



Technology and French Thought: a Dialogue Between Jean-Luc Nancy and François-David Sebbah

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Abstract

This paper is not an article in a regular sense. It is a dialogue between François-David Sebbah, one of the two editors of this topical collection, and Jean-Luc Nancy, one of the most eminent representatives of the contemporary French Thought. This dialogue took place in the first half of 2022 in a written form, because of the sanitary restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and because Nancy was heavily sick. Sebbah sent to Nancy a text, corresponding to Section 2.1, and Nancy responded to it with another text, corresponding to Section 2.2. Unfortunately, Nancy died on August 23, 2022, and could not revise his own text nor pursue the dialogue, as it was originally planned. For this reason, an introductory clarification by Sebbah, corresponding to Section 1, has been added. The purpose of such clarification is to introduce the reader to Nancy's philosophy of technology—although technology never had a central role in Nancy's reflections. In Section 2.1, Sebbah proposes a distinction between “French Theory,” “French Thought,” and “French Philosophy.” He also proposes a list of twelve possible intersections between the French Thought and the philosophy of technology. In Section 2.2, Nancy criticizes the use of expressions such as “French Thought.” He also insists, in a Heideggerian vein, on the fact that Technology (with a capital “T”) does not depend on human ends but has its own ends.

Keywords French Thought · French Theory · Philosophy of technology · Technoscience · Jean-Luc Nancy

This article is dedicated to the memory of Jean-Luc Nancy.

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1 Introductory Clarification (by F.-D. Sebbah)

For this topical collection of *Philosophy & Technology*, Alberto Romele and I decided to solicit one of the actors of the encounter between the so-called French Thought and philosophy of technology, namely, Jean-Luc Nancy. Jean-Luc Nancy and I agreed that he would write a text echoing the one I would send him, in which I would try to indicate how I understood the object and the problematic of this topical collection. This is how we proceeded. Jean-Luc Nancy sent me his finished text, but death prevented him from seeing the final result, which consists of an echo between our two texts. For my part, except for a few clarifications about the idea of “contemporary French Philosophy,” partly prompted by Jean-Luc Nancy’s reluctance to use the term “French Thought,” I kept almost the same lines of enquiry that I sent him and to which his text replies.

I had not thought it wise to send him remarks concerning his own philosophical elaborations on the question of technology or on contemporary technoscientific phenomena. Since, unfortunately, the meaning of our exchange has been transformed along the way, I would like to recall very briefly some of J.-L. Nancy’s ideas on this subject. I will refer to some passages of Sebbah (2010). In books written in the 1990s (e.g., Nancy, 1997, 2000), Nancy insists on the need not to oppose nature and technology too quickly on the basis of a caricatured reading of Aristotle (the former having its own end, the latter having one or more extrinsic ends). According to his descriptions, technology, like nature, is a way of finishing in the sense of accomplishing. To use the Kantian formulation, it is even a matter of “purposiveness without purpose (*finalité sans fin*).” According to him, if we look closely at technologies, they are not so much the place of assigned and programmed ends, as seems obvious, but the place where all finality is taken up and prolonged — without an absolute end (*fin*) fixed once and for all. This “infinite” thus cannot be translated exclusively as a reductive totalization of otherness or, in some respects, as an uncontrolled and proliferating “bad infinity.” Certainly, one side of what Nancy calls “ecotechnie”¹ does conceal this risk. From this point of view, his thinking remains close to those who denounce the dangers of “technoscience” as a “mega-machine” or as an uncontrolled bad infinity. Yet in his descriptions, the ambivalence remains undeniable: this “purposiveness without purpose,” though this can never be guaranteed, *can* just as easily turn into “sovereignty without sovereignty” in Bataille’s sense.² This means that, at the very least, it can turn into the production of effects never recoverable by efficiency or techno-economic performance. Without any certainty being established, or any guarantee provided, eco-technology *can* be an opportunity, an event that participates in the creation of the world and not its destruction.

¹ This notion appears in Nancy at the beginning of the 1990s: see Nancy (1991 [republished in Nancy (2000)]; 1997 [originally published in 1993]).

