

Introduction

MICHAEL MORIARTY AND JEREMY JENNINGS

The attempt to produce a 'history of French thought' might seem self-evidently valid. For many hundreds of years French thinkers have shaped not only national but European and, indeed, global forms of self-understanding. They have sometimes provided direct inspiration to thinkers outside France: sometimes, however, their effect has been more to stimulate contradiction and to help other national traditions (in Britain, say, or Germany) become aware of themselves by their perceived contrast with French models and approaches.

Such a history would have to be more than a history of philosophy, in the sense that word usually bears of systematic reflection on concepts and their relation to fundamental realities. First, because some of the most important French thinkers such as Montaigne and Pascal (often excluded from or marginalized in Anglo-American accounts of philosophy) can be thought of as anti-philosophers, standing outside the official disciplines of philosophy as it existed in their day, and questioning the very project of reaching truth or illuminating human life through human reason systematically applied. Secondly, there are many important French writers (La Rochefoucauld, say, or Voltaire) who, without adhering to philosophical conventions, have addressed what could be considered as fundamental philosophical issues: the sources of human motivation, the problem of evil. These writers have sometimes used 'literary' forms (essays, fiction, brief disconnected reflections), but they resist being corralled into a purely literary space, because their discourse encourages readers to respond intellectually as well as imaginatively. Thirdly, because French thinkers (such as Pascal, again, or Calvin, or Bossuet or Chateaubriand) have sometimes directed their energy towards the explication of non-philosophical concepts or beliefs, such as religious doctrines, exerting their influence not primarily on a specialized readership of theologians but on the literate community at large.

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This volume therefore includes religious, political, social and moral writing as well as philosophy. Though rigid distinctions between ‘thought’ and ‘literature’ are less easy to construct than one may suppose and can in practice be artificial and misleading, the emphasis will be more on the features of texts that attach them to abstract discourses than on those that construct concrete imaginative and affective experiences in the reader. One could hardly exclude Voltaire’s *Candide* or Rousseau’s *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* from consideration in such a volume; but the focus will be more on their (literary) engagement with philosophical and ideological positions than on their formal structure and literary techniques.

But the project of writing such a history could be conceived in different ways. The present project is emphatically not a history of the ‘French mind’ or of the French people’s contribution to European and global intellectual life. There is no unified French tradition in philosophy, imbued, say, by some ongoing ‘Cartesian spirit’: if there are rationalists like Descartes and Malebranche, there are also sceptics like Montaigne, or, from a certain point of view, Derrida, empiricists like Gassendi, positivists like Comte. It would be idle to deny that there are different national philosophical traditions, which, to some extent, reflect diverse modes of implanting philosophy into the educational apparatus of the state (philosophy has long been part of the secondary school curriculum in France, whereas in Britain it is encountered principally at university). But philosophy has at crucial moments of its history functioned in an international space, its debates being conducted across national boundaries. This is plainly true of medieval scholasticism; it was true still in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The history of Cartesian thought involves responses to it from outside France (Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz); Voltaire and Diderot derived crucial positions from Locke, and French thinkers of the twentieth century, from Sartre to Derrida and beyond, have taken inspiration from German sources: Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger. Any history of ‘French thought’ must thus be prepared to call into question the notion of ‘French’ itself, and to acknowledge freely its limiting and possibly distorting effects on our historical understanding. The intellectual, as well as the political, limits of ‘France’ have varied dramatically over the centuries. The Frenchman Calvin escaped to Geneva to formulate his particular brand of Protestantism (vastly influential in these islands); from Geneva, proudly proclaiming his citizenship, came Jean-Jacques Rousseau, perhaps the most historically influential thinker of his age. In modern times, it would be culpably blind to imagine that ‘French thought’ is confined to what French writers call ‘the Hexagon’,

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‘France’ as a geographical entity. The work of Frantz Fanon would be just the most obvious counter-example, but it is not an isolated one.

