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The rebirth of Descartes

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II

The Situation in France (1790-1800)

In this part we will first discuss the farcical manner in which the post-Revolutionary French government dealt with the question of what was to be done with Descartes. Here we will introduce the figures who play a major role and we shall elaborate on their positions in Part III.

MEMORIAE RENATI DESCARTES
RECONDITORIS DOCTRINAS
LAVDE
ET INGENII SVBTILITAT
PRAECELLENTISSIMI
QVI PRIMVS
A RENOVATIS IN EVROPA
BONARVM LITTERARVM STVDIIS
RATIONIS HVMANAE
IVRA
SALVA FIDEI CHRISTIANAE
AVTORITATE
VINDICAVIT ET ASSERVIT
NVNC
VERITATIS
QVAM VNICE COLVIT
CONSPECTV
FRVITVR¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Epitaph of on the stone of Descartes's grave in the chapel of the small church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés: 'In memory of René Descartes, famous through the praise of a better founded science and the sharpness of his mind. He was the first, since the European renovation of sound scientific efforts, to vindicate and defend the right of human reason and the authority of Christian faith unrelentingly. Now he relishes the sight of truth which he only honoured.' The translation is based on Rainer Specht, *Descartes* (1998), p. 147.

3 DESCARTES: *GRAND HOMME* OR CHARLATAN?

One of the things the post-Revolutionary government had to deal with, was the question of what France should do with what was left of Descartes. By ‘what was left of Descartes’ we literally mean his worm-eaten remains.

The occasion that raised this matter, quite paradoxically, involved a fervent enemy of Descartes, Voltaire. In November 1790, the Marquis de Vilette proposed to the Club des Jacobins that the body of Voltaire should be placed in the Sainte-Geneviève Church, which at the time was being transformed into a mausoleum dedicated to national glory, and *en passant* he mentioned Descartes.¹⁴¹ What followed can only be described as an unceremonious fooling around with Descartes’s remains.

On 2 April, it had been declared that this new church was going to be a ‘temple de la patrie’ in which great men would find their last resting place. Although the decree of 4 April announced that it would be reserved for ‘the great men that date from the era of our liberty’, exceptions were made for three: Descartes, Voltaire and Rousseau. The whole idea of the mausoleum came about in a more or less casual and coincidental way. One of the members of the ‘directoire du département de Paris’, Honoré Riquetti-Mirabeau, had died and the Assembly wanted to honour him in the way ‘une nation voisine’ would do (Vilette had mentioned the English and their Westminster, see footnote 141). The proposition put to the Assemblée nationale consisted of five points:

- 1° Que le nouvel édifice de Sainte-Geneviève soit destiné à recevoir les cendres des grands hommes, à dater de l’époque de notre liberté;
- 2° Que l’Assemblée nationale seule puisse juger à quels hommes cet honneur sera décerné;
- 3° Qu’Honoré Riquetti-Mirabeau en est jugé digne;
- 4° Que les exceptions qui pourront avoir lieu pour quelques grands hommes morts avant la révolution, tels que Descartes, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques-Rousseau, ne puissent être faites que par l’Assemblée nationale;
- 5° Que le directoire du département de Paris soit chargé de mettre promptement l’édifice de Sainte-Geneviève en état de remplir sa nouvelle destination, et fasse graver au-dessous du fronton ces mots
«AUX GRANDS HOMMES,
«LA PATRIE RECONNAISSANTE.»¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ It was through the work of François Azouvi, *Descartes et la France* (2002), that we came across the *Chronique de Paris*. In the *Chronique* of Friday 12 November 1790, on pp. 1261-1262 we find the ‘Discours’ of Vilette in which he says: ‘si les Anglais ont réuni leurs grands hommes dans Westminster, pourquoi hésiterons-nous à placer le cercueil de Voltaire dans le plus beau de nos temples, dans la nouvelle Sainte-Geneviève, en face du mausolée de Descartes que l’on alla chercher de même à Stockholm seize ans après sa mort? C’est là que j’offre de lui élever un monument à mes frais.’

¹⁴² *Archives Parlementaires* (1787-1799), vol. XXIV, p. 537. The rest of the inscription reads ‘Fait à Paris, en directoire, le 2 avril 1791. Signé: La Rochefoucauld, président; Sieyès, Germain Garnier, Dutremblay, Anson, vice-présidents; Pastoret, procureur général syndic; Blondel, secrétaire.’

On 4 April 1791, Mirabeau's coffin was transferred to Sainte-Geneviève in anticipation of the completion of the new edifice, that is, the Panthéon. On 12 April, the grand-nephew of Descartes, M. le Prestre de Chateaugiron¹⁴³, read a petition written by Condorcet to the Assemblée nationale in which he requested that his grand-uncle be placed 'dans le Temple que l'Assemblée nationale a consacré aux Manes de nos grands hommes.'¹⁴⁴ The argument, and especially its formulation, for placing Descartes in the Panthéon are extraordinarily interesting for our study. It reads that someone who 'avoit rétabli la raison humaine dans ses droits' must be placed amongst public schools where people strive to educate the rising generations. Descartes had waited a very long time for this sort of rehabilitation, but the delay could be duly compensated:

... celui qui, en brisant les fers de l'esprit humain, préparoit de loin l'éternelle destruction de la servitude politique, sembloit mériter de n'être honoré qu'au nom d'une nation libre; et le sort l'a servi d'une manière digne de lui, en le préservant des honneurs que l'orgueil du despotisme auroit souillés.¹⁴⁵

The reaction of the Assemblée nationale is not only very interesting because of its enthusiasm, but also because of the description it gave of Descartes. We find this description in the abstract of the session in *Chronique de Paris*,¹⁴⁶ 13 April 1791, which reads:

L'Assemblée a applaudi à cette pétition; elle alloit y faire droit, lorsqu'un membre a fait la motion de la renvoyer au comité de constitution; afin de rendre sur son rapport un décret plus authentique qui témoigne la haute estime qu'a la nation française pour le précurseur de Newton. Cette motion a prévalu sur le premier mouvement.