² In Nancy (2000, p. 140), he cites Bataille: “sovereignty is nothing.” However, he does not give any precise reference. Probably he was thinking to Bataille (2012 [a text originally written in the early 1950s]). Earlier in the text, he also writes that “Every consideration about ends leads back to sovereignty” (Nancy 2000, 120).

By granting to technology ontological participation in the “making of the world,” Jean-Luc Nancy points out, like others, the intimate connivance of technology with the economic sphere and particularly (but not exclusively) with what is commonly called capitalism. However, he does not reduce technoscience to capitalism as its truth (here too his insight meets that of other authors, such as Lyotard). Let us emphasize that the thinker of *ecotechnie* is also, and first of all, a thinker of “the world.” One could say that he describes the way technoscience participates in the creation/destruction of the world. In this respect, Nancy falls fully within the target of criticism of those who are annoyed by general discourses which, rather than dealing technically with a precise technoscientific object, speak of “The Technology” (with capital T) at the risk of ignoring positivities, at the risk also of no longer philosophizing from the concreteness of precise situations. We know the legitimacy of these criticisms *from a certain point of view at least*. But to read Jean-Luc Nancy is also, first of all, to experience a discourse — indeed, one that is carried by the consideration of our situation — that no specialized and regional study of this or that technoscientific field can *by definition* hold. This discourse describes the allure and style of a way of “making the world” or at least of participating in “making the world.” This way is called technology, or “technoscience,” or “*ecotechnie*”— each term indicates different inflections of the description. For example, “technoscience” is undoubtedly always that for “French philosophers,” namely, a way of making our world appear (gnoseological problematic) and/or of making/unmaking it (ontological problematic). For the reasons mentioned above, the description that Nancy gives, sensitive to the intrinsic ambivalences of technology and to the fragility of the world (Nancy, 2021), cannot be unilaterally optimistic or pessimistic nor can it claim to see what the future will bring *once and for all*.

Thanks to the technique and technology of the heart transplant (Nancy, 2000), thanks to this prosthesis that reveals to the subject that she is never autonomous and “pure to herself,” Jean-Luc Nancy survived — for more than 30 years, which is exceptional. His survival was not “the meanness of trying to die last” (Canetti. In Lyotard, 1991, p. 66) but, in the precariousness and vulnerability that were nonetheless unconquerable, always again intensifying, Nancy was renewing and generously giving thought right up to the end. The text that follows is one of the last testimonies of this.

2 Exchange

2.1 François-David Sebbah to Jean-Luc Nancy

In recent years, an autonomous field of research has developed that can be called “philosophy of technology.” In particular, it has become autonomous from philosophy of science and its own problems. At the same time, the non-epistemological part of the study of technology was (and still is) dominated by an ethical type of reflection that is integrated to “technology assessment.” Such assessment involves the evaluation of such and such a technology in terms of benefits and harms or a socio-political approach, from the perspective of science and technology studies — I

am thinking of the work and legacy of Bruno Latour (1987) — to the way science is made in the interdependence of networks where objects count as much as human actors. Considerations other than those internal to the technoscientific logic count as much as the latter: desire, power, production of benefits, etc. There is no “pure science.”

It is the dominant opinion today that philosophy of technology, which has become autonomous, calls for specialized competences. Those producing philosophy of A.I., or those producing philosophy of nanotechnologies, etc., must have a precise competence in the field to which they relate. This is the case even if, of course, what makes a philosopher presupposes another competence, say in conceptual analysis, in argumentative rigor, in the ability to understand the concepts of technology, or in the ability to understand the meaning of technology. One thinks, for instance, of Don Ihde (1993) and the work produced in his posterity under the name of “postphenomenology,” which testifies to a true description of the “relationships” to the world, to artifacts, to how the various artifacts constitute, in a differentiated manner, our relationship to the world. In similar contexts, general discourses on “Technology” (of which the famous and often caricatured Heideggerian analyses inevitably provide the example) are often viewed with suspicion as a possible refuge of ignorance.

