

The Early Decades

The names of the philosophers whose work was, at the beginning of the twentieth century, most influential and widely read in France are today all but unknown to English-speaking philosophers. Even among the figures who dominated French philosophy in the first three decades of the twentieth century, only Henri Bergson's name and work are likely to be familiar to many. In addition to Bergson, four figures stand out in the opening years of the century: Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900), Charles Renouvier (1815–1903), Émile Boutroux (1845–1921), and Jules Lachelier (1832–1918).

Ravaisson and Renouvier were students together at the *École Normale Supérieure*, and both drew upon the work of François Maine de Biran (1766–1824) and the French spiritualist tradition.¹ Ravaisson returned to teach at the *École Normale*, where his students included Lachelier, Boutroux, and Bergson. During his long career, Ravaisson occupied several important administrative posts, including *Inspecteur Général* for Higher Education in Letters (1852–88) and President of the *jury d'agrégation*. He wrote an important two-volume work on Aristotle's metaphysics (*Essai sur la métaphysique d'Aristote* [1837–46;

¹ Although he published little during his lifetime, Maine de Biran has had a significant influence on French philosophy. Focusing on psychological introspection as the foundation for a “science of man,” Maine de Biran responded to Descartes's emphasis on man as a “thinking thing” by suggesting instead that the self is primarily a willing agent. To the Cartesian formula “I think, therefore I am” (*Cogito, ergo sum*), Maine de Biran proposed to substitute *Volo, ergo sum* (“I will, therefore I am”), arguing that human beings are most truly themselves in their willed actions and not just their thinking. His works were first published in a four-volume edition by Victor Cousin in 1841, with more complete editions edited subsequently by Pierre Tisserand (*Oeuvres de Maine de Biran*, 14 vols. [Paris: Félix Alcan and Presses universitaires de France, 1920–49]) and François Azouvi (*Oeuvres de Maine de Biran*, 20 vols. [Paris: Vrin, 1984–2001]).

“Essay on Aristotle’s Metaphysics”]), a work on habit that suggests a philosophy of nature in which habit is understood as spirit made nature (*De l’habitude* [1938; “On Habit”]), and an influential work, at the request of the Minister of Public Instruction, on the history of nineteenth-century French philosophy (*La Philosophie en France au XIXe siècle* [1868; “Philosophy in France in the Nineteenth Century”]). Bringing together the psychological insights of Maine de Biran and a philosophy of nature drawn from Schelling’s metaphysics, Ravaisson’s writings had a profound influence on both Catholic philosophy and the development of personalism in France.

Charles Renouvier was a critic of Hegelianism and one of the central figures in the development of French neo-Kantianism. Emphasizing the relativity of phenomenalism (i.e., the view that our knowledge of the phenomenal world is a function of how things appear to us rather than how they are in themselves), and criticizing the existence of essences (noumena) that cannot be represented, Renouvier was the founder of French neo-critical idealism, a position he called *Criticisme*. Late in his life, he moved toward a more Leibnizian metaphysical position, and Renouvier’s emphasis on liberty and reflective consciousness as the defining characteristics of human beings as persons led him to formulate several of the premises of personalism. Among Renouvier’s most influential works are his four-volume *Essais de critique générale* (1854–64; “Essays of General Critique”), *Le Personalisme* (1903; “Personalism”), and the posthumously published *Critique de la doctrine de Kant* (1906; “Critique of Kant’s Philosophy”).

Émile Boutroux was a specialist in Leibniz and seventeenth-century German philosophy. In addition to German idealism, he also drew on resources in French spiritualism and the natural sciences as he sought to reconcile the tensions between metaphysics and science. Boutroux anticipated and influenced the work of both Henri Bergson and Gaston Bachelard. Like Ravaisson and Lachelier, Boutroux taught at the École Normale Supérieure, but unlike them, he did not remain there, moving instead to the prestigious Chair in the History of Modern Philosophy at the Sorbonne, a position he held from 1888 to 1902. Through his teaching positions and his important works on the relations between science and philosophy, Boutroux was one of the dominant figures in French academic philosophy in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Among his important works, several were translated into English, including his best-known work, *La Contingence des lois de la nature* (1874; English translation: *The Contingency of the Laws of Nature*

[1916]), and *De l'idée de loi naturelle dans la science et la philosophie contemporaines* (1895; English translation: *Natural Law in Science and Philosophy* [1914]).

