regime, exerting its influence through the famous "classe de philosophie"

[1] Dominique Parodi, *La philosophie contemporaine en France*, 9–10.
[2] In his *La république des professeurs*.

that was the main requirement for students in French public high schools (lycées) during their last year (when they were seventeen to eighteen years old).[3] The class's modern history went back to regulations of 1809 that reestablished the medieval divisions of philosophy into logic, metaphysics, and morality and stipulated that it be studied for eight hours a week. There was also introduced a division treating the history of philosophy. Around 1830, Victor Cousin[4] added psychology, which soon became the most important element of the curriculum. Also, where the rules of 1809 had given merely a set of recommendations for teaching and a list of authors, Cousin worked out a detailed required structure. The idea was to cover the whole of philosophy, both its problems and its history, in a year-long grand synthesis. Cousin also began the process of laicizing philosophy, by reducing the role of religious questions. His structure stayed in place until philosophy was eliminated from the curriculum of the lycées in 1853 under the Second Empire.

In 1863 philosophy was restored to the lycées and became a required subject for all students in the last year of secondary education.[5] During the First Empire, a lycée education became required for many civil service positions. This meant that, after 1863, the "classe de philosophie" was extremely important for French secondary students, since it was now a key topic on the exam they had to pass to receive their degree (the *baccalauréat*) and be eligible for state employment. Its importance was further emphasized by the reform of 1874, which made philosophy and rhetoric separate divisions, emphasizing philosophy's autonomy and distinctiveness. Moreover, since philosophy was taught only in a single year – the final one – it was presented as the culmination and synthesis of all that had gone before, the "crown", as it was inevitably put, of secondary education. It was not surprising that philosophy soon replaced rhetoric as the course with the highest intellectual status

[3] For an overview of the structure of the French educational system, see the Appendix.

[4] Victor Cousin (1792–1867) was minister of education in the 1830s and 1840s under the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe. His own philosophical position, which he called eclecticism, tried to synthesize French philosophical psychology (deriving from Maine de Biran) with empiricism, Scottish realism, and German idealism. During the mid-nineteenth century, eclecticism had the status of an "official" philosophy in the French university. Cousin was also important as an editor, translator, and historian of philosophy.

[5] For a general discussion of French education in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Fritz Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge: French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective, 1890–1920*. On the role of philosophy in France during this period, see Jean-Louis Fabiani, *Les philosophes de la république*.

and, accordingly, attracted a large number of the brightest students interested in secondary teaching.

Since the main goal of the university teaching of philosophy was to produce teachers for the lycée philosophy class, there was considerable continuity between the content of the two programs. At the same time, the qualifying examination (the *agrégation*) for those who wanted to teach philosophy in the lycées was geared to university-level research rather than merely what we would think of as high-school teaching. The result was a large number of talented lycée teachers with a high level of specialist knowledge in philosophy; and, of course, the best of these went on to take doctorates in philosophy and become university professors.

The French educational system thus gave philosophy a highly privileged place in the Third Republic. There was an audience composed of a general public educated in the rudiments of philosophy, as well as a substantial number of secondary school teachers with specialist knowledge of the subject; and there was a highly elite group of university professors engaged in philosophical research. Accordingly, a faculty of philosophy presided over the "republic of professors". Thibaudet falls into religious language in trying to express the sublimity of the philosopher's role: "The philosophical vocation embodies a principle analogous to a priestly vocation. Anyone who has prepared for the *agrégation* in philosophy . . . has been touched, at some point, like a seminarian, by the idea that the highest degree of human grandeur is a life consecrated to the service of the mind and that the University lets one compete for positions that make it possible to render this service."[6]

Nevertheless, as Ernst Curtius (writing in 1930) emphasized, French culture remained essentially literary. The dominant figures were writers such as Zola and Anatole France, who were outside the university system; and philosophical writing itself was literary in the sense that, as Bergson said, there was "no philosophical idea, no matter how profound or subtle, that could not be expressed in the language of everyday life [*la langue de tout le monde*]".[7] Curtius, imbued with German idealism's conception of philosophy, saw the

[6] *La république des professeurs*, 139.

