

Philosophizing with a Historiographical Figure

Descartes in Degérando's *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie* (1804 and 1847).

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Abstract: The writings by the 'state philosophers' of nineteenth-century France are often seen, either as entirely driven by political or ideological concerns, or reduced to mere history of philosophy. Hence, ironically, those who established the philosophical canon that still now informs philosophy teaching in France were themselves excluded from that canon. Using the heuristic concept of a *philosophical figure*, this contribution intends to show how, for these philosophers, historiography represented a seemingly inoffensive, but in reality extremely efficient, means of searching out philosophical alternatives to the institutionally dominant philosophy of Victor Cousin (1792-1867). Focalizing on the almost forgotten case of Joseph-Marie Degérando (1772-1842), I show how he used the philosophical figure of Descartes and how he used it to counter Cousin.

1. Introduction

The writings of nineteenth-century French philosophy often have a marked concern for the historiography of philosophy, particularly in relation to the early modern period. This phenomenon can be explained in three distinct ways. First, nineteenth-century thinkers had to position themselves in relation to the French Revolution and the values associated with it, which involved an empiricist, or even materialist, epistemology, a radical conception of the

political liberty of man, and an eudaemonist, sometimes even hedonist, moral philosophy. Returning to the major philosophical figures of the early modern period involved making a choice between perpetuating or breaking with those values. This implied that they had to position themselves as either modern or anti-modern while also proposing a conception of their own present to guide them toward the future. Second, the French 19th century was a period of great political instability (Landrin, 2009). In such a context, historiography seemed innocent enough but was, in fact, a very efficient tool for staking out a philosophical position. Behind the masks of Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Bacon, Locke, Reid, or Kant, they could assert their authority and claim their philosophical identity without taking too many risks. Third, these new narratives about the philosophy of the early modern period were particular in not being used by historians in manuals or lectures alone. They could also be found in the work of publicists and positivists. Recent commentators have described the phenomenon in terms of a kind of instrumentalization of past philosophy in the hands of the first French historians of philosophy.¹ These analyses have helped to open up institutionalized teaching programs to the philosophy excluded from them by 19th-century historiographers. They have allowed us to profit from texts which, until recently, were denied philosophical value because they were not part of the canon established in the 19th century, such as those of the materialists, the sceptics, or those of the clandestine libertine traditions.

French philosophy has profited immensely from these reappraisals. At the same time they have brought about a depreciation of the philosophical content of 19th-century French historiography. The French spiritualist historiographers are not considered ‘good’

¹ See in particular Bloch, *Matière à histoires*; Vermeren, *Le Jeu de la philosophie*; Daled, *Le matérialisme occulté*; Rey, *Les enjeux*; Ragghianti, *La Tentazione*, Narcy, ‘Le Platon libéral’, and Borghero, *Interpretazioni*. Regarding the sociology of French philosophy, see Fabiani, *Les philosophes de la République* et *Qu’est-ce qu’un philosophe français?*; Pinto, *La Vocation*; Pinto, ‘Le sociologue’.

contextualist historians who adhere to an ethos of impartiality. But they are not considered ‘good’ philosophers either, as representatives of a ‘French spiritualism’ that is not on a par with ‘German idealism’ or ‘English empiricism’. They are considered neither sufficiently scientific to be good historians of philosophy nor sufficiently engaged to be real philosophers. They represent an army of ‘neither-nors’ who have been erased from the very canon that they created.

The case of Joseph-Marie Degérando (1772-1842) is a dramatic example. Although he never held a professorship, and rather occupied important positions in the French civil service, he was the author of the first 19th-century history of philosophy in France (Chappey, Christen et Moullier, *Joseph-Marie de Gérando*, 43-44). His *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie*, published in 3 volumes in 1804, was, however, often derided; it was described, for example, as the product of an ‘essentially flaccid mind, slippery like macaroni’ (Cassé Saint Prosper, *Almanach*, 83; see also Chappey, Christen et Moullier, *Joseph-Marie de Gérando*, 11). He was also considered a philosophical turncoat, as an ‘old *Idéologue*’ who first took great care in applying a Condillacian empiricism, but who abruptly changed sides to Kant when Napoleon came to power and kicked out the *Idéologues*. He was also described as a mere underling of Victor Cousin (1792-1867), as ‘useless and broken-down, desiring retirement most of all’, and as providing prime examples of ‘intellectual decadence’ in his functions at the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences (Rochoux, *Epicure opposé à Descartes*, x-xi; on Rochoux, see Antoine-Mahut, ‘Cartésianisme dominant’). He was, we learn, a weather vane whose opinions changed with the political winds and ‘a man more apt at developing and strengthening a dominant system than at making one dominant himself’ (*Discours de M. le Comte Beugnot*, quoted in Chappey, Christen and Moullier, *Joseph-Marie de Gérando*, 17). He was a paradigmatic representative of the ‘eclectics’, in the sense that his work was not only syncretistic but also opportunistic. He was ‘a coward, in both senses of the

term, of style and of heart' (Stendhal, *Lettres à Pauline*, quoted in Chappey, Christen, and Moullier, *Joseph-Marie de Gérando*, 16).