Perhaps the most influential of these four philosophers was Jules Lachelier, who taught at the *École Normale Supérieure* from 1864 to 1875. Critical of both Comtean positivism and empiricism, Lachelier sought to ground his idealist philosophy in a theory of induction that could resist the challenges of skepticism. His work had a profound impact on the intellectual development of many French thinkers, including Léon Brunschvicg, Jean Jaurès, Maurice Blondel, and Henri Bergson, whose 1889 doctoral thesis *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (*Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*) was dedicated to Lachelier. Although he did not publish much, Lachelier's years at the *École Normale* and, like Ravaisson, his many years as *Inspecteur Général* (1879–1900) and President of the *jury d'agrégation* (1900–10), made him the most important and influential philosophical figure in France for almost forty years. In addition, his major work, *Du fondement de l'induction* (*On the Foundation of Induction*), published in 1871, and an important essay, "Psychologie et métaphysique," first published in 1885, were frequently found on the list of required readings for *diplômes* in the 1920s and 1930s and were well known to virtually all students of philosophy in France prior to World War I.²

French surveys of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophy typically organize their topic around three basic philosophical positions: positivism, idealism, and, situated between these two extremes, various versions of positions they call spiritualism.³ This division does not so neatly fit the figures discussed above, however, for while Ravaisson and Renouvier link their work to the spiritualist tradition, Renouvier is also strongly inclined toward Kantian idealism. And while Boutroux and Lachelier both draw upon German idealist thinking, Boutroux's sympathies with Leibniz and criticisms of Kant make him much more receptive to certain positivist themes than one would expect of an idealist thinker. Nevertheless, during the early decades of the twentieth century, philosophers in France do largely identify themselves with

² Both of these works appear in English translation in *The Philosophy of Jules Lachelier*, ed. and trans. Edward G. Ballard (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960).

³ Typical, in this regard, is the interesting survey by Jean Guilton, *Regards sur la pensée française 1870–1940: Leçons de captivité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1968).

these three traditions as they respond to each other and to recent developments in both mathematics and science.⁴

Positivism

Outside France, Auguste Comte is perhaps the best-known French philosopher of the nineteenth century. Comte's positivism blends an empiricist commitment to the idea that knowledge is based on sensuously experienced facts (*posita*) with the French enlightenment faith in reason and progress. The foundation of Comte's philosophy is what he called "The Law of Three Stages," which he claimed explained the evolution of thought. The history of the sciences, according to Comte, shows that thought necessarily evolves through three stages. The most primitive stage is the theological stage of fictitious thinking, which views all things as animated by a will and in which facts are explained in terms of actions in accordance with a will. The second stage is the metaphysical stage of abstract thinking, in which abstract concepts replace personal wills as the principles of explanation. In metaphysical thinking, concepts like force, substance, or spirit, rather than supernatural direction, form the basis of the explanatory account, and the goal of metaphysical explanation is to refer everything to one Nature or Absolute (e.g., Spinoza or Hegel). According to Comte, metaphysics is a transitional stage between theology and the third stage of scientific or positive thinking, which gives up the search for absolute knowledge (in the form of a first cause or final will) and seeks instead to work through observation and experimentation. What results in this third stage is a criticism of metaphysical speculation for having replaced the more primitive theological principle of explanation in terms of a personal will with explanations in terms of abstract concepts. Metaphysics must, Comte concludes, give way to scientific, "positive" explanation that establishes "a connection between single phenomena and some general

⁴ We cannot here discuss the impact of developments in mathematics (Dedekind, Cantor) or science (Planck, Einstein) on developments in French philosophy in the early years of the twentieth century. For a discussion of this impact on early twentieth century philosophy in general, the reader is encouraged to examine the introduction and first chapter of Christian Delacampagne, *A History of Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

facts [or laws], the number of which continually diminishes with the progress of the science.”⁵

In the early twentieth century, Comte’s positive philosophy was often found on the reading list for the *agrégation*⁶ and was a frequent topic of students’ theses. More significant for developments in French philosophy in the early twentieth century was the fact that the dominant figure carrying forward the positivist tradition in the later years of the nineteenth century, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), joined the philosophy faculty at the Sorbonne in 1902. The founder of the “French school” of sociology, Durkheim had studied philosophy with Émile Boutroux at the École Normale Supérieure and passed the *agrégation* in philosophy in 1882. He joined the faculty of the Sorbonne as the replacement for Ferdinand Buisson (1841–1932) as “Chair in the Science of Education” in 1906, eventually renaming this the “Chair in the Science of Education and Sociology” in 1913.