[7] Cited by Ernst Curtius, *The Civilization of France: An Introduction*, 100. Fabiani notes, however, that "during the period 1880–1914 there were no close connections between professors of philosophy and avant-garde writers" (*Les philosophes de la république*, 115). As we shall see, that changes with the generation of the 1930s.

French as surrendering the philosophical enterprise "to literary form and average intelligence" and thought this was why, although "in Germany intellectual culture may be philosophical, in France it can be literary only".[8]

The university philosophy of the early Third Republic (before World War I) had both the strengths and the weaknesses of its privileged status. The high level of talent and the informed critical audience sustained a professional solidity that contemporaries favorably (and rightly) contrasted to the eloquent vagaries of Victor Cousin's eclecticism and Hyppolite Taine's positivism, which had dominated the Second Empire. Also, universal philosophical education and the high social position and connections of professors gave philosophy a strong influence on the general French culture. Scientists such as Henri Poincaré (brother-in-law of the philosopher Émile Boutroux) showed a particular interest in philosophical issues. Marcel Proust (a groomsman at Bergson's wedding), was a friend of Léon Brunschvicg, his fellow lycée-student in the philosophy course of Alphonse Darlu. The strong philosophical content of the writings of André Gide and Paul Valéry is often remarked; and the work of André Malraux, who studied philosophy with Alain (the pseudonym of Émile Chartier), the most famous of all lycée teachers, has been characterized as "the thought of Alain transposed into the novel".[9]

But privilege also encouraged intellectual complacency and damped the creativity that can rise from radical questioning by less socially secure thinkers. With the arguable exception of Bergson, the philosophers of the early Third Republic worked within a relatively narrow band defined by their training in the history of thought, their bourgeois moral ideals, and the political realities of their time. Curtius stretches the point to the maximum:

> [French philosophy's] conservative Humanism could not endure either the Pantheism of a world-intoxicated ecstasy, nor the transcendental idealism of the creative spirit, nor the knowledge of salvation which desires redemption and depreciates the value of the world, nor the moral criticism of an heroic will to power. A Hegel, a Schopenhauer, a Nietzsche are unthinkable in France.[10]

On the other hand, eschewing the ecstasies of Germanic metaphysics – and the attendant drive for strong originality – allowed the

[8] *The Civilization of France: An Introduction*, 99–100.
[9] Jean Guitton, *Regards sur la pensée française, 1870–1940*, 59.
[10] *The Civilization of France: An Introduction*, 104.

French professors to create a fruitful circle of sensible conversation, focusing on a small set of key topics and grounded in a common formation and strong mutual respect. Such conversation was carried out in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (founded by Xavier Léon and Léon Brunschvicg in 1893) and in meetings of the closely related Société Française de Philosophie (founded in 1901). The degree of shared understanding that could be assumed is most striking in André Lalande's project of a *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*. This volume, which went through eleven editions between 1900 and 1926, offered detailed definitions of the full range of philosophical terms, finally formulated by Lalande but informed by commentary from most of the leading philosophers of the period. (Lalande's proposed definitions were discussed regularly at sessions of the Société, and the comments of members are printed beneath the *Vocabulaire*'s entries.) The work came remarkably close to its goal of "achieving accord among philosophers – as much as possible – on what they understand by . . . philosophical terms".[11]

Focused and fruitful, if not drastically creative, early Third Republic philosophy was rather like much contemporary analytic philosophy (or medieval scholasticism), though far less technical and rigorous and far more accessible to the general culture. Such thought is not likely to make new epochs, but it is an effective contribution to the civility and rationality of the age in which it finds itself.

Politically, the philosophers of the Third Republic, like other members of the new university, occupied an interesting and important position.[12] Their social status and position as government employees obviously made them part of the establishment, but since they had typically been born into intellectual families (with parents who were teachers, writers, physicians, etc.) they were less inclined to identify with the conservative values of the wealthy bourgeois class. (They had, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, much more cultural capital than economic capital.) Accordingly, professors as a whole formed an influential class of liberal supporters of the Third Republic's ideals, with those with the highest level of intellectual status generally the most liberal. So, for example, in the Dreyfus affair, which split France

[11] *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, ix.
[12] See Fritz Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge: French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective, 1890–1920*, 219–25.

at the turn of the century, the majority of professors at the Sorbonne and the École Normale Supérieure supported Dreyfus, and this support was particularly strong among philosophers.