Recently, however, renewed interest Degérando has arisen, represented by a volume edited by Chappey, Christen, and Moullier (*Joseph-Marie de Gérando*) and a doctoral thesis by Antoine Bocquet (*Portrait d'un spiritualiste*). Interest has grown in certain aspects of his 'philosophy', which has been understood as a spiritualism paradoxically equipped with an authentic social doctrine (Bocquet, 'Les paradoxes'); as a philosophy with a moral and social agenda (Yuva, 'L'utilité indirecte'); as a philosophy open to otherness (König-Pralong, *Médiévisme philosophique*, 62-67); as a 'philosophy of experience' inspired by Bacon and in constant dialogue with certain German counterparts (Manzo, 'Empirismo'); and, finally, as a very peculiar 'comparative' practice in the history of philosophy, developed from his interests in natural history and related to his functions at the Society of the Observers of Mankind (Lézé, 'Contrôler le territoire').² So it seems that Degérando can be of interest in and by himself and not only as the champion of the 'neither-nor'!

Here, I adopt a different perspective, taking my departure in an anomaly. I focus on the way in which the figure of Descartes evolved in Degérando's *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie* between the first edition (1804) and the second part (1847) of the second edition (the first part of this second edition was published in 1822). In the first edition, Descartes is depicted as inclining toward idealism. In the second edition, he appears as someone who is much closer to Bacon's philosophy of experience. And my question is: does this evolution simply reflect the fact that Degérando was a weather-vane? Or did it, on the

² The *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme* was a scientific society created in 1799 in Paris and was for a long time considered the cradle of French anthropology. It disappeared in 1804, the year the first editions of the *Histoire comparée* appeared. Degérando is considered one of the first French anthropologists, on account of his *Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages* (1800). On this aspect, see Copans and Jamin, *Aux origines de l'anthropologie française*.

contrary, reflect the fact that, in the later assessment, he took a personal philosophical stand? In addressing this question, I appeal to an original heuristic notion of a ‘philosophical figure’³. The interest of this term *figure*—which is of the same family as *fingere* (to fashion), *figulus* (potter), *factor* (sculptor, modeler) and ‘effigy’ (image, portrait, statue)—lies in the way it allows for a description of how historiography molds a philosopher rather than simply presenting a finished product. A philosophical figure such as ‘Descartes’ can take several forms and significations, and this plasticity of form is the condition under which it becomes able to incorporate different values and express different judgements. Moreover, a philosophical figure is always attached to a specific philosophical content, identifiable by all, within a given intellectual field, constituting it as a commonly shared point of reference. Finally, a figure does not acquire meaning in isolation. It fits into a genealogical tree in which family relationships between philosophers are constantly conceived and re-conceived.

In France, during the first half of the 19th century, the figure of Descartes was caught in the middle between two opposing, dominant philosophical orientations. First, there was the historiography of the *Idéologues* and their positivist heirs who favored a return to Bacon whom they considered the true father of the philosophy of experience. They wanted to overturn the ontological and metaphysical orientation represented by Descartes’ doctrine of the *cogito*. Instead, a new psychology had to be an empirical psychology, based on Bacon, Locke and Condillac, similar to the kind already developed by the Scottish philosophers, and by Reid in particular. As a reaction to this ‘sensualist’ turn in France and Great Britain, but also to the rise of pantheism in Germany, Victor Cousin’s later spiritualist historiography aimed at promoting a dualist conception of Cartesianism, grounded in an ever more metaphysical and ontological interpretation of the *cogito*. Cousin’s reassessment of the figure

³ For a more general analysis of Descartes’ figures in nineteenth-century France, see Antoine-Mahut, ‘Figures of Descartes’.

of Descartes in the early 19th century was thus, in a sense, a reversal of a reversal, or a return to the Descartes figure that had been criticized by the *Idéologues*. Within these debates, the interlocutors constantly pitted different conceptions of philosophy's past against each other.

In this article, I want to show how the evolution of the figure of Descartes in Degérando's work can be considered a response to the progressive radicalization of Cousin's Cartesian program toward a more idealist position. By displacing Descartes from the idealist side on which the *Idéologues* had originally placed him and moving him closer to the side of a philosophy of experience originating from Bacon, Degérando aimed to correct Cousin's metaphysical and ontological extremism. Philosophically, then, Degérando's re-positioning of the Cartesian figure represented a kind of *spiritualist self-criticism*. Studying Degérando's case thus allows us to exemplify how one can go about rectifying a dominant use of a past philosophical figure. It represents an effort to construct an alternative to the official philosophy. In practice, then, Degérando's *Histoire comparée* and its evolution between successive editions thus puts on display a French philosophy in the process of finding itself, through the intermediary of a history and via authoritative figures that were not its own but rather hailed from the past. In developing my argument, I shall first describe the forms of reciprocal exclusion between Descartes and the 'philosophy of experience' in Degérando's 1804 edition of the *Histoire comparée*. Next, I focus on the principal characteristics of Cousin's Descartes. Finally, I analyze the motivations behind the re-admittance of Descartes into the philosophy of experience in the 1847 edition of the second part of Degérando's *Histoire comparée*. Through this analysis, *philosophical historiography* will emerge as an efficient philosophical tool for pluralizing the canonical figures themselves.