Through his administrative assignments and interest in educational reform, Durkheim came to occupy a position of great influence at the Sorbonne. His lecture-courses on education were the only compulsory courses at the Sorbonne, being required for all students who sought

⁵ Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, Vol. 1, trans. Harriet Martineau (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), p. 2.

⁶ Comte’s works appeared on the reading list for the *concours* in 1901, 1902, 1904, 1908, 1909, and 1910 (indicating the influence of Durkheim), and four more times between 1919 and 1928. Although absent for most of the 1930s and 1940s, his works returned to the reading list in 1949 and stayed through most of the 1950s, appearing in 1950, 1951, and 1955–8 (indicating the influence of Canguilhem, who served as *Inspecteur Général de philosophie* from 1948 to 1955). Overall, Comte appears on the reading list 20 times between 1900 and 1959, far more often than any other nineteenth-century philosophers except Schopenhauer, who appears 30 times, and John Stuart Mill, who appears 18 times. It should be noted, however, that almost all of Schopenhauer’s and Mill’s appearances come after 1910, the year that certain candidates could be excused from the Greek option, substituting for an explication of a Greek text either an explication of an English or a German text (typically, the *concours* offered two choices from each language). Only six of Schopenhauer’s appearances on the reading list come outside of this German option (for the written examination in 1905, 1943, and 1944, and for the oral expositions in 1914, 1915 [although the *agrégation* was canceled in 1914 and 1915], and 1933), and in the majority of his appearances – including every year from 1946 to 1959 – it is the third book of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* that is offered as one of the two German text options. This information is taken from the annual postings of the Programme du Concours de l’Agrégation de Philosophie that appear in the *Revue Universitaire*.

teaching credentials in philosophy, history, literature, or language.⁷ Durkheim's mix of positivism (drawn from Comte, but cleansed of its dogmatic and political-theological leanings) and rationalism (drawn from Renouvier and his idea that morality can be studied scientifically), conjoined with an attentiveness to empirical detail, was a major presence at the Sorbonne in the early decades of the twentieth century, and this led to an intense rivalry among those who followed Durkheim's courses at the Sorbonne and those following Bergson's lectures at the Collège de France. Durkheim's subsequent influence on the academic field of sociology has been profound, and his emphasis on philosophical and moral reflection conjoined with empirical study began a tradition within French philosophy that would draw several philosophy *agrégés* away from philosophy, including among the more well-known examples, his nephew, Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), and, in later years, Raymond Aron, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Henri Lefebvre, and Pierre Bourdieu. While his influence at the time of his death on the social sciences was far greater than it was on philosophy, Durkheim's emphasis on empirical study also led to a tradition that encouraged those pursuing their philosophical reflections on the natural and social sciences to do so with a solid grounding in those sciences, and the proximity of scientific research and French philosophy in general can be traced to Durkheim's own fusion of these two modes of inquiry that, in other intellectual cultures, often proceed along entirely distinct paths.

Idealism

Along with Durkheim, the other dominant figure at the Sorbonne in the early decades of the twentieth century was Léon Brunschvicg (1869–1944). Brunschvicg was without question the leading figure in French idealism and the most important representative of twentieth-century French neo-Kantianism. Together with his friends Xavier Léon and Élie Halévy, Brunschvicg co-founded the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* in 1893, and in 1901 he was instrumental in the founding of the Société Française de Philosophie. Brunschvicg came to the Sorbonne in 1909 and taught there for 30 years. During these years, he produced his major works, including three large historical studies that

⁷ See Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Works* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 372.

chronicle the increasing sophistication with which the mind comes to understand itself and its constitution of experience in the realms of mathematics, causality, and morality and religion: *Les Étapes de la philosophie mathématique* (1912; “Stages in the Philosophy of Mathematics”), *L’Expérience humaine et la causalité physique* (1920; “Human Experience and Physical Causality”), and *Le Progrès de la conscience dans la philosophie occidentale* (1927; “The Development of Consciousness/Conscience⁸ in Western Philosophy”).