And yet, we notice that, more and more, within this philosophy of technology, some authors have recourse to what can be called “French Thought” (an expression that, of course, must be taken with all due caution). They reappropriate the analyses of this or that technoscientific phenomenon, or of technoscience, proposed by authors of French Thought, but also, and this is actually more interesting for our purposes, they *make use* of philosophies from this area and do so independently of any initial explicit relationship of these philosophies with the question of technology.

Despite the prejudices of certain specialized philosophers, “something” seems to attract philosophical approaches to the side of French Thought when it comes to technoscientific phenomena.

What is this “something”?

First, I would like to try to clarify, at least minimally, what I mean by French Thought here. To say the truth, in a more limited way, I would rather talk of “French Philosophy.” Indeed, the “French Thought” (specifying itself as “French Theory” in the USA) goes beyond the disciplinary sphere of philosophy. It mobilizes Saussurean linguistics, human sciences such as anthropology, and its properly philosophical dimension is no longer self-evident; the specificity of the philosophical is no longer an issue for it. Of course, what we can precisely call “French Philosophy” does not cease, in some of its practices (not all of them), to play with these “outsides”: the human and social sciences and the physical and formal sciences as well. Accordingly, it refuses to posit itself as “*Philosophia perennis*” and as autonomous in relation to other fields of knowledge. However, it does not cease to produce itself as philosophy, that is to say, also, and always, to question the very idea of philosophy and its singularity. One can think of the Derridean gesture of “deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.”

“French Philosophy”: what does this expression mean? It is not a question of claiming the spirit or the genius of a language or a people nor is it a question of the simple, possibly “objectifiable” contingency of a geography or a culture: there is,

there has been, *in fact*, a consequent development of activities that are recognized under the name of “philosophy” in France. There is *the fact* of a particular influence — historically dated, to say the truth — but this is only a surface effect.

Philosophy is always a cultural production, i.e., it is marked by the singularity of a culture, but it cannot be reduced to this. Like any cultural activity perhaps, but *particularly intensely*, it aims at the universal through the singularity that it is.

One can practice “French Philosophy” while being Belgian, Italian, American, and Chinese. What counts is a particular sensitivity (the contingency of a situation) to certain determined problems (as such detachable from their contingent ground) *and* a set of gestures of thought in relation to one another in order to approach them. Gestures of thought that relate to one another are also different from one another. The question that concerns “contemporary French Philosophy” is thus the following: how are these differences still somehow related?

Despite the abstraction of the preceding lines, I hope that they formulate precisely enough how the question of French Philosophy imposes itself on me “synchronically,” so to speak. “Diachronically,” I am thinking here in particular of a moment of this French Philosophy: roughly speaking, the one that runs from the 1960s until today (which could be subdivided into sub-moments). Of course, if we assume that every movement of rupture is a movement of recovery, this moment is in contact with the previous moment. If we rely, all too briefly here, on the proposals of Frédéric Worms (2009), the previous moment (from before to after the Second World War) is the moment of “existence.” The contemporary moment would be the moment of the “structure” and the “living” (the 1960s, strictly speaking). This moment is already continuing in a different way, as “our” present, in the return of ethical questions, of justice, of life and survival — the ecology issue, for example — as well as of questions linked to biology and neuroscience (in cognitive sciences, we note the emergence of the connectionist paradigm proposing models irreducible to the Turing machine). To give meaning and content to this “moment,” we can also refer to Maniglier (2011), and, from another perspective, to Esposito (2018).