2. Philosophy of experience and Cartesianism: the 1804 edition

For Degérando, the philosophy of experience represented a bulwark against all kinds of extremism. It was also the unifying element of all past philosophies, and guaranteed the equilibrium of thought (*Histoire* [1804]: II, 397). It was, however, not a mere syncretism. The impartiality of which it boasted was not neutral: elaborating it involved *judging* on the basis of a previously established cartography of all past systems that was as complete as possible. Searching for the points of reconciliation among these systems was like studying a ‘battle’ between seemingly false opinions (*Histoire* [1804]: I, xxxvi-xxxvii). When elaborating such a cartography, Degérando identified two possible transgressions on the part of the historian of philosophy. The first was ‘the predilection [...] for a particular philosophy’ which implied using past philosophy simply to justify one’s own opinions, while the second was the pretense of an ‘absolute impartiality’ which refused to ‘judge’ or ‘put to use’ the ‘data’ of past opinions in order to ‘establish something, be it theoretical or practical’ (*Histoire* [1804]: I, xxx).

Degérando’s own philosophical project—his version of a philosophy of experience—consisted in discovering the epistemological criteria for grounding a true psychology. A true psychology should respect the specificity of its object and have a level of scientificity comparable to that already achieved by the natural sciences. His project should thus be distinguished from an *empiricism* understood as ‘the system which, by focusing exclusively on sensible impressions, denies the data of experience the support of speculative truths’ (Degérando 1804: II, 359). But it should also be distinguished from a *rationalism* which would not take into account the phenomena. Instead, in a new theory of the human mind and its abilities grounded in the philosophy of experience, ‘reason comes to the fore, unites, combines and transforms the first elements of truth provided by the senses. The sensible impressions, having lost their empiricist form, instead acquire the form of experience’ (*Histoire* [1804]: II, 366). What Degérando was seeking to write was thus ‘a peace treaty,

founded on the double experience of external senses and inner feeling' (*Histoire* [1804]: II, 395). The pivotal figure in this regard was Bacon. In England, Bacon studied nature while 'referring everything to experience'. He rejected both 'blind empiricism' and 'temerarious speculation' (*Histoire* [1804]: I, 288). In France, in contrast, Descartes stood as the idealist philosopher who 'encloses everything inside the sanctuary of meditation and takes everything from his own ideas'. In Germany, finally, Leibniz emerged in the middle, trying to link facts to principles (*Histoire* [1804]: I, 284-85).

In this first edition of the *Histoire comparée*, Degérando contrasted Descartes' philosophy with the moderation and fecundity of Bacon's. He noted how the influence of Gassendi, the 'French Bacon', had been constantly overlooked because his philosophy had never been considered on its own terms but only through the lens of Descartes' criticisms and caricatures (in the *Fifth Replies* to the *Objections*). It was considered as a form of empiricism instead of what it actually was, namely the first French philosophy of the human mind:

In his controversy against Descartes, the calm adversary of this impetuous genius, he (i.e. Gassendi) pits method against hypotheses; he pits Descartes against Descartes himself, dissipating the illusion of innate ideas; he destroys dogmatism that is based on unreasonable doubt. (Degérando 1804: I, 303-4)

The two conceptual moves that Degérando denounced in the general reception of Gassendi and Descartes—reducing the philosophy of the former to a mere empiricism and elevating that of the latter to the status of a paradigmatic philosophy of mind—complemented each other. It was, however, not Degérando's aim to rectify such deformations. He was not seeking to bring to light the 'true' Gassendi or even the 'true' Descartes. He was interested in showing how going to one extreme always entailed another, opposite, movement toward the

other extreme. Highlighting the ‘secret and invisible reign’ of Descartes ‘on minds not only in France but even in Europe’, a reign ‘to which we (still) submit voluntarily’ (*Histoire* [1804]: II, 22), he thus attempted to rediscover, in Gassendi, a French background for Condillac’s philosophy that even the *Idéologues* had overlooked, namely in Gassendi’s elaboration of an analytic method against abstract hypotheses, of an empirical psychology against innate ideas, and of a moderate philosophy of experience against the excesses of dogmatism (which had also given rise to an opposed excessive scepticism).

Rehabilitating Gassendi also allowed Degérando to highlight the true importance of the philosophical figure which, in turn, had eclipsed Descartes, namely Locke. By rooting the ideas not only in the senses, but also in reflection, Locke had rediscovered the path initially indicated by Bacon and later cleared by Gassendi. The foundation of the new metaphysics, ‘the unique metaphysics that true reflection can adhere to’, was thus developed, not by Descartes, but by Locke. And through Locke, we can come back to Gassendi as a Metaphysician (*Histoire* [1804], I, 313).

