

*Pascalian Meditations*



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# Contents



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# Introduction



If I have resolved to ask some questions that I would rather have left to philosophy, it is because it seemed to me that philosophy, for all its questioning, did not ask them; and because, especially with respect to the social sciences, it never ceased to raise questions that did not seem to me to be essential – while avoiding asking itself about the reasons and above all the (often not very philosophical) causes of its questioning. I wanted to push the critique (in the Kantian sense) of scholarly reason to a point that questionings usually leave untouched and to try to make explicit the presuppositions entailed by the situation of *skholè*, the free time, freed from the urgencies of the world, that allows a free and liberated relation to those urgencies and to the world. And it has been philosophers who, not content with engaging these presuppositions in their practice, like other professional thinkers, have brought them into the order of discourse, not so much to analyse them as to legitimate them.

In order to justify an inquiry that hopes to open the way to truths that philosophy helps to make it hard to reach, I could have invoked thinkers who are close to being seen by philosophers as enemies of philosophy, because, like Wittgenstein, they make its prime task the dispelling of illusions, especially those that the philosophical tradition produces and reproduces. But, as will become clear, I had various reasons for placing these reflections under the aegis of Pascal. For a long time I had adopted the habit, when asked the (generally ill-intentioned) question of my relations with Marx, of replying that,

all in all, if I really had to affiliate myself, I would say I was more of a Pascalian. I was thinking in particular of everything that concerns symbolic power, the aspect through which the affinity appears most clearly, and other, less often observed, facets of his work, such as the refusal of the ambition of foundation. But, above all, I had always been grateful to Pascal, as I understood him, for his concern, devoid of all populist naivety, for 'ordinary people' and the 'sound opinions of the people'; and also for his determination, inseparable from that concern, always to seek the 'reason of effects', the *raison d'être* of the seemingly most illogical or derisory human behaviours – such as 'spending a whole day in chasing a hare' – rather than condemning or mocking them, like the 'half-learned' who are always ready to 'play the philosopher' and to seek to astonish with their uncommon astonishments at the futility of common-sense opinions.

Being convinced that Pascal was right to say that 'true philosophy makes light of philosophy', I have often regretted that academic proprieties prevented me from taking this invitation literally: more than once I have wanted to fight the symbolic violence that is often exercised, firstly on philosophers themselves, in the name of philosophy, with the weapons most commonly used to counteract the effects of that violence – irony, pastiche or parody. I envied the freedom of writers (Thomas Bernhard on Heideggerian kitsch, or Elfriede Jelinek on the fuliginous clouds of the German idealists), or of the artists who, from Duchamp to Devautour, have, in their own artistic practice, constantly subverted the belief in art and artists.

The vanity of attributing immense and immediate effects to philosophy, and to the utterances of intellectuals, seems to me to be the example par excellence of what Schopenhauer called 'pedantic comedy', by which he meant the ridicule one incurs when performing an action that is not included in one's concept, like a stage horse that defecates on stage. Now, if there is one thing that our 'modern' or 'postmodern' philosophers have in common, beyond the conflicts that divide them, it is this excessive confidence in the powers of language. It is the typical illusion of the *lector*, who can regard an academic commentary as a political act or the critique of texts as a feat of resistance, and experience revolutions in the order of words as radical revolutions in the order of things.

How can one avoid succumbing to this dream of omnipotence, which tends to arouse fits of bedazzled identification with great heroic roles? I think it is important above all to reflect not only on the limits of thought and of the powers of thought, but also on the conditions in which it is exercised, which lead so many thinkers to overstep the limits of a social experience that is necessarily partial and local, both geographically and socially, and restricted to a small

region, always the same, of the social universe, as is shown by the limited scope of the references invoked, often restricted to one discipline and one national tradition. Attentive observation of the course of the world should, however, incline them to more humility, because it is so clear that intellectual powers are most efficacious when they are exercised in the same direction as the immanent tendencies of the social world, at which time they indubitably redouble, through omission or compromise, the effects of the forces of the world, which are also expressed through them.

I am well aware that what I have to say here, which for a long time I wanted to leave at least partly in the implicit state of a practical sense of theoretical things, is rooted in the singular, and singularly limited, experiences of a particular existence; and that the events of the world, or the minor dramas of university life, can have a very profound effect on consciousnesses and unconsciousnesses. Does that imply that what I say is thereby particularized or relativized? The unceasing interest that the 'gentlemen of Port-Royal' showed in authority and obedience, and their determination to reveal its principles, has been related to the fact that, although very privileged, especially in cultural terms, they almost all belonged to the bourgeois aristocracy of the *robins (noblesse de robe)*, a social category still very distinct, in the eyes of others and in itself, from the *noblesse d'épée* under whose insolence they chafed. Their special lucidity as regards aristocratic values and the symbolic foundations of authority, especially that of title, may well have owed something to the marginal position that inclined them to critical dispositions towards the temporal powers of Church or State, but this in no way invalidates the truths it reveals.