What network of problems is then at stake? The *remainder* of the previous epoch does not stop working: existence is put in tension between “philosophies of the concept” and philosophy of “experience,” of the subject. The emerging notions of structure, difference, otherness, etc., in ways that are certainly very different from one another, orchestrate the “end” of the subject or of subjectivity. This “end” must be understood in a very nuanced way. I set aside the “returns” of the subject, of values, etc. — *backlash* against what would have been possible excesses. Rather, I would like to recall how much the thoughts that might seem to signify a resistance of the subject within this very context of French Philosophy from the 1960s to today do not signify a resistance of the subject as a substance, or as an absolute, or as a sovereign (let us think, for example, of the thoughts of Levinas or Henry). I want to recall just as well how much the thoughts that will have emphasized the productive virtue of anonymous instances “without person” (the structure, etc.), to show subjectivities resulting from processes of subjectivation, do not cancel or erase subjectivities, even if the latter are, so to speak, sobered up from the axiomatics of substance and origin. We can give a few names, or examples (but as reference points, without exhaustiveness or hierarchy): Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard. In all of them, we note

this polarization in the direction of the liberation — and this vocabulary of emancipation is not appropriate — of a gap or a difference: liberated from the subject, liberated from the dialectic, liberated from the structure itself, without any possible recovery. This must immediately be nuanced: with Derrida especially, this polarization in the direction of an irreducible, non-recoverable, or recoverable gap (which is then said in the terms of *différance*, *architrace*, etc.) is coupled with the idea that it would be naïve to think we can access it directly and fully. Since this work is done from within the demand for rationality that characterizes the exercise of philosophy, this access will paradoxically only be produced in the indefinite postponement of any recuperation by a mode of rationality (the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the “structure,” etc.) — albeit, I repeat, always from *within* these modes of rationality and their resources.

This subversive charge in philosophy is of course not unrelated to the event of 1968, but it cannot be determined, since that would be too caricatural and naïve, as the shock wave (an essentially “positive” one — though not for all these philosophers!) of an event that would not be primarily philosophical in philosophy.

A trait, a gesture of thought, seems to me to characterize the problem that goes from “structure” to *différance* (let us write it with an “a” like Derrida) born in contact with scientificities (in particular, linguistics caught up in the scientific requirement of the “structural journey” (*périple structural*) according to Milner’s (2002) expression). These thoughts are caught up in a requirement that confronts them with the edge or the limit of rationality (this is especially the case with Derrida). This is what exposes them to points of excess that will distinguish them very clearly, even oppose them, to the style of analytic philosophy. Of course, there is argumentation, description, a work of definitional precision (in various ways according to the authors) — I do not believe that all that is thrown overboard, in any case. Nevertheless, this rigorous rational work is caught up in a relation to a limit and thus to an excess in relation to this limit, and it works from then on the various modes of the relation to this excess. One can think, for example, of Levinas’ gesture pointing towards the One beyond being, but this point of excess does not necessarily point towards a transcendence (to the Being itself). On the contrary, for many authors, it is a question of being absolutely faithful to the plane of immanence in order to exceed the structures of representation and of the subject/object duality as³ best as possible.

As far as I am concerned, I am particularly sensitive to the “rupture-reprise” with and of the moment of existence. It is also very often a “rupture-reprise” with and of phenomenology as a method and tradition (in authors like Derrida, Lyotard, and Stiegler).⁴

A clarification is needed. The question for me is not directly or primarily that of the constitution of a “French Philosophy of Technology” (Loeve et al., 2018) which

³ For a more specific perspective on the relationship between French Philosophy and analytic philosophy, see Salanskis (2016).

⁴ It is worth noting how exemplary Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophical gesture is from this point of view: he shares in some respects Derridean deconstruction of the naïveté of phenomenological axiomatics; however, he does not relegate the question of the “crisis of meaning” to antiquity but on the contrary assumes a thought of “meaning” — and of the “world.”

the names of Gilbert Simondon and Jacques Ellul in particular illustrate in different and exemplary ways. Of course, we find in Lyotard, Derrida, and other thinkers of this “moment,” philosophical elaborations about technology, prosthetics, and technoscience (the list is not closed) as well as some analyses of artifacts or technological mediations (television, digital technologies, etc.). The fact remains that this has never been the dominant polarity of their thought and that they are often called upon by contemporary authors from *other strands* of their work to think about and describe something about technoscience that they themselves have not produced.