Not only was Descartes seen as a genius, but also as the precursor of Newton. Two years later¹⁴⁷ this petition was apparently granted, and although the Assemblée made the following declaration, his body was never 'panthéonised'.

DÉCRETS DE LA CONVENTION NATIONALE

Des 2 et 4 octobre 1793, l'an second de la République Française une et indivisible, qui accordent à René Descartes les honneurs dûs aux grands

¹⁴³ This is what Adam says, but in *Chronique de Paris* of Wednesday 13 April 1791 it reads that the letter came from a certain 'M. Grez, habitant de Château-Chinon, petit neveu de Descartes.' The reason why Adam is probably not talking nonsense is that he clearly traced the descendants of Descartes, see his supplement to the edition of the works of Descartes (AT XII), *Vie & Œuvres de Descartes, Étude historique* (1910), p. 11-12 note *b*. The reason for this divergence is still not clear. In Cousin's edition of the works of Descartes appears the name of M. le marquis de Château-Giron. This man was the closest of Descartes's descendants and he provided Cousin with an autographical note from Descartes, see Cous., XI, vij.

¹⁴⁴ See AT XII, 609.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. Azouvi, *Descartes et la France* (2002), p. 330 remarks that this text is slightly different from the one in *Journal de Paris*, 13 April 1791.

¹⁴⁶ N° 103, p. 412.

¹⁴⁷ It remains unclear why it took the Assembly two years to decide upon this case.

‘Grand homme’ or charlatan?

Hommes, et ordonnent de transférer au Panthéon François son corps, et sa Statue faite par le célèbre Pajou.¹⁴⁸

What happened? As Adam pointed out, it were ‘the grave political events’ that made the legislature forget to execute its order.¹⁴⁹ When the Convention had eventually served its time, the date on which Descartes should receive the honour of national recognition had still not been set.

In the mean time, Condorcet (1743-1794) wrote *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (An III), in which he finds the roots of the Revolution in the thought of Descartes.¹⁵⁰ Condorcet mentions Descartes when explaining why the principles on which the constitution and laws of France are based are purer, more precise and more profound than those that regulate the American Constitution.¹⁵¹

Depuis le moment où le génie de Descartes imprima aux esprits cette impulsion générale, premier principe d’une révolution dans les destinées de l’espèce humaine, jusqu’à l’époque heureuse de l’entière et pure liberté sociale, où l’homme n’a pu remplacer son indépendance naturelle, qu’après avoir passé par une longue suite de siècles d’esclavage et de malheur, le tableau du progrès des sciences mathématiques et physiques nous présente un horizon immense, dont il faut distribuer et ordonner les diverses parties, si l’on veut en bien saisir l’ensemble, en bien observer les rapports.¹⁵²

According to Condorcet, the period from the invention of printing to the time when science and philosophy freed themselves from the yoke of authority is marked by ‘trois grands hommes’: Bacon, Galileo and Descartes. In a short comparison of the first two with the latter he says:

Si dans les sciences physiques, sa marche [namely Descartes’s] est moins sûre que celle de Galilée, si sa philosophie est moins sage que celle de Bacon, si on peut lui reprocher de n’avoir pas assez appris par les leçons de l’un, par l’exemple de l’autre, à se défier de son imagination, à n’interroger la nature que par des expériences, à ne croire qu’au calcul, à observer l’univers, au lieu de le construire, à étudier

¹⁴⁸ AT XII, 610.

¹⁴⁹ Most probably Adam means the period known as the ‘Terreur’ (1793-1794) during which approximately 17,000 people were guillotined and another 23,000 were assassinated without sentence.

¹⁵⁰ *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*. Ouvrage posthume de Condorcet, Paris, l’an III [1795-1795] de la République, une et indivisible. Henceforth: *Esquisse*. The edition of 1822 (Masson et fils) is followed by *Réflexions sur l’esclavage des nègres*, but for the rest remained unchanged. Condorcet wrote most of this work when he was hiding in the house of Mme Vernet. On 3 October 1793 he was accused of criticizing the project of the Constitution presented by Héault de Séchelles. He left his safe house on 25 March 1794 and two days later he was arrested. The next day (or two days later) he was found dead in the prison of Bourg-l’Égalité (Bourg-la-Reine). According to some sources, he poisoned himself, in any case, we can call him a victim of the ‘Terreur’.

¹⁵¹ Condorcet also shows why the French constitution and laws, in contradistinction to the American, completely escaped the influence of all kinds of prejudices; how equal rights in France, in opposition to those in America, have nowhere been replaced with self-interest, of which it is nothing but a weak and hypocritical supplement. *Esquisse*, 277-278, (ed. Masson, p. 222).

¹⁵² *Esquisse*, 278-279 (ed. Masson, p. 225).

l'homme, au lieu de le deviner; l'audace même de ses erreurs servit aux progrès de l'espèce humaine. Il agita les esprits, que la sagesse de ses rivaux n'avoit pu réveiller. Il dit aux hommes de secouer le joug de l'autorité, de ne plus reconnoître que celle qui seroit avouée par leur raison; et il fut obéi, parce qu'il subjugoit par sa hardiesse, qu'il entraînoit par son enthousiasme.¹⁵³

On 10 pluviôse An IV (30 January 1796) session of the Conseil des Cinq-Cents, a letter from the Institut national was read in which it proposed to proceed with the transfer of the remains of Descartes to the Panthéon. Marie-Joseph Chénier (1764-1811), officer, poet, dramatist and politician had proposed this in 1793, and he adds:

Je crois digne du corps législatif de reconnaître par un éclatant témoignage, les éminens services rendus à la France et à l'Europe par René Descartes, qui, le premier, a ouvert le sentier de la vraie philosophie.¹⁵⁴