Reflecting the Third Republic's secular liberalism, the central concerns of its philosophers were science, human freedom, and the relation between the two. Unlike the German idealists, who felt themselves possessed of intuitive or dialectical modes of knowing that far outstripped the plodding efforts of empirical science, these philosophers saw their reflections as grounded in an accurate understanding and appreciation of scientific results. On the other hand, even those closest to a positivist acceptance of the ultimate cognitive authority of science rejected empiricist epistemologies of scientific experience in favor of a rationalist active role for the mind. In a parallel way, construals of freedom typically avoided the determinism or compatibilism favored by empiricism and the subordination of the individual human will to an idealist absolute spirit. Because of this lack of sympathy with the dominant traditions of both Germany and Britain, French thought was very nearly autonomous during this period.[13]

POSITIVISM

Surveys of philosophy in France from 1870 to 1920 almost always employ a standard division of their subject into three schools: positivism, spiritualism, and idealism. These are useful categories for understanding the problems and approaches of the period, but they are much less helpful as classifications of individual thinkers. This is particularly so for positivism. The term was first used by Auguste Comte (1798–1857) to characterize his effort to develop a philosophy based on only the plain (positive) facts of experience – of which science provides paradigm examples – and to avoid metaphysical hypotheses. It came to be applied to any view that privileged empirical science over metaphysical thought. A "positivist" might well hold strongly scientistic views such as Humean empiricism or materialistic reductionism, but not necessarily. Many positivists

[13] Similarly, there was little foreign interest in French philosophy. Harald Höffding, for example, in his comprehensive history of modern philosophy, omits any treatment of French philosophers of the latter half of the nineteenth century, noting that, although they are important in the thought of their own country, "they have brought no new principles to bear on the discussion of problems" (*A History of Modern Philosophy*, 486).

rejected Comte's exclusion of theoretical entities, such as atoms, from science, and Comte himself maintained the irreducibility of biology and sociology to physics and chemistry. Later, leading positivists such as Ernest Renan and Hyppolite Taine painted grand visions of historical progress that were with some plausibility labeled Hegelian. This represented a broadening and dilution of positivism as it became more a general intellectual orientation than a well-defined philosophical position. In the mid-nineteenth century, positivism was still a major force, but its main proponents were literary figures such as Renan and Taine rather than academic philosophers. From 1870 on it was rejected by every major philosopher.[14]

Nonetheless, the positivist spirit survived. It was a major motivation for extending the methods of the natural sciences to the human domain, leading to the seminal work of Durkheim in sociology and of Pierre Janet in empirical psychology.[15] Such work did not assume or imply that all knowledge was scientific, but it did constitute a challenge to anti-positivist arguments that the specifically human domain was not open to empirical understanding. Other vital legacies of positivism were the development, by Poincaré and Duhem, of philosophy of science as a separate subdiscipline and the central role accorded detailed discussions of the history and results of science by virtually every major figure from Boutroux to Brunschvicg and Bergson. Indeed, by the 1930s Bachelard could respectably maintain that philosophy, while not reducible to science, should be identified with the philosophy of science.

SPIRITUALISM: RAVAISSON AND RENOUVIER

Spiritualism has a good claim to be the national philosophy of France. It is rooted in Descartes' assertion of the epistemic and

[14] One thinker who did defend a strong positivist position in the early 1900s was Félix Le Dantec (1869–1917). Parodi briefly summarizes his views in his survey of the contemporary scene; but then, in place of his usual critical assessment, he merely remarks, "it would be pointless to criticize such work" (*La philosophie contemporaine en France*, 57). The marginal place of positivism is also suggested by the two pages devoted to it in Lalande's *Vocabulaire*, in contrast to the four pages on spiritualism and the nine on idealism.