Brunschvicg’s idealism draws its inspiration from Kant’s, but it is informed as well by a Hegelian attention to historical development and a Comtean respect for the givenness of the external world and the ultimate unity of knowledge. Like all idealists, Brunschvicg accepts that we can have no knowledge of a thing as it is in itself, independent of our consciousness of it. But contrary to subjective idealists like Berkeley, Brunschvicg does not deny the existence of a world external to our consciousness; he argues instead that the relation between subject and object is itself a relation that emerges within and is known to consciousness. And unlike the transcendental idealism of Kant, Brunschvicg does not understand the objects of knowledge to be constituted on the basis of *a priori* and unchanging categories; instead, the objects of our knowledge unfold historically as the mind reflects on its own activity. In his three historical studies, he thus followed the development of knowledge in mathematics, nature, and morality as the progressive process of new discoveries of reality that follow from the increasingly sophisticated self-reflective activity of consciousness.

Like Durkheim, Brunschvicg’s courses at the Sorbonne were extremely popular: for example, in the 1919–20 academic year, every student at the École Normale Supérieure who registered to take the *agrégation* lists taking Brunschvicg’s course on “La conscience.”⁹ While many of the more famous students who took his classes, including Gaston Bachelard, Simone de Beauvoir, Emmanuel Levinas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Paul Sartre, chose not to follow him toward idealism, one can in most cases see their

⁸ It is important to keep in mind that the French word *conscience* means both ‘consciousness’ and ‘conscience.’ In Brunschvicg’s text, he clearly intends both meanings. That the French *conscience* can mean both ‘consciousness’ and ‘conscience’ has been responsible for more than a few misunderstandings and mistranslations of French philosophical thought by English readers.

⁹ These records can be found at the Centre d’Accueil et de Recherche des Archives Nationales (CARAN), Paris, carton AJ/61/192.

work evolving in critical response to Brunschvicg's. For those many students who followed his courses on Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant, his lectures, in the words of Jean-Toussaint Desanti, accustomed them "to see something like an internal logic according to which these names represented the high-points in Reason's Odyssey, necessary reference points along the unfolding of philosophy as manifested in history."¹⁰ Through his books, his institutional positions with the Société Française de Philosophie and the *jury d'agrégation*, and his 30 years of teaching at the Sorbonne, Brunschvicg's influence on French academic philosophy in the first four decades of the twentieth century was second to none.

Spiritualism

The third position, and the one that can be seen to have had the greatest impact on subsequent French philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century, is spiritualism. Spiritualism does not so much define a philosophical position as name a tradition in French thought that has its origins in the ideas of Maine de Biran and that emphasizes, in contrast to nineteenth-century materialism, the importance of the will. As a consequence, spiritualism was the most multiform and diverse of the early philosophical movements in France, taking both religious and non-religious forms, and within each of these forms, significant differences can be found among the leading representatives. In terms of both immediate influence and enduring philosophical impact, the most prominent of the spiritualists was Henri Bergson (1859–1941). Indeed, Bergson was the most dominant figure in French philosophy for much of his lifetime, in part because of his position for many years as a holder of a Chair in Philosophy at the Collège de France, and in part because the accessibility of his writing gave him a large audience outside the academic community. While his turn toward evolution and away from Kant alienated him from the academic centers of power at the Sorbonne (with Brunschvicg and Durkheim) and the École Normale Supérieure (with Boutroux), his exploration of evolutionary theory in terms of the spiritual force he called *élan vital* captured the imagination

¹⁰ Jean-Toussaint Desanti, "A Path in Philosophy," trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 54. This interesting collection includes 11 essays from important French philosophers who were asked to reflect on their own work and several of the essays address the authors' intellectual formations.

of French writers and society at large, and had a great influence on other, more religious spiritualist philosophers.