Chénier knew that the season was not suitable and that the ceremony should be postponed until spring. In the meantime, a commission was to be established which should produce a report on the subject. Chénier's proposition was adopted. On 18 floréal An IV (7 May 1796) the report was discussed in the Conseil des Cinq-Cents. Chénier only wanted the approval on the date of the transfer, namely, 10 prairial, the 'jour de la fête de la Reconnaissance.'¹⁵⁵ In his address, Chénier claimed that Descartes, who he calls 'le premier des philosophes' and 'l'ornement de sa Patrie opprimée', paved the way for Locke and Condillac in metaphysics. His mathematics lead Newton, Leibniz, Euler and Lagrange to new discoveries. He connects the French people, who became republican, to 'la gloire de ce profond penseur qui a posé un flambeau sur la route des siècles, dont les rêveries mêmes ont marqué les progrès de la raison'.¹⁵⁶ For Chénier, without Descartes, France would not be as great as it had become (1796), both literally and figuratively.¹⁵⁷ Chénier had the whole ceremony planned, which indicates that he did not expect any opposition.

Nothing was further from the truth, because the proposition was fiercely attacked by one of the representatives, Mercier. He rhetorically states that he 'understands' Chénier, because he himself had made a youthful lapse, as the opening phrase of his address shows.

¹⁵³ *Esquisse*, 231 (ed. Masson, p. 185).

¹⁵⁴ *Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur Universel*, N° 135. Quintidi, 15 pluviôse, l'an 4 de la République Française une et indivisible (Thursday, 4 February 1796), p. 539. Henceforth : *Gazette*.

¹⁵⁵ This celebration consisted of a long military parade and some patriotic speeches by the authorities.

¹⁵⁶ *Gazette*, N° 234, Quartidi, 24 floréal, l'an 4 de la République Française une et indivisible (Friday, 13 May 1796), p. 936.

¹⁵⁷ He mentions that it is for extending the borders of free Europe as well as the benefits for science that Descartes must be accredited.

‘Grand homme’ or charlatan?

Et moi aussi, j’ai dans ma jeunesse fait l’éloge de Descartes.
L’expérience ne m’avait pas encore appris que les plus grands charlatans
du monde ont souvent passé pour les plus grands hommes.¹⁵⁸

The attentive reader may remember Mercier from Section 1.3, where we briefly discussed Thomas’ prize-winning *Éloge de Descartes* and mentioned that a certain Mercier had also contributed. However, Louis-Sébastien Mercier now apparently made a philosophical U-turn, arguing that Descartes had caused his country a ‘mal profond’.

In order to illustrate his change of heart it suffices to take a random quote from his earlier *Éloge*:

Heureux celui qui fut appelée aux hautes destinées d’éclairer le monde!
Heureux le Génie que le Créateur a doué d’une ame propre à lire tous les
traits de sa puissance! O DESCARTES! quand mon œil observe la
sublimité de ton vol, je conçois un nouveau respect pour la profondeur
de l’esprit humain.¹⁵⁹

Twenty eight years later, Mercier is of the opinion that Descartes has ‘slowed down the progress of the Enlightenment through the long tyranny of his errors’. According to Mercier, the absurd Cartesian system had held back physics for about a century. Hence his rhetorical question:

Citoyens, au moment où la physique dégagée du ridicule système des
tourbillons se relève par des découvertes utiles, et fait chaque jour des
pas hardis et des progrès certains, porterez-vous au Panthéon les cendres
d’un visionnaire dont le système n’est qu’un délire d’un esprit fanatique
et romanesque qui, loin d’embrasser la nature, n’en a pas saisi le premier
trait?¹⁶⁰

Mercier thought that the only merit of Descartes was that he applied algebra to geometry, however, to be overexcited or become overly nationalistic because of this would be disastrous for humanity. He found that Galileo, for instance, deserved more credit, as he had applied geometry to nature. Mercier not only rejected Cartesian physics, but also his metaphysics, which he thought had led the human race into irreligious and immoral behaviour. After more disapproving words for Descartes, Mercier came to the point, exclaiming:

Le Panthéon Français est le temple des Républicains: réservez-le pour
les héros et les martyrs de la révolution. Laissons-là les livres, leurs
auteurs, laissons le pays des chimères; attachons-nous aux vertus
républicaines, elles seules ont un fondement solide et durable . . .

Gardons-nous surtout de prostituer ces honneurs et d’être obligés de
les retenir après les avoir inconsidérément accordés. Nos devanciers en
eussent agi plus sagement que nous; ils n’eussent pas accordé les

¹⁵⁸ *Gazette*, N° 234, Quartidi, 24 floréal, l’an 4 de la République Française une et indivisible (Friday, 13 May 1796), p. 936.

¹⁵⁹ Mercier, *Éloge de René Descartes* (1765), p. 5. The entire eulogy is written in this style; the quote is not an exception.

¹⁶⁰ *Gazette*, N° 234, Quartidi, 24 floréal, l’an 4 de la République Française une et indivisible (Friday, 13 May 1796), p. 936.

honneurs du Panthéon à ce grand corrupteur de l'espèce humaine, à ce flatteur des rois et des princes qui se montre leur esclave . . .¹⁶¹

It seems that Mercier found the weak spot in Chénier's discourse and wanted to make the Conseil des Anciens realize that it was not a 'corps académique'. The Conseil des Anciens should not debate the necessity of elevating Descartes merely in order to oppose him to Newton, who was buried in Westminster. Mercier was against the performance of any new 'canonizations'. Furthermore, he thought it of no interest to the Conseil whether Descartes was a novelist or a great genius. He wanted to stop the efforts to determine the limits of his fame. His conclusion is a typical *argumentum ad populum*:

Le peuple a-t-il entendu prononcer souvent le nom de Descartes? Est-il dans cette commune trente personnes qui aient lu Descartes? Non, sans doute. Je ne crains pas de l'affirmer, la cérémonie de la translation de ces cendres au Panthéon serait regardée du Peuple à peu-près comme la procession du grand lama. Je me résume et demande qu'on laisse la réputation de Descartes vivre ou mourir dans ses ouvrages.¹⁶²