The vestiges of religious or political moralism that lurk behind a number of apparently epistemological questionings have to be repudiated. In the order of thought, there is, as Nietzsche pointed out, no immaculate conception; but nor is there any original sin – and the discovery that someone who has discovered the truth had an interest in doing so in no way diminishes his discovery. Those who like to believe in the miracle of 'pure' thought must bring themselves to accept that the love of truth or virtue, like any other kind of disposition, necessarily owes something to the conditions in which it was formed, in other words a social position and trajectory. I am even fairly convinced that, in thinking about the things of the intellectual life, where so many of our investments are placed, and where, as a consequence, the 'refusal to know' or even the 'hatred of truth' that Pascal refers to are particularly intense (if only in the inverted form of the perverse false lucidity of resentment), a degree of personal interest in unveiling (which may well be denounced as denunciation) is no bad thing.

But the extreme vulnerability of the historical sciences, which are in the front line of the danger of relativization that they introduce, does have some advantages. And I could invoke the particular vigilance towards the injunctions or seductions of intellectual trends and fashions that results from constantly taking them as one's object; and above all, the work of critique, verification and elaboration – in a word, sublimation – that I have brought to bear on the impulses, revolt or indignation that lie behind a given intuition or anticipation. When I uncompromisingly examined the world to which I belonged, I could not but be aware that I necessarily fell under the scrutiny of my own analyses, and that I was providing instruments that could be turned against me. The image of the 'biter bit' simply designates one very effective form of reflexivity as I understand it – as a collective enterprise.

Being aware that the privilege given to those who are in a position to 'play seriously', in Plato's phrase, because their estate (or, nowadays, the State) gives them the means to do so, could slant or limit my thinking, I have always asked of the most radically objectifying instruments of knowledge that I could use that they also serve as instruments of self-knowledge, and not least knowledge of myself as a 'knowing subject'. In this way I learned a lot from two research projects, carried out in very different social milieux – the village of my childhood and the Paris universities – which enabled me to explore some of the most obscure areas of my subjectivity as an objectivist observer.<sup>1</sup> In fact I am convinced that only an enterprise of objectification, divested of the particular indulgence and complacency normally asked for and granted to evocations of the intellectual adventure, makes it possible to discover, with a view to going beyond them, some limits of thought and especially those that arise from privilege.

I have always felt some impatience with 'puffed-up words' [*les mots d'enflure*], as Pascal puts it, and the grand affirmation of peremptory theses that often accompany major intellectual ambitions; and, partly no doubt in reaction against the taste for epistemological and theoretical preliminaries or the endless exegesis of canonical authors, I have never shunned what are regarded as the humblest tasks of the craft of ethnology or sociology – direct observation, interviews, coding or statistical analysis. Without succumbing to the initiatory cult of 'fieldwork' or the positivistic fetishism of 'data', I felt that, by virtue of their more modest and practical content, and because they took me out into the world, these activities, which are in any case no less intelligent than others, were one of the chances I had to escape from the scholastic confinement of the habitués of ministerial offices, libraries, lectures

<sup>1</sup> P. Bourdieu, 'Célibat et condition paysanne', *Études Rurales*, 5–6 (Apr.–Sept. 1962), pp. 32–136; *Homo Academicus*, tr. P. Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

and speeches that I encountered in my professional life. So I could have attached to almost every line the references to empirical investigations, some of them going back thirty years before the moment at which I now write, which made me feel I was authorized to put forward the general propositions that they presupposed or that they had enabled me to establish, without providing all the supporting evidence at each point and in a tone that may sometimes appear too abrupt.<sup>2</sup>

The sociologist has the peculiarity, in no way a privilege, of being the person whose task is to tell about the things of the social world, and, as far as possible, to tell them the way they are. In itself, that is normal, even trivial. What makes his (or her) situation paradoxical, sometimes impossible, is that he is surrounded by people who either actively ignore the social world and do not talk about it – and I would be the last to criticize artists, writers or scientists for being totally absorbed in their work – or worry about it and talk about it, sometimes a lot, but without knowing much about it (there are some of these even among recognized sociologists). It is indeed not uncommon that, when associated with ignorance, indifference or contempt, the obligation to speak that derives from suddenly acquired notoriety or the modes and models of the intellectual game inclines people to talk everywhere about the social world, but as if they were not talking about it, or as if one were talking of it to help to forget it and have it forgotten – in a word, while denying it.

