



Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy

Jacques Derrida and François Laruelle

JD: Mines is not an easy task. After what you've just heard, you can see the risk I took in speaking of François Laruelle's '*polemos*'.

You spoke in the name of a certain peace. Yet I have to admit that, with regard to *polemos* and terror, there were moments while I was listening to your description of philosophical terror as transcendently constitutive of philosophy, etc., when I was sometimes tempted to see in your own description a rigorous analysis of what you were in fact doing here. I say sometimes, because I did not succumb to the temptation. I shall nevertheless attempt to say something else. I am obliged here to play devils advocate.

Among the many questions I would have liked to ask you, slowly, patiently, text in hand, in the manner befitting a philosophical society or a scientific community; from among all these questions, it seems natural for me to pick a few and to formulate them in a schematic fashion, since we don't have much time, and to refrain, at least for the time being, from referring to your latest book¹.

I shall state in a word or two, bluntly, the questions which occurred to me while listening to you, and my perplexities.

Would you say that the scientific community, the community of science, of the new science which you described, is a community without a *socius*, in the sense in which you defined the *socius*?

This question is not about whether or not you have been cautious enough, but rather about the way in which your precautions run riot and counteract one another. When you talk about the essence of science, while being careful to say that what is at stake is this essence prior to its political and social appropriations, which is to say prior to what is called its effectivity, its effectivity rather than its reality? where do you find this essence of science, which science in its effectivity always falls short of? What is it apart from its effectivity, its political and social appropriations? This is a very general question, which I shall naturally try to reiterate by means of other questions which I have prepared.

My first question ?a massive one? concerns the reality of this real which you constantly invoked in your talk, or ?and this comes to the same thing? the scientificity of this science, this new science, since this reality and this scientificity seem to be related. You oppose reality to a number of things; you oppose it to totality ?it is not the whole, beings as a whole? and you also stressed its distinction from effectivity and possibility. The distinction between reality and possibility doesn't look all that surprising.



But what is rather more surprising is when you oppose reality to philosophy. If we were to ask you in a classical manner, or in what you call the ontologico-Heideggerian manner “What is the reality of this real?”, and whether it is a specification of being, you would I suppose dismiss this type of question, which still belongs to the regime of ontologico-philosophical discourse, and even to its deconstruction, since it is easy to assimilate the latter to the former. Such a question would still be governed by this law of philosophical society to which you oppose this real, the new science, community.

What makes it difficult to go along with the movement I would like to accompany you in, is that it sometimes seems to me to consist in you carrying out a kind of violent shuffling of the cards in a game whose rules are known to you alone... Which is to say that the hand ends up being completely reshuffled. The only thing is that I seem to detect ?and this is probably a philosophical illusion on my part, one which I would like you to disabuse me of? a real and philosophical programme which has already been tried and tested. For example, when you say:

“By way of contrast, one can ask another question, one about [sciences] conditions of reality. I am careful not to say ‘conditions of possibility, these being the metaphysical and the State combined together with the metaphysical and philosophical interpretation of science, whereas I am talking about sciences transcendental conditions of reality’”

Under what conditions is research a real activity as opposed to a social illusion? This is all the more crucial given that you go on to state:

“The problem then becomes that of a critique of reason [let us say heuristical]; of a real rather than merely philosophical critique.”

Is this distinction pertinent for a transcendental philosophy? Can a transcendental philosophy distinguish between the possible and the real in the way in which you yourself do?

I should say that I often felt myself in agreement with you. For instance, with your initial description of the researcher, of research insofar as it seemed to follow a certain Heideggerian logic, in the description you gave of the principle of reason, and what you said about programming and about non goal-oriented research, which in fact re-institutes a goal...; I was willing to subscribe to all this. Then you went on to oppose to this description this new science, which you distinguished from its political, social, etc., appropriations, and there, obviously, I had the impression you were reintroducing philosophemes ?the transcendental being only one of them? into this description, this conception of the new science, the One, the real, etc. There, all of a sudden, I said to myself: hes trying to pull the trick of the transcendental on us again, the trick of auto-foundation, auto-legitimation, at the very moment when he claims to be making



a radical break. So if, for example, the distinction 'real/possible' is pertinent independently of philosophies of the transcendental type, another hypothesis arises, which I immediately have to dismiss along with you: isn't this distinction already characteristic of a Marxist or neo-Marxist type programme? Real and no longer philosophical: at least insofar as the philosophical would seem to be restricted to a theoretical rather than transformative interpretation and hence would remain confined to what you call the social illusion. But you rule out this hypothesis for us by telling us that when you say 'real', you are not referring to material structures. So I seemed to understand that this kind of Marxist-style interpretation was also among the things you wanted to rule out.

You claim that:

"This amphiboly of philosophy and the real, which is the secret of philosophical decision, can only be discovered in accordance with another, generally non-philosophical experience of the real."

Here, I would like you to explain very pedagogically what you mean by a 'generally non-philosophical experience of the real.'

You also claim that:

"Philosophy and unconstrained research are the abundant forgetting of their real essence; not of their conditions of possibility but of their conditions of reality. There is no forgetting of philosophy; on the other hand, there is a forgetting by philosophy as principle of sufficient philosophy of its own real essence."

A little further down, we encounter this notion of 'force', about which I have many questions I would like to ask you:

"[I]t is this latter thesis that must be radically contested in order to found a critique that would be more forceful than all the deconstructions of philosophical sufficiency."