While Bergson's philosophy most directly responds to both the positivists' rejection of metaphysics and the idealists' hyper-intellectualism and discounting of the epistemological importance of the body, it also offers a broader challenge to the dominant tradition in the history of metaphysics that has privileged being over becoming and understood time in the Aristotelian sense of an endless series of discrete and singular moments.¹¹ According to Bergson, to analyze time as a series of distinct moments ultimately conceives time according to the model of space, and this had led metaphysicians to understand ultimate reality in terms of that which does not change (e.g., Plato's Forms). Instead, Bergson claims that we must understand time as we experience it, as *durée* or duration, which does not proceed from moment to moment but moves instead as a continuous stream of becoming (as both Bergson and William James recognized, the similarity between Bergson's idea of duration and James's "stream of consciousness" is clear). Duration, Bergson writes, is experienced as "a qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity; a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of inner duration are not external to one another."¹²

What links these inner moments of duration is what Bergson called *élan vital* (vital impulse), the driving force that underlies all life (echoes of Spinoza's *conatus* should be heard here). The center of Bergson's vitalism, *élan vital* was his way to account for the evolutionary process of becoming while avoiding what he saw to be two unsatisfactory explanations of evolutionary change: mechanism and finalism. Where the mechanistic interpretation of evolution saw the process as one of pure chance which, according to Bergson, could not account for the apparently purposive increase in organic complexity, the finalist interpretation saw the evolutionary process as overly determined and unable to account for the randomness and contingency that was for him so clearly a part of natural history. Bergson's alternative was to see evolution as a *creative* process, one that was inherently capable of producing something new, unlike either mechanism or finalism, which saw

¹¹ Bergson's views are, in this regard, much closer to Heidegger's than Heidegger's few brief and dismissive comments on Bergson in *Being and Time* would indicate.

¹² Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: Macmillan, 1910), p. 226.

the future as, respectively, either causally or teleologically determined. The key to understanding evolution as creative was to understand the life force or *élan vital* as “virtually multiple [*virtuellement multiple*],”¹³ as making possible any of several actual futures. As Gilles Deleuze has noted, when Bergson talks about *élan vital*, “it is always a case of a virtuality in the process of becoming actualized, a simplicity in the process of differentiating, a totality in the process of dividing up.”¹⁴ And insofar as what is virtual holds many possible future actuals, contrary to the deterministic consequences of either mechanistic or finalist accounts of evolution, Bergson’s account of evolution allows for the creation of the new and the different.

Among the more religious spiritualist philosophers, Bergson’s impact can be seen on both Thomists and non-Thomists alike. In fact, of the more important spiritualist philosophers in the first decades of the twentieth century, it is only Maurice Blondel on whom Bergson’s philosophy had little influence. Blondel studied with Boutroux at the *École Normale* and, like many *normaliens*, he was greatly influenced by Boutroux’s emphasis on freedom and by his lack of sympathy for Bergson’s thought. Of the spiritualist philosophers, Blondel was perhaps the dominant thinker working outside the Thomist tradition and his most important work, *Action*, first published in 1893, was one of the most widely read and influential texts of these early decades. For all the other significant Christian spiritualists, however, Bergson was a powerful influence, whether directly through his lectures, which were heard by Jacques Maritain, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Gabriel Marcel, or indirectly, as in the case of Emmanuel Mounier, whose mentors (Maritain, Charles Péguy [1873–1914], and Jacques Chevalier [1882–1962]) were themselves deeply influenced by Bergson.

Whether framed in terms of Sorbonne rationalism vs. anti-university spiritualism, or neo-Kantianism vs. vitalism, the rivalry between Brunschvicg and Bergson dominated French philosophy in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Yet as we will see, their influence began to diminish in the 1920s and dropped off considerably in the years

¹³ See Henri Bergson, *L’Evolution créatrice* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1914), p. 280.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 94.

¹⁵ Although the rivalry between their respective followers was often harsh, the relations between Bergson and Brunschvicg themselves were quite cordial. Vladimir Jankélévitch discusses Brunschvicg’s respect for Bergson’s work and sympathy for Bergson’s physical ailments and the harsh treatment he received by academic

approaching World War II. There are several reasons for this which have little to do with their respective philosophical positions. Bergson suffered from a debilitating form of arthritis and, although he remained officially a member of the Collège de France until 1921, his poor health prevented him from teaching after 1914. More importantly, Bergson's health made it difficult for him to work, with the result that, following the appearance of *Creative Evolution* in 1907, 25 years would pass until his next, and final, important work, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, would appear in 1932. While some, like Sartre, admitted to being inspired to begin the serious study of philosophy by Bergson,¹⁶ the more typical response of the advanced students at the École Normale Supérieure is expressed by Merleau-Ponty, who in 1959 reflected back on how little attention was paid by his contemporaries to Bergson. Although students at the Sorbonne and École Normale were more hostile to Bergson and more sympathetic to Brunschvicg, Merleau-Ponty confesses that “if we had been more careful readers of Bergson, and if more thought had been given to him, we would have been drawn to a much more concrete philosophy, a philosophy much less reflexive than Brunschvicg's.”¹⁷

philosophers in a 1969 essay, “Léon Brunschvicg,” reprinted in *Sources* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), pp. 133–41, esp. 133–5.