When Mercier was asked to produce a written version of his discourse a part of the audience began murmuring loudly. Another representative asked for an adjournment in anticipation of this printed version. Chénier, of course, was not amused with this development and found that the 'corps législatif se couvrirait d'ignominie', whereupon the audience again erupted into violent murmurs. Chénier ardently defended Descartes and attacked Mercier, asking why Descartes should be denied access to the Panthéon, when Voltaire had already been placed there. Finally, he gave some ground saying:

Je ne m'oppose cependant pas à l'ajournement; mais si le projet est attaqué une seconde fois, je demande qu'on ne prononce rien sans avoir entendu ceux qui, à cette tribune, voudront défendre les lumières et la philosophie.¹⁶³

The discussion was closed, Chénier's project was adjourned and Descartes's remains never arrived at the Panthéon. Mercier even went further and attempted to have the antique porphyry sarcophagus in which Descartes was lying emptied of the remains, because he did not find it suitable for a geometer. In 1799, the 'Élysée' was created in the Jardin des Petits-Augustins in which the sarcophagus (obviously more important than its inhabitant) was given a place. When the sarcophagus was required to be given back to the Louvre, Lenoir had a new one made, which he described as follows:

N°. 507. Sarcophage, en pierre dure, et creusé dans son intérieur, contenant les restes de René Descartes, mort en Suède en 1650, supporté sur des griffons, animal astronomique, composé de l'aigle et du lion, tous deux consacrés à Jupiter, et l'emblème du soleil dont ils représentent le domicile. Des peupliers, dont la cime monte jusqu'aux

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 937.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

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nues, des ifs et des fleurs ombragent ce monument, érigé au père de la philosophie, à celui qui le premier nous apprit à penser.¹⁶⁴

What is most interesting is that Descartes is accredited with the title ‘père de la philosophie’ and is even honoured as the man ‘who first taught us to think’. The naming of Descartes as ‘father of philosophy’ is perhaps a bit exaggerated, one is inclined to add ‘française’ or ‘moderne’. The first edition of Lenoir’s *Description* dates back to the ninth year of the Republic, that is, to 1803, though the terms he uses to qualify Descartes may of course be older, as it is not clear whether Lenoir borrowed these appellations or thought them up himself.¹⁶⁵

In spite of Lenoir’s efforts, the administration during the Restoration had different plans and Descartes had to be moved again. On 26 February 1819, the remains of Descartes together with those of Mabillon and Montfaucon were brought to the closest church, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and placed in its chapel.

¹⁶⁴ Alexandre Lenoir, *Description historique et chronologique des monumens de sculpture réunis au musée des monumens français* (1806), p. 243.

¹⁶⁵ See Adam, *Vie et Œuvres de Descartes* (1910) and also Azouvi, *Descartes et la France* (2002). As Schütt shows, the earliest mention of the father metaphor was, notably, from Mercier in his *Éloge de Descartes* (1765) on p. 81 called Descartes ‘père de la Philosophie moderne’, see Schütt, *Die Adoption des »Vaters der modernen Philosophie«*, p. 97ⁿ. Schütt also brought to our attention that Tanja Thern found an even older use of this metaphor, see Thern, *Descartes im Licht der französischen Aufklärung. Studien zum Descartes-Bild Frankreichs im 18. Jahrhundert* (2003) p. 334 ff. She shows that the jesuit Antoine Guénard in his *Discours sur l’esprit philosophique* from 1755 called Descartes ‘le père de la Philosophie pensante’ indicating that Descartes said to the people that, in order to be a philosopher, it did not suffice to believe but that he should think. She also shows that in the 1942 edition of this discourse ‘pensante’ remarkably changed into ‘présente’ which, of course, comes very close to ‘moderne’, cf. p. 337.

4 THE ROLE OF DESCARTES IN THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

In our histories of philosophy, the year 1824 is marked by two facts: the death of Maine de Biran and, under the title *Système de politique positive*, the publication of the ‘opuscule fondamental’, as Auguste Comte called it, which offered the first exposition of the law of three states and its supplement, the classification of the sciences. Let us now imagine a speaker who, at the end of this same year 1824, had taken up the subject ‘View on the contemporary philosophy in France’.

He first would have saluted the respectable Destutt de Tracy who just turned seventy, the eldest survivor of the Ideology and, besides that, the inventor of this word which designates the French school which followed Condillac. Next to him, hardly any younger, we would have seen M. Laromiguière, whose *Leçons de philosophie* are regularly re-edited, an unforgettable example of self-critical Condillacism. According to chronological order, our speaker would discretely have regretted that after his course of 1811 at the Sorbonne, M. Royer-Collard had sacrificed philosophy to administration and politics and thus interrupted his dialogue with the Scots. He would not have neglected to recall the works of Baron Degérando, his excellent *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie* in particular. Finally, in order to amply make room for the younger people, he undoubtedly would barely have mentioned the philosophy of language of Vicomte de Bonald in order to have time to dwell longer on Professor Victor Cousin, who had already made a name at the École normale and the Faculty of Arts and had been unemployed since the assassination of the Duc de Berry, now occupied with the translation of Plato and the edition of Proclus [and Descartes (cz)] . . .

As to Maine de Biran, our speaker surely would have pronounced some words of affection in order to deplore the loss of a thinker of the highest rank, who passed away too early, without doing justice to himself in a work worthy of his genius.¹⁶⁶

We owe this excellent introduction of the philosophers mentioned above to Henri Gouhier. In this section we abandon our philosophical focus on the reevaluation of Descartes in order to briefly introduce and outline the political views and functions of de Maistre, de Bonald, Maine de Biran, Royer-Collard and Cousin. We only discuss them here with reference to this specific point, their philosophical views will be discussed in Part III.