Assuming the defects inherent to both the generality of the subject matter here and to the type of suggestion, of sketching out avenues of reflection, I will pick out, in no particular order, a few salient features of the most philosophical gestures that have arisen within “French Thought” (gestures that may, moreover, be significantly heterogeneous) and that may find it possible to reinvest them in the perspective that concerns us here, namely, the possible intersections between philosophy of technology and the French Thought:

- (1) In very different emphases (some technophobic, others technophilic, still others not allowing themselves to be trapped by this alternative): a first gesture grants to technology that it does not belong to the subaltern order of “means” but intimately concerns being and its unveiling. Technology concerns existence itself just as much, as not circumscribed to the site of the human (since Heidegger). This gesture is thus granting technology *a great deal*.
- (2) A second gesture deciphers being itself and does so in terms of device and/or power (the latter problematic not being added, in a second step, to a neutral ontology). Such a gesture has nothing to do with the study of power as a matter of human affairs, for example, of an art of governing or a specialized human science. As in Foucault, for example, it therefore implies a possible relationship to technology that does not see it as the “means” of “human power” (over nature or humans).
- (3) A third gesture accompanies the dismantling of power, particularly as the power of the body or bodies, or of the drive (*pulsionnel*). This is the case since Nietzsche and the “will to power” (Deleuze, Foucault, and quite differently Henry), but also, in another vein, since Bergson. This power can be evaluated in very different ways, and technology can then be described as its extension, or even as its accomplishment and truth, or *on the contrary* as an impediment (of vital affirmation) — to put it very imperfectly indeed.
- (4) Performativity *and* precariousness: a fourth gesture describes technoscience as pure power taking place (without any prior “power” or virtuality), pure efficiency, or performativity belonging exclusively to a regime that is heterogeneous to all others (to that of truth, to that of “values,” etc.). It describes life, all life, as negentropy, or even (it is, however, quite different) as deeply caught up in the death drive. In short, this gesture describes technoscience between hyperpower and vulnerability, or even precariousness, or between life drive and death drive, so to say — as is the case, for instance, in Lyotard.
- (5) Of course, but let us say it again, a fifth gesture defeats the sovereignty of any figure of the subject (whatever it may be): is technoscience this very defeat or,

on the contrary, is it the triumph of a figure of the “subject” unsuspected until now?

- (6) We can consider that technology belongs to the “means of production,” to the infrastructure as such, though it is not certain that Marx was a “thinker of technology,” or that he really thought its specificity (see Rodrigo, 2017). In any case, a certain “French Thought” was established at the point of intersection between Heideggerian and Marxian analyses of technology in the 1960s and 1970s — e.g., Axelos—see, in particular, Axelos (1969).
- (7) A seventh gesture understands technoscience as belonging to the “bad infinite” or to “totality” (insofar as it is negatively connoted in relation to a positive infinite *à la* Levinas) or as belonging to the “system” or the “mega-machine.” This is the case, for example, in Ellul.
- (8) An eight gesture sees technoscience as a formatting, an *institution* of the world against a background of chaos or magma, of nonsense. It sees technoscience as belonging to an “instituting imaginary” (Castoriadis) or to a mythology (Axelos). Imaginary and mythology are in the same movement freed from the register of “fiction,” itself perceived from the side of the “lesser being” (*moin-dre être*). Here the “instituting imaginary” is that of calculating rationality.
- (9) The tension between calculable and incalculable characterizes a ninth gesture. One of the veins of French Thought (the one I feel closest to) has greatly valued the incalculable (even if it can also come under a dark face). This vein sometimes (not always) goes hand in hand with the valorization of a certain idea of passivity, of welcoming without mastery — this involves a tension with the calculable/calculated/computable/programmed, as evidenced by the current domination of the computer/digital world over all regions of reality and existence. This formulation is undoubtedly exemplarily Derridian, even if many others than Derrida contributed to it.
- (10) A tenth gesture deploys “deconstruction” in relation to technoscience, where deconstruction thwarts all “positional and oppositional logic” (and insofar as we can think that it does not only deconstruct discourses). Is there a particular affinity between deconstruction and technoscience? Can we “deconstruct” technoscience as we “deconstruct” politics, or this or that, neither better nor worse, neither more nor less?
- (11) An eleventh gesture concerns the related problematics of the arch-trace, of writing in Derrida’s sense, of spectrality, insofar as, since *Plato’s Pharmacy* (Derrida, 1981 [1968]), material inscription is recognized as having a constitutive role for the temporality of consciousness, “memory,” and for meaning in general. This “opens up” in the direction of the Stieglerian perspective — even if Stiegler is not entirely “derivable” from Derrida — and even if Derrida, with regard to technology, is in no way an “announcement” of Stiegler. I am particularly sensitive to the fact that Derrida cannot, should not, be “thetical,” whereas Stiegler is, perhaps sometimes excessively so — this is a matter for debate.