¹⁶ Sartre recounts the impact of reading Bergson, specifically his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (*Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*), on his turn from literature to philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in the 1976 film *Sartre*, transcribed and published as *Sartre By Himself*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), p. 27. While Sartre is critical of Bergson's work when he does address it in, for example, *The Psychology of Imagination* and *Being and Nothingness*, there can be little doubt that Bergson's persona, as a writer for an audience outside the academy and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, made a lasting impression on the young Sartre.

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosophy of Existence,” trans. Allen S. Weiss in *Texts and Dialogues*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry, Jr. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1992), p. 132. In another 1959 essay, “Bergson in the Making,” Merleau-Ponty admits to how badly Bergson was read at the time, and how much more there is to his philosophy than what was “identified with the vague cause of spiritualism” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Bergson in the Making,” trans. Richard McCleary, in *Signs* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964], p. 182). Subsequent readers of French philosophy would have to wait for Gilles Deleuze to bring out what Merleau-Ponty refers to in this essay as the “audacious” Bergson. See, for example, Deleuze's *Bergsonism*, as well as his two volumes on cinema.

Brunschvicg, for his part, remained institutionally powerful for many years in his positions as Sorbonne professor, frequent member of the *jury d'agrégation*, and jury president from 1936 to 1938. His support for women who wanted to study philosophy at the Sorbonne also was significant.¹⁸ But confronting the events of World War I led students away from idealism, and the events leading up to World War II, and France's eventual occupation by Germany, made things difficult for Jews in France. It is worth noting that three of the dominant figures in French philosophy in these early decades—Durkheim, Brunschvicg, and Bergson—were all Jews whose careers and lives were directly affected by anti-Semitism. Both Durkheim and Brunschvicg were active Dreyfusards who took part in the campaign to exonerate Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer falsely accused of spying for the Germans, and both were attacked by the social and political conservatives who saw the Sorbonne falling victim to Germanic philosophizing and Jewish cultural influences. In 1940, Brunschvicg was forced to flee Paris for the free zone in the south, leaving his library behind, and eventually settling in Aix-en-Provence. Because of the advancing German forces, he was forced to move several more times before his death in January, 1944. Bergson, although born to Jewish parents, late in his life became spiritually committed to Catholicism and would most likely have converted; he refused to do so, however, at a time when French Jews were most seriously threatened. Having been made an “Honorary Aryan” by the Vichy government in recognition of his contributions to French intellectual culture, Bergson to his credit refused to renounce his Jewish background or accept any special treatment, which likely contributed to his death in early January, 1941.

Beyond these historical factors, there were also, to be sure, philosophical factors that led the generation of students of the late 1920s and 1930s to make a general turn away from the spiritual and ideal and toward the concrete. For either a theist like Marcel or Merleau-Ponty, or an atheistic thinker like Sartre or Beauvoir, the otherworldly character of idealism or spiritualism did not satisfy their desire to understand the concrete data of human experience, whether it be the wholesale carnage of World War I or the more mundane details of

¹⁸ Brunschvicg's wife, Cécile Brunschvicg (1877–1946), was one of the leading feminists of her day, and she credits her husband with being a strong advocate of women's suffrage. See Deidre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), p. 654n32.

a human life. For some, this turn was both explicitly politicized and directed toward the academic philosophical institutions. Paul Nizan, a Marxist who was a close friend of Sartre and a fellow *normalien*, made the dissatisfaction with the Sorbonne mandarins the explicit theme of his 1930 text *Les Chiens de garde* (*The Watchdogs*). While indicting many of the leading philosophers of the day (Bergson, Lalande,¹⁹ Parodi,²⁰ Bouglé),²¹ it is Léon Brunschvicg in particular who bears the brunt of Nizan's attack on the bourgeois tendencies of academic philosophy, whose supreme function, he writes,

is to obscure the miseries of contemporary reality: the spiritual destitution of vast numbers of men, the fundamental dichotomy in their consciousness, and the increasingly intolerable disparity between what they could achieve and what little they have actually accomplished . . . It serves to divert the exploited from the contemplation of their own degradation and debasement – an activity that might prove dangerous to the exploiters . . . In a word, the purpose of this philosophy is to explain, to fortify, and to propagate the half-truths manufactured by the bourgeoisie and so useful in consolidating its power.²²

The turn away from idealism and spiritualism was taken up explicitly by Jean Wahl in his 1932 work *Vers le concret* (“Toward the Concrete”).