It is important to elucidate the nature of this ‘unique metaphysics’. Degérando manifestly had Condillac in mind, in particular the empirical metaphysics elaborated at the beginning of the *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines*. This empirical metaphysics acquired its entire meaning from the opposition it formed to Descartes’ *Meditations* that Condillac had considered to be too abstract and self-absorbed (Condillac, *Essay*, 3-4). Following Condillac, Degérando thus portrayed Descartes as wedded to the synthetic method *a priori*, to a method

which begins with abstract axioms in order to move downward to the particular truths—a method which incidentally corresponded very well to the inclinations of this proud, enterprising, audacious mind, a friend of systematic combinations and envious

of the creative force they seem to lend the understanding—by populating, at will, the regions of science with ever new beings. (*Histoire* [1804]: II, 17)

For Degérando, this analysis served to counterbalance the subliminal supremacy Descartes still had over contemporary philosophy. The choice to maintain the term ‘metaphysics’ did, however, set Degérando apart from the *Idéologues* and in particular from the most metaphysically inclined among them, namely Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836), for he wanted to entirely replace the term ‘metaphysics’ with that of ‘ideology’, by which he meant a science of ideas (Destutt, *Mémoire*, 324). For him, maintaining the term ‘metaphysics’ implied holding on to the old signification, it implied remaining attached to the criticized Cartesian tradition.⁴ In the first edition of the *Histoire comparée*, when Degérando highlighted Locke’s contributions to the overturning of Cartesianism, he was thus seeking to combine the heritage from the *Idéologues* with a more direct, spiritualist orientation.

Third eclipse: as a psychologist, Descartes was superseded by the Scottish philosophers. When asserting that the Scottish school had developed a Lockian conception of reflection—for Degérando the best part of Locke’s metaphysics—, he associated himself with the work of Dugald Stewart (1753-1828). Dugald Stewart’s rehabilitation of Reid’s philosophy had highlighted the importance of common sense, understood as ‘an intellectual instinct that forces us to admit truths’ (*Histoire* [1804]: I, 376). This take on common sense represented yet another way of holding together the empirical requirement and the rational concern. It also testified to the fact that it was possible to lay down truth criteria which were both individual and commonly shared. On the scales of the philosophy of experience, this alignment with Dugald Stewart re-situated the spiritualist project close to Bacon while distancing it from Descartes. It allowed Degérando to complete what he called ‘the family

⁴ On Destutt de Tracy’s conception of Ideology, see Clauzade, *L’Idéologie*, 129-210.

tree of human knowledge and of moral science' (*Histoire* [1804]: I, 376). In the first edition of the *Histoire comparée*, Descartes thus appeared *either* as someone who, by presenting a caricature of both himself and his primary adversary, Gassendi, had contributed to the decline of the philosophy of experience in France, *or* as someone who had been overlooked and caricatured by the philosophy of experience. The history of the relation between Descartes and Gassendi was that of a mutual exclusion that Degérando set out to denounce.

3. Victor Cousin's dominant Descartes

In contrast to Degérando, Cousin was a professor. When he replaced Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard (1763-1847) at the Sorbonne in 1815, his teaching was highly popular among students. Cousin filled the auditoriums, promoting the values of free will (Ragghianti and Vermeren, 'Introduction', 5-57). In his first series of lectures, Descartes was not particularly valorized. Cousin stressed the sceptical dangers of taking recourse to doubt too systematically. The young philosopher was the author of a Latin thesis on the analytic method of Condillac. He had been taught by Pierre Laromiguière (1756-1837) whose project had been to rethink the heritage of Condillac. Coming from this background, Cousin was unsurprisingly more concerned with understanding the internal sense as formulated by the Scottish philosophers than with criticizing the philosopher who later, for Cousin, became the father of the despised 18th-century 'sensualism', namely Condillac.⁵ In this respect, the young Cousin was Degérandian. But without saying so.

Rapidly, however, Cousin moved closer to the philosopher whose memory and

⁵ On Cousin's first lectures and the idea that 'the reign of Descartes ends with Reid', see Cousin, 'Discours d'ouverture', 15. On Cousin and Scottish Philosophy, see Malherbe, 'La réception', 115-136. See also Wojciechowska, 'Le sensualisme de Condillac'.

philosophy had been tarnished by the heirs of Condillac. The sceptical Descartes he had previously taught receded into background and, instead, he began promoting a Cartesian figure which was now inseparable from the *cogito*. This new figuration of Cartesianism was a way to confirm his philosophical independence from his masters. At the same time, it represented a way to reinvent a philosophical tradition which was, at the same time, French, metaphysical but in a different way than Gassendi, and concerned with personal existence as much as was British philosophy. Cousin, the spiritualist Cartesian, was now on the move.

In 1822, Cousin was barred from teaching because of his liberal ideas. The story of his years outside French academia, of his travels and imprisonment in Prussia, and of his exchanges with Hegel who got him out of prison, is now well-known (Cousin, *Souvenirs d'Allemagne*). That story is not our present concern, but it allows us to understand how, during this period, Cousin managed to create his own legend as an unjustly accused freethinker. It was during this time in exile that he edited Descartes' *Œuvres complètes* (1824-1826) and published a text that would become foundational for French philosophy throughout the 19th century: the 1826 preface to the *Fragments philosophiques*. The successive editions of this preface, from 1826 to 1833, sees him moving from claiming Baconian roots and arguing in favor of scientific study of consciousness towards a much more explicit affirmation of a Cartesian heritage (Antoine-Mahut, 'Experimental Method'). Cousin thus rehabilitated the Cartesian figure that Degérando had criticized in the first edition of the *Histoire comparée*. By overturning Degérando's reading, and after having separated himself from Royer-Collard and Laromiguière, Cousin thus also staked out his position in relation to his primary French rival among the historians of philosophy. And when Cousin, in 1828, resumed his university position, gave his famous lectures on Locke, he presented himself as the herald of a new philosophy, as an alternative to the positivist heirs of sensualism and to ultra-Catholics. But he also presented himself as an alternative to the

spiritualists who had taken up Condillac, the British philosophers, or Kant. Cousin's was a philosophy which did not reveal itself frontally; it both hid behind and revealed itself beneath the mask of Descartes.