In any case, at the level of generality at which we are situated here, technology can be described as a “non-living” material inscription constituting all life, all spirit, all meaning, etc. Various technosciences can be described as differ-

- ent ways of proceeding to the “always already” constitution by this material inscription (digital differs from analog, for example, from this point of view).
- (12) In a related way, this problematic of the support or of the (archi)original inscription can be seen from another angle, in a twelfth gesture, as “organology,” to take up a notion also proposed by Stiegler (from Leroi-Gourhan, Canguilhem, and Simondon). Existence is prosthetic *and* organological: by weakening the boundary between the organ of the living body and technical prosthesis, organology considers that any extension (of the body or the mind) gives rise to effects beyond the function initially programmed or aimed at (inaugurating new possibilities) and acts in return on the body or the mind, or the social, for that matter, transforming them in a non-calculated way (for better or worse): hence the need for a “pharmacology” (again, in Stiegler’s words).

A provisional final thought: I have the feeling it is precisely what fuels distrust and prevention the most among certain specialized “professional” philosophers, which, taken in good part, makes approaches of French Thought so fruitful and relevant: to take into consideration, to experience, “at the limit,” or on the “edge,” the incalculable, or the “non-positional and non-oppositional,” or the gap to the origin, the non-presence, the “death” of inscription, etc. Is it not the case that everything happens as if technoscience is never at the antithesis of these limits but on the contrary as close as possible to them? (And it is not “irrationalism” to point this out!) Is this not what anyone who is seriously interested in any contemporary technology is bound to encounter?

2.2 Jean-Luc Nancy to François-David Sebbah

The picture you paint of the relationship between thoughts about technology and “French Thought” is one of precision and breadth that is impossible for me to master, since I am not familiar with most of the thoughts about technology outside of “F.T.” (I will abbreviate, since I dislike using this term — I will come back to it). On the other hand, I am familiar with the other works you mention — and I would add those of Günter Anders and Gérard Granel and, those, more recently, of Erich Hörl. But even on that side, and in particular on the paths of many of Bernard Stiegler’s emulators, I am far from knowing everything that is being done. These are limits, some of which are unavoidable because they are the lot of each and every one of us at a time when information and dissemination technologies tend to require new A.I. machines to process *huge data*. This is also the case in the field of philosophical intelligence (or unintelligence), where this word is taken in its most extensive sense, which is itself a product or effect of a culture that is blurring even more the contours of what is not properly technoscientific.

To echo you, I could start there. Our time is devoted to so-called scientific positivity. This “said” is being used to indicate that what we call “science” today, like medicine, is not a science, or everything that, in the field of the “human sciences,” is based on procedures that are very different from those of the exact sciences, which, by the way, are precisely in the process of making their supposed

accuracy more complex and, dare I say it, inaccurate (I refer here to the epistemological and philosophical work of the astrophysicist Aurélien Barrau). In other words, the sciences no longer think that they are moving towards the grasp of a primary reality. Rather, they know that their objects are themselves diverse and variable elaborations of a reality to which cognitive activity, like other activities, is not external. On the contrary, this activity knows itself more and more as the functioning of a natural — biological, organic — intelligence whose capacity goes as far as the production of an additional intelligence.