4.1 Traditionalism and ultramontanism

Traditionalists regarded the French Revolution as a highly negative event that had both destroyed French traditions and threatened to religion. The writings of de Maistre and de Bonald were reactions against the irrelegiosity and amorality they thought the Revolution had brought about. The leading traditionalists were Joseph

¹⁶⁶ Gouhier, *Maine de Biran par lui-même* (1970), pp. 4-5, transl. cz.

de Maistre (1753-1821), Louis de Bonald (1754-1840), Benjamin Constant (1767-1830) and Félicité de Lamennais (1782-1854). Traditionalists or ultramontanists¹⁶⁷ were fierce defenders of the Catholic faith. During the eighteenth century, Catholicism had been under constant attack, first by Voltaire and Rousseau, and later when d'Alembert, Diderot and the whole army of Encyclopaedists overwhelmed it again. It can be said that during this period no person or theory defended Catholicism, as a result it was abandoned until the beginning of the nineteenth century when de Maistre *c.s.* defended it.

4.1.1 De Maistre

Joseph de Maistre has been described as a 'ferocious absolutist, fanatic theocrat, intransigent legitimist, apostle of a monstrous trinity of pope, king and hangman, in all affairs partisan of the most austere, most narrow-minded and most inflexible dogmas, gloomy figure of the Middle Ages of which he was the doctor, the inquisitor and the executioner'.¹⁶⁸ If, among catholics, there is a category which can be classified as 'very catholic', de Maistre belongs to it. His *Du Pape* (1817), for instance, is a plea for the restoration of a Medieval style of Roman Catholic theocracy. The reason why most of his writings are polemics aimed against the Revolution in general and against Rousseau, Bacon, Locke, Voltaire and Diderot in particular, can be found in his religious views.

To de Maistre, the Revolution was leading the people and not vice versa. Like a cyclone it was destroying everything that got in its way.¹⁶⁹ He even thought that there was a 'satanic character' in the French Revolution which 'distinguishes it from everything we have ever seen and perhaps will ever see'.¹⁷⁰ From the beginning, de Maistre attacked every revolutionary movement, probably not only for ideological reasons.

Born into a family of magistrates who were very loyal to the king, and educated by Jesuits at the University of Turin, he became a member of the Senate of Savoy in 1788. When the Revolution came and its effects became felt in Savoy, his fortune was lost, his career destroyed and he was forced to live in exile in Lausanne. He stayed there for three years during which time he wrote his *Considérations sur la France* (1796). He was then summoned to Turin by the king and appointed Sardinian Minister Plenipotentiary to St. Petersburg where he stayed

¹⁶⁷ From *ultramontanus*, 'beyond the mountains', as the northern members of the Catholic church regularly looked southward beyond the Alps (that is, to Rome) for guidance.

¹⁶⁸ Émile Faguet, *Politiques et moralistes du dix-neuvième siècle* (1891), p. 2. This was what people thought about de Maistre around 1830. At the time of the appearance of his posthumous writings, however, he was found 'charming', 'friendly', 'a delightful friend', 'an adorable father', 'a gentleman from the eighteenth century' as Faguet remarks.

¹⁶⁹ See De Maistre, *Considérations sur la France* [1797], in *Œuvres* I, ch. I, p. 66.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109. Here de Maistre has Robespierre's discourse against priesthood in mind, and he goes on 'l'apostasie solennelle des prêtres, la profanation des objets du culte, l'inauguration de la déesse Raison, et cette foule de scènes inouïes où les provinces tâcheroient de surpasser Paris; tout cela sort du cercle ordinaire des crimes, et semble appartenir à un autre monde.' According to de Maistre, the time has come for another divine explosion for the sake of human kind. The heresy of the sixteenth century (the Reformation) has cut Christian Europe in half and both halves were suffering from scepticism and indifference. The omens are clear to him: civil revolts, all sorts of epidemics and endless wars that divide us.

for 14 years. While there he wrote his *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, which was not published until the year of his death, 1821.

In *Considérations sur la France* (1796), de Maistre not only reveals his fiercely critical opinion of the Revolution, but also his view that history is a display of the operation of divine providence. He finds that the constitution developed by revolutionary Jacobinism relies on an abstract and imaginary anthropology:

La philosophie moderne est tout à la fois trop matérielle et trop présomptueuse pour apercevoir les véritables ressorts du monde politique. Une de ses folies est de croire qu'une assemblée peut constituer une nation; qu'une constitution, c'est-à-dire, l'ensemble des lois fondamentales qui conviennent à une nation, et qui doivent lui donner telle ou telle forme de gouvernement, est un ouvrage comme un autre qui n'exige que de l'esprit, des connoissances et de l'exercice...¹⁷¹

By the term 'modern philosophy' in the above quote, we assume that he basically means mainstream eighteenth-century philosophy. As to his philosophical stance, we do not detect an actual rehabilitation of Descartes in his works, but his anti-Lockean attitude and defence of innate ideas make it worthwhile to examine the issue further in Part III.

4.1.2 *De Bonald*

Louis-Gabriel-Ambroise de Bonald (1754-1840) was a contemporary of de Maistre with a similar background. He also fought against eighteenth-century liberal and materialist doctrines. De Bonald, born into a noble family, joined the royal musketeers, became mayor of Milhau (near his place of birth Monna) at the age of twenty two and later became a member and president of the Assembly of Aveyron. However, when he was no longer permitted to recognize the civil constitution of the clergy, he emigrated and joined the army of Condé¹⁷² against France.

According to de Bonald, the world had fallen into heresy and this human arrogance had resulted in the French Revolution. However, in 1802, 'le *tour du monde social est fait*'.¹⁷³ It was obvious to him that after the experiment of popular authority, there would be a return to authority and religion. The Social Contract à la Rousseau was thought to be a moral impossibility and the destructive passions which had surfaced could only be reformed by a social power that was both external and superior to the powers of individuals. De Bonald's philosophy fully depends on his social philosophy, which is nothing but a critical reflection on what he calls 'this experiment'.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁷² Louis-Joseph, 8^e Prince de Condé, Duc de Bourbon (1736-1818) was one of the first princes who emigrated after the fall of the Bastille in 1789. He established himself at Worms in 1791 where he raised an army of emigrants (the so-called 'army of Condé'), which took part in the anti-revolutionary campaigns of 1792-1796.