Language, of course, constitutes another dimension of ‘Frenchness’. But even here the situation is less simple than it might appear. Calvin wrote in French, and has been considered one of the founders of modern French prose. But his major work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was first written in Latin. So was the single most important philosophical work by a Frenchman, Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes had written *A Discourse on the Method* in French so as to appeal to a broad literate public – including women, he tells a correspondent; but he also states that he toned down the sceptical arguments he there considers, as being unsuitable for a general readership. The sceptical case – an indispensable preliminary to his own reconstruction of knowledge – is given its full force only in the *Meditations* – written in Latin for the learned.¹ Leibniz, a German, used French for many of his most important writings, but Latin for others. Nonetheless, in 1610, Scipion Dupleix (1559–1661) had produced the first work of metaphysics in French. And the use of the vernacular for serious philosophical work continued to grow: Malebranche (1638–1715), inspired by Descartes but a profoundly original philosopher, wrote in French, and in this he was followed by the great thinkers of the eighteenth century, all of whom wrote for a broad educated public, rather than scholars alone. (A similar development took place, of course, in these islands, at much the same time; in German, the switch to the vernacular came in the later eighteenth century.) To include only French-language material, ignoring Latin, would be to ignore the continuing importance of Latin as the medium of scholastic thought throughout the early modern period; and it would be implicitly adopting a teleological viewpoint from which only those thinkers appear to whom we in the twenty-first century acknowledge an intellectual debt. In such a volume as this, the perils are strong of anachronistically projecting our own range of interests and schemes of values on the past, and the editors’ aim is to resist this temptation.

In short, ‘French’ and ‘France’ here denote a certain intellectual and cultural space, which does not always coincide with that of France as a political unit. Most of the agents operative within it (but not all) were French subjects or citizens, writing in French for a French or French-speaking public. But this space has always been part of a larger European and, indeed,

¹ Descartes to Vatieur, 22 February 1638, AT I, 560; *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Preface to the Reader, AT VII, 7; Fourth Replies, AT VII, 247.

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global space, and must be considered both as traversed by influences from outside France and as exerting influences beyond national boundaries. At times, therefore, it will be necessary to touch on non-French thinkers whose work is indispensable for our understanding of French developments. The chronological scope of the volume reflects this understanding of French intellectual and cultural space. It is certainly true that Paris was a centre of intellectual life throughout the Middle Ages, never more than in the thirteenth century. But it was a cosmopolitan space, its medium of exchange being Latin, and its most predominant figures being St Albert, a German, and St Thomas Aquinas, an Italian. To write the history of that period without them would be absurd.

The volume combines an author-centred and a topic-centred approach. Any such history must do justice to some towering individual figures whose independent, original and systematic thought requires to be treated as a whole. But other writers are important chiefly within a school or tendency of thought, and it is artificial to isolate them. The great Enlightenment authors (Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot) can be seen as engaged in a series of debates or dialogues with one another: they all discussed a vast range of issues, to some of which they brought profound and innovative insights, while on others their contribution is of secondary importance. But it would be wrong to confine our attention merely to their most original positions. Alliances and oppositions are not always straightforward: despite their personal hostility and their radically contrary views on society and history, Rousseau and Voltaire on other topics (such as religion) could develop quite similar positions – in the late eighteenth century apologists for religious orthodoxy came to see their former bugbear Voltaire as an ally in the struggle against atheism. Hence, the editors have chosen at times to focus on debates and schools of thought rather than on individual thinkers. It goes without saying that they have been aware, in their selection of writers and movements for consideration, that though intellectual and cultural institutions have almost always, and bodies of thought have for the most part, presupposed and reproduced the socially superior position of men, women have been over the centuries authors as well as objects of representation.

The editors conceived this volume when they were both colleagues at Queen Mary, University of London. Their disciplinary background and chronological range of interests complement each other: one (Michael Moriarty) is in a Department of French, and his interests are chiefly in the early modern period; the other (Jeremy Jennings) is a political theorist ranging chiefly from the nineteenth century to the present. Michael

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Moriarty handled the first part of the volume, Jeremy Jennings the second part. The authors come from Britain, France, Ireland and North America, and represent a range of disciplines (French studies, political theory, intellectual history, philosophy). This volume is, therefore, a consciously pluralist presentation of a complex historical field.