If the supplement (addition and substitute) can be produced by what it supplants, this considerably blurs our representations of both a real in itself that would face us and a transcendent agent that would also face us. This considerably shifts our habits of thought. However, it should be noted that this displacement has taken place continuously in philosophy since Kant and that, to put it in a nutshell, it leads to an indistinction between what is and the fact that it is. This indistinction is at the heart of Heidegger's thought and is that which all of philosophy has been working on the basis of for almost a century.

This work is made necessary by the following: a strict immanence could seem to be concluded from the indistinction between "beings" and "being." But this immanence would not account for the very fact that it can be thought and questioned. That everything can be wrapped up in a sameness inevitably opens up the question of an otherness, even if it is itself situated "in" the sameness. This is why, from Hegel to the present day, the theme — or rather a thematic profusion — of the otherness has been at work in philosophy. Indistinction is itself differential (or differentiating).

However, the common representation persists in entrusting oneself to a scientific positivity as if the very position of the "positive" (of the "fact," of the "data") did not open the question of the act of posing. This is what "analytical metaphysics" in France wants to do, and even if I do not share its axioms, I recognize that it must indeed be "metaphysics" if we mean by it — contrary to Heidegger but not to Derrida — what opens up to a true otherness and not what leads back to identity.

Now, if it is striking to note that, as I have just reminded you, the supposed positivity does not cease to show better the uncertain, adventurous, or even fictitious character of the "realities" that it manipulates (such as "the living," "the universe," "space-time" — not to mention the "psyche" and the "social," which we no longer know whether it designates a specific register of collective forms or the maximum extension of all species of communication), it is equally striking to note that the general state of collective consciousness or unconsciousness is that of a massive reign of opinion, that is to say, the subjective appropriation not only of facts and their interpretations, but also of languages, modes of expression, and judgments, so that little is left to the authorities of knowledge or of conduct (political, moral, esthetic).

This contrast requires reflection. And indeed, it has already been done: articles, speeches, and books have already seized upon this new situation, of which "conspiracies" on the one hand, and mystical vaticinations on the other, provide the most caricatural figures. To put it briefly, we ourselves are bewildered by our own overflowing loquacity. It would seem that we can say anything, if we cannot do anything (which is not far off).

We do not know how to speak very well anymore, because a large number of terms that were once important are swept away in this hubbub (man, politics, thought, religion, faith, equality, freedom, justice, living and dead, beautiful and ugly, banal or exceptional, violence or efficiency, etc.).

But remember, there was talk of a *linguistic turn* that would have affected philosophy in Europe 70 years ago and led it to language deviations worthy of the *Freudian slip* unless it was *punch line* or *hoax* to continue speaking the language of *fake news*.⁵

But far from being a caprice and a fashion, the attention to language already stemmed from a feeling of confusion and uncertainty in the order of the great meanings received within the Western culture that was dominating the world. In addition to the words mentioned above, we can note that the notions of “science” and “technology” were already at stake (in Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Canguilhem for example). In short, what had already been announced for a long time as the “crisis of the mind” (Valéry) or as the “crisis of the European sciences” (Husserl), what was being inaugurated as the “logical analysis of language” (Carnap) and as the study of “language games” (Wittgenstein), and what was being invented at the same time as the symptomatology of language (Freud), converged—but did not agree—in a staking of the confident use of ordinary language. That is to say, a staking of signification as leaning on a natural or real reference.

What mobilized philosophy from then on was to work—even if it was plural and dissensual—on the possibility of sense⁶ (of having or making sense). What had been shaken was a certain confidence in sense. Philosophy was born from such an undermining (that of mythology, whose name evokes the word) and has not ceased to be reborn from underminings of this order (for example, in nominalism, in empiricism, in Nietzsche). Philosophy has always proceeded from a confidence in the possibility of dealing better or differently with sense. This is what *philo-sophia* means if we look closely.