At the time, Descartes' correspondence was accessible through two editions. The first was the *Lettres* edition of 1724-25, which added French translations from the Latin, and *vice versa*, to the original edition by Claude Clerselier, while the second was the unique copy of the *Lettres de M. Descartes* kept at the *Institut de France*,⁶ which contained notes written in the margins, or on separate sheets, and other annotations, references, corrections, additions, and dates, added between 1684 and 1704 in view of a new edition by the Academy of Sciences. But this second edition was incomplete. The texts were poorly classified and even, in some cases, still not edited or translated (see the overview by Destutt de Tracy, 'Sur les lettres de Descartes'). With Cousin's edition, however, Descartes became the philosopher of the *Méditations métaphysiques* and the *Discours de la méthode* separated from the scientific essays—the *Dioptrique*, the *Météores* and the *Géométrie*—that were part of Descartes' initial project (Antoine-Mahut, *L'Autorité*, sect. 3.2). Descartes came to represent a philosophy focused on the metaphysics of innate ideas (understood as ideas born with us) which considered the positive sciences as secondary. In short, Cartesianism came to represent an inversion of Bacon, a philosophy which took its point of departure in all those things Bacon missed, i.e. all the facts of consciousness, in order to provide certainty about those things in

⁶ The tumultuous genesis of this editorial project begins with the death of Gilles Personne de Roberval in 1675 when Philippe de la Hire got hold of the letters from Descartes to Mersenne that Roberval had gotten from the latter after he died in 1648, including abundant documentation gathered by Claude Clerselier. After 1648, the collection was further complemented by Jean-Baptiste Legrand and Adrien Baillet and by the autographs deposited by La Hire at the Academy of Sciences (see *René Descartes. Lettres*, Introduction, and Descartes, *Oeuvres complètes*, Introduction, XLVI-LXIV. The pages LXII-LXIV are devoted to Cousin's use of the Institute copy).

which Bacon took his point of departure, i.e. knowledge of natural things. Descartes thus put philosophy back on its feet, giving us the ‘true philosophy’ that Cousin now took it upon himself to promote. In this respect, the last words of the Descartes edition sounds like an epitaph oriented toward the future of philosophy:

This eleventh volume is the last. Our work is completed, and France finally has an edition of the *Complete Works* written by the man who has done so much for its glory. May this moment, dedicated to Descartes and to France, serve to bring my compatriots back to the study of the true philosophy, to this philosophy of which Descartes, throughout humankind, has been one of the most illustrious interpreters; [Descartes], who, severe and daring at the same time, without exceeding the limits of observation and induction, has gone so high and so far, and who, beginning with human consciousness, that is to say, with thought, never leaves it behind and rediscovers it everywhere, in nature as well as in the soul, in the slightest details as well as in the great phenomena of universal existence. *I think, therefore I am.* (Cousin in Descartes, *Oeuvres complètes*, XI, viii)

In the meantime, Cousin had written a review of the first part of the second edition of Degérando’s *Histoire comparée* (published in 1822 and dedicated to ancient philosophy, Plato in particular). He argued that Degérando had remained too close to the ‘mutilating’ and ‘exclusivist’ theory of Condillac in the 1804 edition and described the first part of the second edition as superior because it inclined towards the kind of spiritualism that Cousin himself was now the principal representative of (Cousin, *Fragments*, II, 2). And when Cousin returned to this second edition of the *Histoire comparée* in 1829, in chapter XIII of his *Cours d’histoire de la philosophie*, the lessons that he drew from it served mostly to consolidate his

own authority, associating Degérando to his own reappraisal of a ‘much more idealist philosophy’ which was ‘opposed to Condillac’s philosophy’ (Cousin, *Cours*, 429).

Finally, in his funeral eulogy for Degérando, published after the ‘Avertissement’ in the 1847 posthumous edition, Cousin described the author of the *Histoire comparée* as someone who ‘extends his hand’ to ‘a philosophy of experience’ originating in Aristotle, Bacon and Locke, while also defending the philosophy ‘of reason’ coming from Plato and Descartes. Cousin thus highlighted as Degérandian the figure of Descartes which was, in fact, that of the first edition, i.e. the one that separated Descartes from the philosophy of experience. Certainly, as becomes a funeral eulogy, Cousin made room for Degérando among the ‘fathers of the new philosophy’. But the legitimate father of the French rational spiritualists, remained, without any ambiguity, Cousin himself. By returning to a strong interpretation of the *cogito* as an innate idea, Cousin rehabilitated the figure of Descartes that had been criticized by the *Idéologues*. And this interpretive move was accompanied by a both explicit and virulent rejection of the different forms of ‘sensualism’ that had appeared in the wake of Condillac. In Degérando’s terminology, Condillac became an ‘empiricist’ for Cousin. And in a curious turn of events, within French philosophy, the true philosophy of experience now moved to the side of an impersonal reason grounded in the *cogito*.⁷ For, at this point, Cousin had accumulated all the powers—he was chair of the history of modern philosophy at the Sorbonne, director of the *École Normale Supérieure*, state counselor, peer of the realm, member of the French Academy, director of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, minister for public instruction, president of the *agrégation*, and in charge of posting teachers throughout France as well as of establishing the teaching syllabi—and the