So, when he simply does what he has to do, the sociologist breaks the enchanted circle of collective denial. By working towards the 'return of the repressed', by trying to know and make known what the world of knowledge does not want to know, especially about itself, he takes the risk of appearing as the one who 'gives the game away' – but to whom, except to those with whom, in so doing, he breaks ranks, and from whom he cannot expect recognition for his discoveries, his revelations or his confessions (which are necessarily a little perverse, it has to be said, because they are also valid, by proxy, for all his kind)?

I know fairly well what one can expect from working to combat the repression, so strong in the pure and perfect world of thought, of everything that touches on social reality. I know that I shall have to confront the virtuous indignation of those who reject the very principle of the effort to objectify – either because, in the name of the

<sup>2</sup> As regards both my own works and works by others which have been useful to me, I have limited myself here to the references that seemed indispensable to those who might themselves wish to extend the research; and I am well aware that the middle way I have chosen, after much hesitation, between a total absence of references and the long enumerations of the names of philosophers, ethnologists, sociologists, historians, economists, psychologists, etc. whom I could and perhaps should have invoked at each moment, is simply the least bad solution.

irreducibility of the 'subject' and its immersion in time, which condemns it to endless change and singularity, they identify every attempt to convert it into an object of science with a kind of usurpation of a *divine* attribute (Kierkegaard, more lucid on this point than a number of his acolytes, talks, in his *Journal*, of 'blasphemy'); or because, being convinced of their own exceptionality, they only see there a form of 'denunciation', inspired by 'hatred' of the object (philosophy, art or literature) to which it is applied.

It is tempting (and 'profitable') to proceed as if a simple reminder of the social conditions of 'creation' were the expression of a desire to reduce the unique to the generic, the singular to the class; as if the observation that the social world imposes constraints and limits on the 'purest' thought, that of scientists, artists and writers, were the effect of a bias towards denigration; as if determinism, for which sociologists are so much reproached, were, like liberalism or socialism, or some aesthetic or political preference, a matter of belief or even a sort of cause on which one took up a position, either for or against; as if the commitment to science were, in the case of sociology, a prejudice, inspired by resentment, against all intellectual 'good causes', singularity and freedom, transgression and subversion, difference and dissidence, the open and the plural, etc.

Faced with the pharisaical denunciations of my 'denunciations', I have often regretted not having followed the example of Mallarmé, who, refusing to 'perform, in public, the impious dismantling of the fiction and consequently of the literary mechanism, to display the principal part or nothing',<sup>3</sup> chose to save the fiction, and the collective belief in the game, by enunciating this seminal nothingness only in the mode of denegation. But I could not be satisfied with the answer he provided to the question whether one should utter publicly the constitutive mechanisms of social games that are as shrouded in prestige and mystery as those of art, literature, science, law or philosophy and charged with the values commonly held to be the most universal and the most sacred. To opt to keep the secret, or to unveil it only in a strictly veiled form, as Mallarmé does, is to pre-judge that only a few great initiates are capable of the heroic lucidity and willed generosity that are necessary in order to confront the enigma of fiction and fetishism.

<sup>3</sup> S. Mallarmé, 'La musique et les lettres', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. H. Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1970), p. 647. I have offered an analysis of this text, likely to provoke shudders in the pious celebrants of the seraphic poet of absence, who have turned a blind eye to it, in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, tr. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 274–7.

Conscious of all the expectations that I was forced to frustrate, all the unexamined dogmas of 'humanist' conviction and 'artistic' faith that I was obliged to defy, I have often cursed the fate (or the logic) that required me consciously to take up such a difficult cause, to engage, armed only with the weapons of rational discourse, in a struggle that was perhaps lost in advance against enormous social forces, such as the weight of habits of thought, cognitive interests and cultural beliefs bequeathed by several centuries of literary, artistic or philosophical worship.

This feeling was all the more paralysing because as I wrote on *skholè* and all these other things, I could not fail to feel the ricochet of my own words. I had never before felt with such intensity the strangeness of my project, a kind of *negative philosophy* that was liable to appear self-destructive. On other occasions, to try to still anxiety or worry, I have been able, sometimes explicitly, to assign myself the role of public scribe and try to convince myself – and also those I carried with me – of the certainty of being useful in saying things which are not said but deserve to be. But once these (so to speak) 'public service' functions were set aside, what remains by way of justifications?