¹⁷³ De Bonald, *Législation primitive, considérée dans les derniers temps par les seules lumières de la raison* [1802], vol. 1, in *Œuvres*, vol. II, p. 132. The rest of the sentence reads: 'il ne reste plus de terres à découvrir, et le moment est venu d'offrir à l'homme la carte de l'univers moral, et la théorie de la société.'

Quoting Degérando's *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie* throughout his *Recherches philosophiques* (1818-1826), de Bonald directly attacks philosophy itself. The main argument for this is that philosophers are not always on a par with each other, therefore philosophy itself is inconsistent and lacks authority. As a result, it is useless. He remarks that philosophy has never contributed to the stability and flourishing of nations, using the examples of the Spartans and Jews who simply maintained the beliefs of their ancestors rather than indulging themselves in idle, sterile discussions. The only criterion de Bonald seems to consider is whether philosophers were useful to society.

La diversité des doctrines n'a fait, siècle en siècle, que s'accroître avec le nombre des maîtres et les progrès des connaissances; et l'Europe, qui possède aujourd'hui des bibliothèques entières d'écrits philosophiques, et qui compte presque autant de philosophes que d'écrivains, pauvre au milieu de tant de richesses, et incertaine de sa route avec tant de guides; l'Europe, le centre et le foyer de toutes les lumières du monde, attend encore une *philosophie*.¹⁷⁴

We shall discuss his stance towards Descartes and the innate ideas in the next part.

4.2 Idéologie

Following Condillac, the movement known as 'Idéologie' was in many ways a counterpart to the traditionalists. Its propagators were Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) and Cabanis (1757-1808). In opposition to the traditionalists, the 'Idéologues' were proponents of the ideals of the French Revolution and played an important role in post-revolutionary politics. Moreover, they were particularly hostile towards the religious restoration. During the Convention (1792-1795) they were on the moderate side, and during the Terror (1793-1794) they too were under threat. Their most important activities were the restoration of order in the different agencies of the educational system and the organization of the French Institute, its three academies and the Academie des sciences morales et politiques. Because they believed that a critical mind is essential in the arts and sciences, their role was suspended by Napoleon when he 'reorganized' the Institute in 1803.

The term 'Idéologie' stems from Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836), who, in his *Projet d'éléments d'idéologie*, described it as the science that could form true ideas, express them with exactitude and combine them appropriately.

Cette science peut s'appeler idéologie, si l'on ne fait attention qu'au sujet, grammaire générale, si l'on n'a égard qu'au moyen; et logique, si l'on ne considère que le but. Quelque nom qu'on lui donne, elle renferme nécessairement ces trois parties; car on ne peut en traiter une raisonnablement sans traiter les deux autres. Idéologie me paraît le terme générique, parceque la science des idées renferme celle de leur expression, et celle de leur combinaison.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ De Bonald, *Recherches philosophiques*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, part 3, p. 2. Henceforth: *Recherches*.

¹⁷⁵ Destutt de Tracy, *Projet d'éléments d'idéologie* [1800-1801], pp. 19-20.

Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt de Tracy was born in Paris in 1754. On his deathbed, his father, a brave soldier, made him promise to follow a military career. This he duly did, first in Strasbourg, then with the musketeers of the royal house. At the age of twenty-two he was a colonel second class of a regiment of the royal cavalry which he became the commander of two years later. As a deputy of the Estates General he proved himself attached to the principles of the Revolution. In 1789, the Estates General were called to meet and he joined the Third Estate, although he had come from an aristocratic family. He was soon elected to the Constituent Assembly. By 1792, he became disgusted with the extreme revolutionaries and retired from politics. During the Terror he was imprisoned for a year, which enabled him to study Condillac and Locke, resulting in his 'Idéologie'. In 1796 he was made a member of the Institut national, in the field of Moral and Political Sciences.

Although they initially supported Bonaparte, around 1803 the Idéologues realized that he was not the liberal successor of the Revolution that they had hoped for. Napoleon found them hostile to his project of creating a law that would deal with crimes against state security and he excluded them from the Tribunal and suppressed the Académie des sciences morales. Furthermore, the decrees that founded the Imperial University were prepared by the opponents of the Idéologues: Fontanes, Cardinal de Bausset and de Bonald. Destutt de Tracy was still active in educational reform in the sense that he wanted to create a national system of education. Because of his membership of the Senate during the Consulate and Empire, he had the opportunity to oppose to Napoleon's non-liberal administration. In 1814 he called for the removal of the Emperor for which he was rewarded with the restoration of his noble title by Louis XVIII in that same year. However, he still supported the liberal opposition during the Restoration of Louis XVIII and Charles X, who he had helped bring to power during the July Revolution of 1830.

Although the Ideology is strictly speaking an analysis of the human faculties on the basis of Condillac, it has a completely different inspiration. Unlike Condillac, Destutt de Tracy is not interested in the origin and genesis of the faculties. He even reproaches Condillac for having made distinctions where he should have united concepts and vice versa. Ideology is the analysis of ideas which breaks them down into the sensory elements of which they are composed. This new science would replace classic logic, according to Destutt de Tracy, and separate ideas that are founded in experience from those that are groundless. According to Destutt de Tracy, all ideas are physiologically determined, hence the question that was asked by the Second Class of the Institut national on 6 October 1799 concerning the influence of habit on judgement. As we will see in the next section, it was Maine de Biran who won this contest with his *Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude* in 1802.