⁷ Compare with the last words in the third lecture on the sensualist philosophy of the Eighteenth Century, dedicated to Condillac (Cousin, *Philosophie sensualiste*, 129). I do not here consider the *Fragments de philosophie cartésienne* of 1845 because Degérando died in 1842.

authorization of philosophical content had fallen entirely under his institutional domination. Cousin had become, following the often repeated phrase of his student Jules Simon (1814-1896), ‘the king of philosophy’ just like Louis Philippe had been made ‘king of the French’ (Simon, *La Philosophie*, quoted by Vermeren, *Victor Cousin*, 176).

4. Descartes’ comeback: the posthumous edition of 1847

Reactions to this institutional situation can be observed in the contributions to the competition on the history of Cartesianism announced in 1838 by the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences. These contributions are numerous and very rarely studied (Antoine-Mahut, ‘To replant and Uproot’). Via the historiography of Cartesianism, each contributor sought to associate or dissociate himself from Cousin’s official philosophy. Degérando, for his part, sat in the jury. In this respect, he represented the face of official philosophy. Under such circumstances, it is only the more interesting that he now himself also returned to the history of Cartesianism, in view of revising the second part of the second edition of the *Histoire comparée*, dedicated to modern philosophy. And studying the way in which he there placed the Cartesian figure on the scales of the philosophy of experience brings to light a different spiritualism than the exclusivist spiritualism of Cousin.

If we are to believe his son Gustave (1803-1884), editor of the posthumous edition of 1847, Degérando was working on this edition in 1827, that is to say, immediately after Cousin’s publication of Descartes’ *Oeuvres complètes*. This may not be true of the entire text, for some passages were probably written or corrected afterwards. Moreover, while preparing the edition, Gustave Degérando drew upon his father’s unpublished manuscripts concerning Descartes and Condillac. Finally, Gustave’s ‘Avertissement’, written towards the end of the 1840s, left no doubts as to what was at stake with this posthumous publication. It was an

attempt to rehabilitate his father by setting him apart from the two schools of sensualism and spiritualism that he had, at different times, been associated to an excessive degree. But it was primarily an attempt to show that Degérando's spiritualism was less 'exclusive' and thus 'purer' than the dominant spiritualism of the 'leader' (Degérando, 'Avertissement', x-xi).

Degérando's own depiction of Descartes' figure, which governed the edition as a whole in that it was a central question to address at this intellectual juncture, followed the same logic: it was governed by a search for the 'purest spiritualism', by which he meant the spiritualism which would be the least exclusivist and the most 'conciliatory' as the 1804 edition had called it. Degérando's first significant move in the second edition consisted in reminding his readers of the scientific origins of the philosophy of experience. For Degérando, giving renewed visibility to this largely forgotten practical conception of philosophy was an attempt to turn the tree of knowledge upright again (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], II, 11). By referring to the 'influence' of the Baconian and Galilean systems of human knowledge on the French Enlightenment, Degérando went back to Cousin's first formulations in the 1826 preface to the *Fragments philosophiques*, formulations which rehabilitated Bacon. The stakes of this argumentative move were epistemological rather than ontological. Or to be more precise: Degérando returned to epistemology, as an attempt to resist what he saw as Cousin's ontological overreach. Hence, in Degérando, the early Cousin, who had insisted on the use of the experimental method in psychology, was turned against the later Cousin, who rejected such a use. At the same time, this reading strategy modified the meaning of 'metaphysics' which had now become dominant again. According to Degérando, the principal contribution of this 'kind of hidden philosophy', represented by Galileo, Bacon, and Gassendi, had been to 'ban metaphysics from the regions of physics' by 'founding science on observation' (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], II, 11-12). Rejecting any metaphysics separated from experimental data could serve as a way to ground a true experimental science

of the soul, and hereby put spiritualism *back on its feet*.

For Degérando, it was, moreover, a way to put spiritualism *back in its right place*, institutionally speaking. It allowed him to relocate it from Paris to Berlin. The second edition of 1847 thus also proposed a new philosophical geography, more open to the outside than the previous one. Among the German historiographers, Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann (1761-1819) had taken Degérando's interest in Gassendi in the first edition of the *Histoire comparée* to express a reproachable form of nationalism ultimately no different from Cousin's (Tennemann, *Vergleichende Geschichte*, vol. 1, 220). Degérando replied to this criticism by relocating Gassendi twice over, in the past and in the present. In the past: Gassendi and his school (Derodon, Duhamel, and Mariotte) were described as showing how, in France, situated between Italy and England, Galileo's experiments and Bacon's principles had been absorbed. If, in the 1804 edition, Gassendi represented France, he now represented a pan-European figure. In the present: the 1847 edition praised the Berlin Academy as a nexus for intellectual exchange and as the place where French philosophy had been received in the most harmonious way (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 445-7).