¹⁹ André Lalande (1867–1963) was co-founder in 1901 of the Société Française de Philosophie. He held a Chair in Philosophy at the Sorbonne from 1904 to 1936, and served as President of the *jury d'agrégation* from 1920 to 1927 and 1931 to 1934. Lalande's most influential work, and his preoccupation from 1902, was his project of editing a collection of detailed definitions of philosophical terms, the *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*. Between 1902 and 1923, the Société Française de Philosophie devoted 21 of its bi-monthly meetings to working through the vocabulary alphabetically, publishing subsequently its presentations and discussions in its bulletin. The first complete edition of the *Vocabulaire* was published in 1926, and currently it is in its eighteenth edition, the first nine editions having been overseen by Lalande.

²⁰ Dominique Parodi (1870–1955) served off and on as *Inspecteur Général* of Public Instruction from 1919 to 1934 and was editor of the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* from 1935 to 1955.

²¹ Célestin Bouglé (1870–1940) was a sociologist associated with Durkheim, who taught at the Sorbonne in the Department of Philosophy from 1908 to 1940, with a Chair as Professor of Social Economy from 1919 to 1940. He also served as Adjunct Director (1927–35), and then Director (1935–40), of the École Normale Supérieure.

²² Paul Nizan, *The Watchdogs: Philosophers and the Established Order*, trans. Paul Fittingoff (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 91–2.

Wahl argued in successive chapters on William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gabriel Marcel, that we see in their works a dialectic between thought and its object that refuses to lose touch with the real. The principal enemy for James, Whitehead, and Marcel is “mental aridity [*sécheresse mentale*],” and because they each retain an attention to the body and to lived experience, their dialectics, unlike Hegel’s, remain oriented toward the concrete.²³ We see a similar motivation driving Alexandre Kojève’s historical and materialist reading of Hegel’s master–slave dialectic as he argues that “History is the history of the working Slave” who will become free by transcending himself through labor: “The future and History hence belong not to the warlike Master, who either dies or preserves himself indefinitely in identity to himself, but to the working Slave. The Slave, in transforming the given World by his work, transcends the given and what is given by that given in himself.”²⁴ And, perhaps most significantly, this is a fundamental motivation for those who, like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, were turning to Husserl and Heidegger, whose method of phenomenological description and account of Being-*in*-the world were just what they needed to turn away from Brunschvicg and Bergson and turn, in the words of Jean Wahl’s text, *vers le concret*.²⁵

²³ Jean Wahl, *Vers le concret* (Paris: Vrin, 1932), p. 13. Although this text is comprised of three studies of James, Whitehead, and Marcel, the footnotes in the preface make clear that Wahl’s orientation toward the concrete is guided by his reading of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

²⁴ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Raymond Queneau, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), pp. 20, 23.

²⁵ In *Search for a Method*, Sartre mentions Wahl’s text as enjoying a “great success” among his generation. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 19. Dominique Janicaud makes a similar observation about Sartre’s attraction to phenomenology. Commenting on Sartre’s “brief, but dazzling [1939] manifesto for the new ‘phenomenological ontology’ [entitled] ‘Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology,’” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations I* [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1947], pp. 31–5; English translation by Joseph P. Fell, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 1, no. 2 [May 1970]: 4–5), Janicaud writes: “Against André Lalande, Léon Brunschvicg, and Émile Meyerson, who analyzed and celebrated the mind’s power of assimilation and unification, Sartre lays claim to ‘something solid,’ without however wanting to return to either a gross sensualism, an objectivism, or a more subtle type of realism à la Henri Bergson.” See Dominique Janicaud, *The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology*, trans. Bernard G. Prusack, in Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 18.