4.3 Maine de Biran

François-Pierre Gonthier de Biran was born in Bergerac in 1766 (the name 'Maine' did not appear on his birth certificate, but was just a family tradition which was followed on the paternal side of the family). He was educated at Périgeux where he

followed classes managed by the ‘doctrinaires’. At the age of eighteen he went to Paris where he joined the royal guard. He was injured in a mob uprising in 1789 while defending the king and a few years later, after both his parents and two of his brothers had died, he retired to the castle of Grateloup near his birthplace. Maine de Biran stayed in this lovely place throughout the Terror.

During his life he published very little: *L'influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser* (1802) for which he won a prize from the Institut de France, *Examen des leçons de philosophie de M. Laromiguière* (1817) and in 1819 an article on Leibniz for the *Biographie universelle*. He only published the last article in his own name, but he also participated anonymously in the essay competition of the Academy of Berlin of 1805, resulting in his *De l'aperception immédiate*. In the same year he won a prize from the Institut for his *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, on the basis of which he was made a member of the Institut. In 1812 he also won a prize from the Academy of Copenhagen for his *Mémoire sur les rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme*.

As for his political career, he was administrator of the Dordogne from 1795 to 1797, member of the Conseil des Cinq-Cents from 1797 to 1798, sous-préfet of Bergerac from 1806 to 1812, questeur à la Chambre in 1815, Conseiller d'État in 1816 and deputy of Bergerac from 1818 until his death in 1824.

In the next part we discuss the philosophy of Maine de Biran in detail and show the role Descartes plays in the foundations of de Biran's psychology.

4.4 Royer-Collard

Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard (1763-1845) was born in Sompuis, into a devout Jansenist family who sent him to the Collège des Doctrinaires of Chaumont. When he left this congregation, there being no vow, he chose a career in law. The Revolution of 1789, however, pushed him into the foreground of politics. He was elected a member of the City Council of Paris and later became a secretary of the Commune where he met Danton and Condorcet. Refusing to participate in the excesses of the Revolution, he left the Commune. However, he did not give up the cause of liberty and a few days after the outlawing of the deputies of la Gironde, he presented a petition to the Convention in which he pleaded for the rights that had thus far been suppressed. After this he had to flee, seeking refuge in his home town. In 1796 he protested against the directory of the department of Marne which he alleged had made illegal demands. In 1797 he was elected a deputy of the Cinq-Cents, but due to the Fructidor coup d'état on 4 September 1797, he was forced to resign from his position. He became a royalist and a leading figure in a small committee in Paris that tried to propagate the Restoration.

When the Consulate was established, however, the hope of a monarchy was lost and Royer-Collard devoted himself entirely to philosophy. During the Empire he was preoccupied with Scottish philosophy, especially that of Thomas Reid who had always interested him, and, more generally, with attacks on eighteenth-century philosophy. For this task he used Descartes and his followers, and the Fathers of Port-Royal with whom he had already been acquainted in his youth. Most

biographers, and especially Cousin,¹⁷⁶ say that he did not know much about philosophy, yet from 1811 to 1814 he lectured at the Sorbonne. During this relatively short period he was the first holding a French chair to rehabilitate Descartes, if we are to believe Victor Cousin. Although Royer-Collard had no liking for Napoleon, the latter highly approved of his inaugural lecture, which we discuss in the next part.

As we saw in the opening quote of this chapter, Royer-Collard was only briefly active as a professor of philosophy. From 1814 he became involved in government after the Bourbon Restoration, sitting in the chamber of deputies almost continuously from 1815 to 1839. From 1815 to 1820 he was president of the commission for public instruction. Royer-Collard was a leader of the Doctrinaires, a middle-of-the-road group that included François Guizot, Camille Jordan, Charles de Rémusat, and Madame de Staël's daughter, the Duchesse de Broglie.¹⁷⁷

4.5 Cousin

Victor Cousin was born into a poor working class family in 1792. He was raised in abject poverty until 1803. On an October afternoon of that year, the pupils of the Lycée Charlemagne noisily chased one of their comrades who was wearing what in their eyes was a ridiculous gown. While they were beating this poor child, a rascal who was playing in the gutter suddenly threw himself into the middle of the scuffle and dispersed the gang by administering a torrent of blows. That night the mother of the rescued child learned about this act of heroism and also that he belonged to a family of working people. She offered to pay for the tuition of this hero, and Victor Cousin had started his career.

Attending two classes a year and winning every prize in the general competitions, his studies at the Lycée went well. In 1810 Cousin entered the École normale during which he took his first course of philosophy. In his *Fragments philosophiques*, Cousin writes:

Il est resté et restera toujours dans ma mémoire, avec une émotion reconnaissante, le jour où, pour la première fois en 1810, élève de l'École normale, destiné à l'enseignement des lettres, j'entendis M. Laromiguière. Ce jour décida de toute ma vie; il m'enleva à mes premières études . . .¹⁷⁸

The state of philosophy was very poor in those days. There was no philosophical education in the lycées and the faculties were just coming into existence. The

¹⁷⁶ See Simon, *Victor Cousin* (1891), p. 12: 'M. Royer-Collard, ancien greffier de la Commune de Paris, ancien membre du conseil des Cinq-Cents, avocat, nullement philosophe, fut nommé professeur de philosophie en 1809. Or il faut qu'un professeur de philosophie enseigne la philosophie; pour l'enseigner, il faut la savoir. M. Royer-Collard, qui ne la savait pas, se promenait sur les quais à la recherche d'un maître. Il le trouva dans l'étalage d'un bouquiniste. Un volume dépareillé des *Essais de philosophie* de Reid fut pour lui ce qu'avait été Descartes pour Malebranche, ce qu'était, presque au même moment, La Romiguière pour Victor Cousin.'

¹⁷⁷ See Royer-Collard, *Les fragments philosophiques*, p. LIV ff.

¹⁷⁸ Cousin, *Fragments philosophiques* (preface to the second ed. 1833), in *Œuvres*, vol. 2, p. 70. Also see Simon, *Victor Cousin* (1891), p. 12.

Idéologues had almost been forgotten and the history of philosophy only went as far as Condillac.