The aim of the 1804 edition was mainly to denounce biased interpretations of past philosophers, freeing them up for a better use in the present. However, in a French context where interpretive exaggerations of all kinds were returning, the reference to the Berlin Academy in the 1847 edition allowed Degérando to refocus on the 'truth' of the authors concerned. Hence, for example, 'it is not the Locke of Fontenelle or Voltaire, but the true Locke who appears directly in Berlin' (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 450). Conversely, putting the 'true' Locke on display in this way allowed for the rectification of biased interpretations of Descartes. Quoting Johann de Castillon from memory—'Descartes and Locke reconciled' (Castillon, 'Descartes et Locke', 277, quoted by Degérando in *Histoire* [1847], III, 465)—, Degérando thus elaborated a conception of the true relation between the

two philosophers which was decidedly different from Cousin's. Descartes and Locke were different only in words, but not in fact. They were rejecting the same exaggerated innatism but also agreed about recognizing as innate those ideas which 'are born from reflection, whose foundation is in ourselves, which relate to the operations of our soul and which, consequently, come naturally to us' (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 465-66).

This posthumous edition moreover aimed to rectify the understanding of Descartes' uses in the present. Within the eclecticist framework favored by spiritualists like Degérando, the problem was to figure out what could be kept and valued from Descartes if he was to be given an important role in the philosophical project of creating an experimental science of the soul. Could the *cogito* be 'saved from the shipwreck' and become a fertile truth of fact instead of an abstract deduction (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 176)? Degérando's reply consisted in distinguishing between *two readings of Descartes*:

(1) The Descartes of the official texts like the *Méditations* (the first five, above all) and the *Discourse de la méthode* (essentially the first four parts) was the figure of a dogmatic philosopher who considered innate ideas to be born *with* us. Criticizing this Descartes was equivalent to criticizing the institutionalized, Cousinian reading of him.

(2) The Descartes of the sixth part of the *Discours de la méthode* and of the *Essais*, some of the *Réponses aux Objections*, the correspondence, and the polemical texts like the *Notae in programma*, all texts where Descartes recognized truths of fact as fruitful and defined innate ideas as born *in* us. This second Cartesian figure represented an alternative to the institutionalized version.

Discussing the first figure of Descartes, Degérando took up the problem regarding the indetermination of innate ideas, i.e. whether they are born *in* man or *with* man (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], 209-10, note E). This discussion was correlated with a development stressing the importance of finding, in the present, a way of specifying Descartes' position on this point

(Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 5, note A). Degérando here made an additional precision which was absent from the first edition: he expressed regret that Descartes had not established the limits between philosophy and theology with sufficient clarity, that he had engaged in excessive innatism when, ultimately, grounding the certainty of ideas in God. The particularity of Degérando's form of spiritualism, in contrast to theological spiritualism, was to ground knowledge in human reason. Hence, grounding the certainty of ideas in God was, for him, a perversion of spiritualism which also entailed a confused conception of philosophy itself (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 225-26). Consequently, it was not in the 'official' philosophy of Descartes that one should seek for the seeds of truth. For, according to the 'official' reading of Descartes, experience was unjustly relegated to a secondary role. Another understanding of Descartes therefore had to be put forward.

Within Degérando's own philosophical project, the 'true' Descartes was principally the one found in the correspondence with Elisabeth. This correspondence concerns morality as considered through the lens of experimental research. It develops a new approach to the human passions. It revealed a Descartes being 'fortunately unfaithful to his own method' and becoming a philosopher of experience because he sticks to the truths of fact and refers to advances in the natural sciences. It also revealed a physicist concerned with practical applications, the Descartes whom we also encounter in the sixth part of the *Discours* and in the *Essais*. It was a Descartes who made it possible to highlight the sound philosophy hidden within the natural sciences:

It is striking to see how this philosopher who envisaged exclusively *a priori* methods, thus giving in to the seduction of hypotheses, was still brought back, by the instinct of a good mind or perhaps also by the direction the sciences at the time began to take everywhere, to acquire a rather strong taste for experimental studies, to cultivate his

research in several branches of physics, physiology, in the study of the human passions, and above all to engage with particular care in the study of the sense organs and of the functions they fulfill. He even on one occasion went so far as to declare that he put practical philosophy, as applied to the knowledge and use of the physical forces, above the speculative philosophy taught in the schools (*Discourse of the Method*, VI, p. 124). It is exactly to this kind of research that he owed his two main discoveries in the physical sciences, the law of refraction and the explanation of the phenomenon of the rainbow. (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 194-5)

Finally, taking into account physiology as developed in the treatise *L'Homme* (which Degérando acknowledged, with Cousin, not to be Descartes' best work⁸) was a means of underlining that psychology would never become concrete and experimental if it rejected physiology. On the contrary, it would become so only if we made use of all the resources of Bacon and Galileo's 'hidden philosophy', just like Descartes had done when studying the passions in the correspondence with Elisabeth. The demonstration *a contrario* of this thesis was the strong tendency in any exclusivist spiritualist interpretation of Descartes to quickly degenerate into its contrary, namely, into materialism incapable of preserving the spirituality of the soul (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], II, 190-91).