Sense (*sens*) does not mean signification (*signification*)—not conceptual grasp—but *sensitivity* (*sensibilité*), that is, exposure to the other and the relationship to otherness. Not only the other “me” but the other than any “me” and the other than any presence in the world. Meaning, in this sense, is that which is not accomplished but is always relaunched outside, to the other and from the other. Sense is that which circulates infinitely.

This is why, incidentally, there is no *French Thought* here any more than there is an *American Dream*. National and continental circumstances are largely— if not completely—explained by the course of the world since industrial expansion. Nothing is gained by using code names—except in war.

The development of a culture in which sense is given by the efficiency of operations of mastery of the elements, forces, and ends to be attained—and therefore by senses (speed, energy, efficiency, etc.)—could not but provoke a new shaking

⁵ Linguistic turn, Freudian slip, punch line, hoax, and fake news in English in the original [translators’ note].

⁶ We use here the term “sense” rather than “meaning” having in mind Nancy (1997).

of sense. This shaking has taken on two names that basically say the same thing: “death of God” and “end of metaphysics.” This double event had an important consequence: it transferred sense into the production of mastery. Heidegger meant nothing else when he spoke of technology. In doing so, he invited us to think of it not as an instrumentation but as a modality of making sense (of the human, of its history).

This is undoubtedly the decisive point from which the thoughts that continued to consider technology as an instrument that could lead to ends determined by the human subject and the thoughts that understood technology as being itself the subject of a new era open to all existences (not only human) were divided.

But this is the direction in which we are clearly headed. Technology neither bends nor shrinks from human ends but creates its own ends. I am content to evoke the example of medicine insofar as it implements physical, chemical, biological, and computer technologies to become a technique of long life. But long life, which is not a gift from God or the fruit of wisdom, is no longer just the product of complex and delicate operations whose effects must be integrated into a life for which mere maintenance can become an end, which is of course problematic. This is what came to light on the occasion of the pandemic. There were philosophers (or at least people labelled as such) who argued that the social good was to expose the elderly or frail to the virus. But our social good is supposed to be defined, among other things, by health and long life. These same ideologues should have redefined the social good.

This is just one example: the technical purpose of our culture no longer allows us to define ends, except by other and new means which at the same time can only be the result of new operations and new controls. The whole ecological question is there, and no doubt with it the whole social question — itself assessed in terms of the planet and eight billion human beings.

There is an abyss (*béance*) or a vacancy of sense insofar as the whole world — and the world as a possibility of the circulation of sense (that is what “a world” means) — is engaged in what is indeed the history of human beings. What to trust? That is, how to philosophize?

I propose to say, very schematically, it is the abyss that we must trust. It is, moreover, the abyss that has attracted a good part of the philosophical activity mentioned above. Not the abyss of a lack but the abyss of a chance. I mean the chance opened up by Heidegger’s affirmation that “being is nothing.” For this is not a nihilistic statement: it is the affirmation that that which history carries us is nothing given or finalized in advance. Nothing is promised to us like “total human” or “paradise” and even those who still trust one of these terms know that sense is made between us every day and not in the sole reference to the final promise. They know it from an obscure knowledge, neither scientific nor philosophical, but experienced, *felt* in the most acute sense, in the most banal of existence.

It is this non-scholarly knowledge, this experience of existing — and of existing together — that is both given with human life and absent from the signifying projections of our scholarly knowledge. It is, however, in the element of this experience that philosophy has always risen and sought to return. It is a knowledge of the abyss, of the abyss at the heart of reality.

“Neither an object in the world, nor the subject of a possible world.” This formula by Deleuze⁷ can serve as a maxim here: this neither-nor opens the abyss in which we are, which we have opened and in which it is a matter of thinking. To conclude by continuing along our recent history, we could say that Derrida would answer: here is an aporia. For him, this indicates the necessary condition of a decision, of an impulse, of the seizure of a chance. And this neither-not, in fact, if we examine it carefully, opens up the possibility of another invention, of the occurrence of an all-other whom to trust. For one never trusts but without assurance and without proof or guarantee.

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⁷ Deleuze (2010, p. 23). This very old and certainly dated text nevertheless contains an obvious germ of its author's later thought.

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