[15] For a long time, there was no sharp distinction drawn between psychology/sociology and philosophy. Even well into the twentieth century, Durkheim, Janet, and similar thinkers were routinely regarded as philosophers and included in standard surveys such as Parodi's *La philosophie contemporaine en France* and Isaac Benrubi's *Les Sources et les courants de la philosophie contemporaine en France*. Even today, the work of sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour has a strong philosophical component.

metaphysical primacy of thought but does not require his mind–body dualism. The view is, in fact, consistent with any ontology that allows for these two central assertions: that the value of human existence derives from the higher mental faculties (both intellectual and affective) of individuals; and that these faculties are neither reducible to material processes (including sense experience) nor assimilable to a higher level of reality (the absolute). Spiritualism is thus an assertion of the metaphysical and ethical primacy of the individual mind (*l'esprit*), against the claims of materialism, empiricism, and certain sorts of idealism.

One of the earliest and most influential spiritualists was François Maine de Biran (1766–1824). Arguing against Locke, Hume, and, especially, Condillac and the *Idéologues*, he maintained that empiricist reductions of mental life to the flow of passing sense impressions were refuted by our experiences of willing (*effort voulu*), which reveal a persisting self continually straining against bodily resistance. In these experiences, a unified self or mind is revealed through what Maine de Biran calls our *sens intime* (inner awareness). Such inner experiences of human freedom remained the foundation of later spiritualist cases for the ultimate autonomy and value of the individual.

The spiritualist legacy reached early twentieth-century French philosophy primarily through Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900). Ravaisson never held a university chair (Cousin, who had initially helped advance his career, blocked the appointment). But he exercised major influence through a series of administrative positions: inspector of libraries, general inspector of higher education, and, most important, chair of the committee that set and graded the *agrégation* examination in philosophy. His interest in art led to scholarly work on Da Vinci and on ancient Greek sculpture and an appointment as curator at the Louvre, where he carried out a major restoration of the Venus de Milo.

In 1867, Ravaisson published his *La philosophie en France au XIXe siècle*, a report commissioned by the French government on the occasion of the Exposition of 1867. Surveying the history of French philosophy after 1800, he noted the dominant place of Comte's positivism and of its main rival, the eclecticism of Victor Cousin. Ravaisson argued that both these positions had failed and that exigencies of fact and argument were driving French philosophy toward the spiritualism that Maine de Biran had developed but his contemporaries ignored. Ravaisson predicted a new philosophical

epoch dominated by what he called "spiritualistic realism or positivism"; that is, a philosophy that gives priority to spiritual "facts" in the same way that ordinary realism and positivism do to perceptual and scientific facts. Such an epoch would, he said, have as its "generating principle the consciousness that mind [*l'esprit*] has of itself, a self recognized as an existence from which all other existences derive and on which they depend, and which is nothing other than its own activity".[16]

His prediction was entirely correct. By 1890 Ravaisson's books were, in Parodi's words, "the breviaries of all the young philosophers"[17] and the philosophical agenda was being set by thinkers such as Lachelier, Boutroux, and Bergson (all students of Ravaisson at the École Normale), who were strongly sympathetic to the spiritualist view.

If, as Comte had famously said, materialism is the claim that the higher can be explained by the lower, spiritualism claims to explain the lower by the higher. Here, of course, the higher is the mind, but not the Cartesian mind that includes any experience whatsoever. The spiritualist mind is the locus of only the higher mental functions such as intelligence, will, and aesthetic appreciation. It does not include lower forms of mentality (e.g., sense perception and emotions), associated with our "animal" nature. The mind or spirit is, then, the locus of the "properly human" dimension of our experience. The project of spiritualism is, first, to describe, accurately and in detail, our experience of ourselves as spiritual beings; and second, to show that everything else (the realm of nature) is subordinated to and dependent on spirit. True to Maine de Biran's seminal descriptions, Ravaisson and his followers made freedom the fundamental feature of the mind, thereby placing creative action at the root of all reality. Whereas Maine de Biran understood freedom primarily in terms of the effort exerted by the will, Ravaisson emphasized the desire (and therefore the love of the good) behind this effort, a desire he saw as ultimately directed toward the perfect goodness of the Christian God.

Although Descartes can be readily regarded as the first French spiritualist, since he gave clear epistemic and metaphysical priority to intelligence and volition, Ravaisson replaced the Cartesian

[16] *La philosophie en France au XIXe siècle*, 275.
[17] *La philosophie contemporaine en France*, 29.