From this point onward, it became possible for a completely different history of Cartesianism to emerge. This new history connected the spiritualist present to the eclecticism that had spread in France during the 18th century instead of distancing itself from it by characterizing it as 'sensualist'. After underlining that 'Cartesianism [...] was not so completely abandoned in France in the 18th century as has been generally asserted' (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 266), Degérando went on to list all the possible transplants

⁸ He even qualifies it as 'the weakest' among them (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], II, 240).

and applications of Cartesianism in the physiology of sensation which had been advanced by Claude-Nicolas Le Cat (1700-1768), in the theory of beauty proposed by Père Yves-Marie André (1675-1764) whose works Cousin published in 1843, in the theory of law defended by Henri-François d'Aguesseau (1668-1751), in the theory of language proposed by César Chesneau Dumarsais (1676-1756), and so on.

By proposing this series of displacements of the Cartesian figure, all nested within each other, the very 'extension' of the 'term philosophy' in the present was at stake (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 237). According to Degérando, the strongest move of 18th-century French eclecticism resided in the way it had proposed a 'combination of Descartes' philosophy with those of Gassendi and Locke' (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 239). However, 'Descartes and Locke's natural tendency to combine within the French school has never been better fulfilled and exposed than in Condillac. It is in the writings of Condillac that this alliance is consummated' (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 315). By correcting the exaggerated 'sensualist' interpretation of Condillac which had led to the denigration of the entire 18th century, one could now return to the 'true metaphysics', to the 'experimental metaphysics', the 'sound metaphysics' as found for example in the work of Turgot (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 341-46). Moreover, Condillac himself had to undergo some reform, but reform opposed to that proposed by Cousin. Walking this time in the footsteps of Destutt de Tracy, Degérando thus showed that Condillac was in fact such a 'sincere and convinced spiritualist' that 'his philosophy, by exaggerating spiritualism, tends to degenerate into a veritable idealism' (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 318). Resisting this particular exaggeration would reveal the difference between a true eclecticism and a mere syncretism. When a 'contradiction' between two philosophers, whom one seeks to reconcile, still exists, or when they are simply 'juxtaposed' without being 'truly connected', the sterile battle of doctrines characteristic of syncretism remains. By contrast, when they are authentically

combined and reconciled, the way of true eclecticism opens up (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 330-31).

Continuing along this line of argument, Degérando moreover held that French spiritualism could now reconnect with other fathers than Cousin: Cabanis, Laromiguière, Destutt de Tracy, and Maine de Biran. He engaged in a ‘general emulation’ of men in the present, i.e. of ‘these distinguished men who, as the first, made philosophical study honored among us’, stopping only at the very limit of ‘present-day things’ (Degérando, *Histoire* [1847], III, 376). In one and the same movement, this amounted to equip present-day spiritualism with a plurality of potential fathers, other than the one who pretended to be its only legitimate father, namely Cousin. He was thus pluralizing the origins of present philosophy by replacing a genealogy of paternity with a genealogy of kinship.

5. Conclusion

In this article, using the example of the varying figures of Descartes in Degérando, I have shown how writing the history of philosophy can, in general terms, be seen as comparable to a battle. It is, certainly, a curious battle: it concerns the ideas stored in the basements of libraries or in offices; a contemporary battle, but between figures lodged in the past; an indirect battle where the participants hide behind masks or hold shields up bearing effigies other than their own. Nonetheless, if one takes the time to analyze them, we realize that these historiographical battles had important consequences for our current representations and practices in the history of philosophy. Moreover, returning to these competing narratives in the historiography of philosophy not opens up the possibility of broadening the canon to include more figures but also for broadening the understanding of the canonical figures

themselves, or pluralizing the canonical figures.

The 1847 edition of Degérando's *Histoire comparée* brought to light relations between Descartes and his 'adversaries' which are distinctly different from the binary oppositions between clans to which we have become habituated.⁹ From there on, other possible histories begin to emerge, not only of Cartesianism, but of modern philosophy as a whole. New hybrid positions become conceivable, in particular between Cartesianism and empiricism, by reading the work written during the 19th century about the empirical metaphysics of Condillac and, before him, about Bacon and Gassendi. The 'true' Descartes becomes a Descartes who is both wholesome and non-exclusive, not only a metaphysician, be he revered or loathed, but also someone who loved physics and physiology, who took an interest in moral and political questions. In short, Descartes becomes an embodied figure, irreducible to any materialist or onto-theological caricatures.

When taking this approach, focusing on the canon, on the '*crème de la crème*' (Waithe, 'From Canon Fodder', 22), implies studying the canon as the product of a series of exclusions while also exploring all the excluded interpretive routes, thus allowing for a richer and broader conception of the canonical figures themselves. It is an effort which runs parallel to the one aiming at introducing new figures or replacing those which are already there. In this way, focusing on the canon can also be about promoting a pluralist philosophy which is open to conceptual otherness. Moreover, if conducted along these lines, the historiography of philosophy allows us to reconnect with the dimension of judgment and criticism which has characterized the historiography of philosophy since its very founding. Finally, thus complementing one's first-order practice as a historian of philosophy with a second-order consideration of the presuppositions of its historiography also implies providing those who teach this history with a tool to choose, among the often contradictory narratives that exist,

⁹ On this confrontation between gods and giants, partisans of Descartes or Gassendi, see Lennon, *The Battle*.

the one that corresponds the most to their own experience, to their own values, and to their own commitments (Vanzo, ‘Symposium’, 321). And perhaps there is nothing more political or democratic than that.

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