In 1812, at the age of twenty, Cousin became Professor of Greek Literature. The next year, he was charged with the task of overseeing the philosophy courses at the Faculty of Arts not so much in the role of professor, as in that of co-ordinator. In 1815, Royer-Collard chose him as his replacement and in the same year Cousin became 'active' in politics as well. He joined the royalist volunteers, an act which, in his case, consisted only of a trip to Vincennes from which he returned the next day.

As he was almost totally unprepared when he began his career in public education, he initially followed in the footsteps of Laromiguière and Royer-Collard, but also followed Maine de Biran. Simon summarizes this as follows: 'Il apprit de La Romiguière à étudier la sensation, de Royer-Collard à étudier l'intelligence, et de Maine de Biran à étudier la volonté'.¹⁷⁹ His lectures in philosophy during the first year were almost entirely focused on Scottish philosophy, but from 1816 he became more and more interested in German philosophy. He started to learn German, though, even according to his biographer Simon, he never knew it well. At the end of 1817 he thought he had surpassed Kant and wanted to study the new German philosophy, namely Schelling's philosophy of nature. He decided to visit Schelling in Heidelberg, but did not find him. Instead he found Hegel 'par hasard'.¹⁸⁰

In 1820 the Duc de Berry, nephew of the former king Louis XVIII and son of the Comte d'Artois, the future Charles X, was assassinated and a violent reaction ensued. The government was terrified and decided to limit the electoral law, the freedom of the press and even individual freedom. The three courses of Guizot, Cousin and Villemain, which were highly popular and always drew large crowds, suddenly became suspect. The constitutional party was divided. One side chose the reactionaries, while the other, which included Royer-Collard, remained loyal to the Constitution. In the chamber of deputies the Doctrinaires had voted against the minister, and de Serre, who was on the reactionary side, was forced to break with his old allies. This meant that Camille Jordan, Royer-Collard and Guizot were all dismissed from the state council. The effect of these events was even felt at the Sorbonne and resulted in Cousin being asked to leave his chair which remained vacant during the following eight years. Cousin still gave his courses at the École normale, but in 1822, even this school was closed down. 'Tel était le libéralisme de la Restauration, que, par une illusion rétrospective, on se plaît quelquefois à rappeler comme l'âge d'or du régime parlementaire', as Janet put it.¹⁸¹ During his country retreat, Cousin started his studies and publication of the manuscripts of Proclus (6 vols., 1820-1827). He also published the complete works of Descartes (11 vols., 1824-1826) and translated Plato (13 vols. 1822-1840).

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 16.

¹⁸⁰ Cousin, *Œuvres* (1844) vol. 2, (*Cours d'histoire de la philosophie morale, fragments philosophiques*), preface to the second edition, p. 20. In Chapter 9 we will return to Cousin's relation with Schelling and Hegel.

¹⁸¹ Janet, *Victor Cousin et son œuvre* (1885), p. 161.

In 1824 he was charged with the task of accompanying his pupil, the son of the Duc de Montebello, to check on a young lady who this pupil was planning to marry, the daughter of Madame de Gerebzoff, a Russian noble who lived in Dresden. This suited Cousin well, as he had been waiting for some time for an opportunity to meet Hegel again. Things did not go according to plan, however, as Cousin was suddenly arrested by the Prussian police in Dresden and sent to Berlin. He was suspected of preaching Carbonarism,¹⁸² according to Simon, but according to Janet, he was suspected of preaching Jacobinism and engaging in espionage. The exact accusation remained unclear as the procedure was secret and the official documents were not presented to him. Cousin stayed in prison for six months until Hegel was able to have him released.¹⁸³ During his time in prison he studied German and read the works of Kant, Fichte, Jacobi and Hegel.¹⁸⁴ He also tried to translate some verses of Goethe whom he had visited in Weimar. After his release, Cousin stayed with Hegel and some of his students (Gans, Hotho, Henning, Michelet) for a while, and they maintained correspondence thereafter.

When he returned to France, the enthusiasm surrounding him was even greater, as people saw him as a hero. His only aspiration was to finish his translation of Plato, but due to his popularity he was given back his assistant professorship in 1828 by the Martinac ministry. The Revolution of 1830 brought Cousin closer to politics, but he strongly disapproved of the violence. During the July monarchy he became a member of the Conseil royal de l'Instruction publique (1830) and in the following years he became a member of the Académie française and the Académie des sciences morales et politiques. He became the director of the

¹⁸² The derivation of this word is unclear and there are many fantastic stories about it. Most probably the Carbonari were some kind of derivative of the Freemasons. The movement started in southern Italy and, to put it briefly, it strove for freedom and independence. In France Carbonarism took root around 1820, Cousin's part in it is not clear.

¹⁸³ In his edition of *Œuvres de Platon*, vol. 3 (1826), Cousin thanks Hegel. In the preface it reads: 'Hegel, il y a dix ans que vous me reçûtes à Heydelberg comme un frère, et que dès le premier moment nos âmes se comprirent et s'aimèrent. L'absence et le silence ne refroidirent pas votre amitié; et quant dans ces derniers temps, voyageant de nouveau en Allemagne, une police extravagante, dirigée à son insu par une politique odieuse, osa attenter à ma liberté, me charger des accusations les plus atroces, et me déclarer d'avance convaincu et condamné, vous accourûtes spontanément vous présenter devant mes juges, leur dire que j'étais votre ami, et engager votre parole pour la mienne'.

¹⁸⁴ These are his own words, in the next chapter we will see that although he 'read' these works, he did not understand much of them.

The role of Descartes in the political context

Ecole normale in 1834, and even became the Minister of Education in the cabinet of Thiers in 1840.

When Louis Napoleon came to power in 1848, Cousin's glorydays came to an end as, in his defence of secular education, he had taken the part of the university against the clergy. After the coup d'état of 1851 he retired and spent the rest of his life studying and writing. He died in Cannes 13 January 1867.