I have never really felt justified in existing as an intellectual; and I have always tried – as I have tried again here – to exorcise everything in my thinking that might be linked to that status, such as philosophical intellectualism. I do not like the intellectual in myself, and what may sound, in my writing, like anti-intellectualism is chiefly directed against the intellectualism or intellectuality that remains in me, despite all my efforts, such as the difficulty, so typical of intellectuals, I have in accepting that my freedom has its limits.

To conclude these preliminary considerations, I would like to ask my readers, even the most well disposed of them, to suspend the pre-conceived or precautionary ideas they may have of my work and, more generally, of the social sciences, ideas which sometimes oblige me to return to questions that I believe I settled a long time ago, as I shall do again here, in clarifications which should not be confused with the doubling back and the revivals required by the sometimes imperceptible progress of research. I do indeed have the sense of having been rather ill-understood, partly, no doubt, because of the idea people often have of sociology, based on vague school memories or unfortunate encounters with the most salient members of the corporation, which can, alas, only reinforce the politico-journalistic image of the discipline. The diminished status of this pariah science inclines the poorly sighted to think that they surpass what surpasses them and the ill-intentioned to produce a deliberately reductive image without incurring the sanctions normally attached to excessively flagrant transgressions of the

'principle of charity'. These prejudices seem to me all the more unjust or inappropriate because part of my work has consisted in reversing a good number of modes of thought current in the analysis of the social world (starting with the vestiges of a Marxist vulgate which, beyond political affiliations, clouded the brains of more than one generation). The analyses and models that I put forward were thus often perceived through categories of thought which, like the obligatory alternatives of dualistic thought (mechanism/finalism, objectivism/subjectivism, holism/individualism), were precisely rejected.

But I do not forget all that was due to myself, to my difficulty in explaining or my reluctance to explain; nor the fact that the obstacles to comprehension, perhaps especially when social things are in question, have less, as Wittgenstein observed, to do with the understanding than with the will. I am often surprised at the time it has taken me – and this is probably not over – really to understand some of the things I had been saying for a long time with the sense of knowing exactly what I was saying. And if I rework the same themes and return several times to the same objects and the same analyses, it is always, I think, in a spiralling movement which makes it possible to attain each time a higher level of explicitness and comprehension, and to discover unnoticed relationships and hidden properties. 'I cannot judge of my work, while doing it. I must do as the artists, stand at a distance; but not too far.'<sup>4</sup> I too have wanted to find the point from which the whole of my work might be seen in a single gaze, relieved of the confusions and obscurities that I could see there 'while doing it' and which one lingers on when looking from too close. Being inclined rather to leave things in the practical state, I had to convince myself that I would not be wasting my time and trouble in trying to make explicit the principles of the *modus operandi* that I have implemented in my work and also the idea of 'the human being' that, inevitably, I have engaged in my scientific choices. I do not know if I have succeeded, but I have in any case acquired the conviction that the social world would be better known, and scientific discourse about it would be better understood, if one were able to convince oneself that there are not many objects more difficult to understand, especially because it haunts the brains of those who try to analyse it, and because it conceals under the most trivial appearances, those of daily banality for daily newspapers, available to any researcher, the most unexpected revelations about what we least want to know about what we are.

<sup>4</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, 114. (The translations from the *Pensées* are those of W. F. Trotter; see *Pascal's Pensées* (London and Toronto: Dent, 1931). *Trans.*)

## I

# Critique of Scholastic Reason

It is because we are implicated in the world that there is implicit content in what we think and say about it. In order to free our thinking of the implicit, it is not sufficient to perform the return of thought onto itself that is commonly associated with the idea of reflexivity; and only the illusion of the omnipotence of thought could lead one to believe that the most radical doubt is capable of suspending the presuppositions, linked to our various affiliations, memberships, implications, that we engage in our thoughts. The unconscious is history – the collective history that has produced our categories of thought, and the individual history through which they have been inculcated in us. It is, for example, from the social history of educational institutions (a supremely banal one, absent from the history of philosophical or other ideas), and from the (forgotten or repressed) history of our singular relationship to these institutions, that we can expect some real revelations about the objective and subjective structures (classifications, hierarchies, problematics, etc.) that always, in spite of ourselves, orient our thought.

### Implication and the implicit

Renouncing the illusion of the self-transparency of consciousness and the representation of reflexivity commonly accepted among philosophers (and even accepted by some sociologists, like Alvin Gouldner,