This motif of force reoccurs forcefully but associated with a project of auto-foundation, of transcendental legitimation? these are the terms you use, albeit in inverted commas, and my question concerns these inverted commas. I could have been very quick and simply asked you: what is the status of inverted commas in your text?

For example, when you say *"This instance must be real rather than material; it must be of a cognitive order in order to measure up to philosophy and to research; finally, it must have its foundation and legitimation in itself, without requiring the mediation of philosophy, which is to say it must be transcendental in its own way."*? my question, my perplexity, the point on which I am asking for illumination is: What is a transcendental project of auto-foundation and auto-



legitimation when it is non-philosophical? And when you then go on to attribute this non-philosophical project of transcendental auto-foundation, auto-legitimation, to a science, to what you call science insofar as you distinguish it from all of its appropriations, and which you also call the force-of-thought (you yourself underline the 'the'), my question is: What is it in this force, this science, that is not philosophical, etc?

This force will be a force capable of ?I dont want to go too far and say that it will be capable of imposing peace? but it is nevertheless a force in the name of which the peace proper to this community founded by the new science will be possible.

What is this force belonging to a subject whose undivided identity, without identification, anterior to division, will ultimately found a community? When one knows, having read you, that the One to which you refer in your discourse, and on the basis of which you critique ?you prefer 'critique to 'deconstructing?', or rather send philosophy packing; when this force, this subject, this science, this undivided subject, is a 'One which you tell us is not the identical, must not be understood in the classically philosophical sense of 'One; what then is the difference between this One and the entire chain that accompanies it, i.e. science, the real, the entire community, enforced peace, free peace?

What is the difference between this One and what others call 'difference, since it is not identity?

Ultimately, all the questions I wanted to ask you come down to this schema: Why do you reduce ?and isnt there a violence here of the kind you denounce in philosophical society?? so many gestures which could accompany you along the path you wish to pursue?

To take just one example among many: the gesture of proposing scientific approaches which would no longer conform to the conception of current practices, to the philosophical concept of science; of interrogating certain discourses which claim to be scientific, of helping science make critical progress through movements which would no longer conform to what is understood in those appropriations which you talked about?

Why ignore the existence of this gesture in the various deconstructions which you evoked in passing?

Why, in this or that approach putting forward propositions very similar to yours? for example, with regard to constitution, given that you said that some things were un-constituted? why class these gestures among everything else you dismiss? It is obvious that among movements of the deconstructive type, which you have thought about and whose analysis you have developed at greater length in your book, there is among other things a movement to deconstruct the model of constitution, to avoid that constitutive or constitutional schema which you identify with everything you want to reject.



Why proceed thus, if not on account of a gesture tantamount to socio-philosophical war? There, bluntly put, are all the questions I would like to have been able to formulate better, in a situation other than one of improvisation and haste.

To what do you tie your concept of democracy, what does 'democracy mean, once this concept is emptied of all its philosophemes?

FL: I notice that all your questions are interrelated, obviously; they form a coherent whole, just as one might expect. These questions are indicative of the resistance of the Principle of sufficient philosophy.

JD: No surprise there, needless to say...

FL: Which is to say that your questions have a very particular style, which I found highly interesting, that of retortion: "You're just like those you criticize"; "You're doing just what you claim to abhor". You taught me in your work that one should be wary of retortion. So I would like to suggest that to the extent that you are making a certain use of retortion, and this is a theme that recurred throughout, right up to the end via the accusation of socio-philosophical war, then it is necessarily the case that some of your objections in a certain way say precisely the opposite of what I said.

Let me take your first question. You tell me I am practising terror [*protestations from Jacques Derrida*].

Do I practice terror? There are obviously two readings of my text. There is a philosophical reading, one in which I do practice terror. And there is a non-philosophical reading, which is obviously my reading. And from the latter point of view, I am reluctant to concede that I am practising terror. I would like to suggest to you why not.

I was careful to say that terror was bound up with overturning. I only used the word 'terror in contexts that related it to overturning.

So, are the relations I described between science and philosophy relations of overturning?

Absolutely not. The whole problem for me, having studied your work along with that of other contemporary philosophers, lay in defining a point of view on philosophy that would not be acquired philosophically; which is to say, a point of view that would not be acquired via philosophical operations, be they those of doubt, controversy, or overturning as principal philosophical operation, and even displacement insofar as it is of a piece with overturning. From science to philosophy? and I will return to this point, since this is the direction that governs everything I write? there is no overturning. There is merely a limitation, but one which



does not take the form of an overturning. Perhaps it should be stated more explicitly: there is a limitation of philosophy by science; that is all.

But I absolutely do not overturn philosophy; were I claiming to overthrow it, it would be a pointless gesture, a zero-sum game. The entire enterprise would then be contradictory.

JD: When you say you are calling into question the sufficiency of philosophy, in what way is that particular gesture different from a host of others, mine among them...? Why erase the latter gesture and consign it to the realm of sufficiency?

FL: You often claim that I conjoin ontology and deconstruction. Obviously, I only conjoin them under certain conditions, not generally, and I have sufficiently emphasized in other works how seriously I take the difference between certain forms of metaphysics and your own work on and in metaphysics. But if I allow myself to conjoin them, it is in the name of the struggle against the Principle of sufficient philosophy, and in that regard alone. What is more, I do not call any philosophy into question, since I posit the equivalence of all philosophical decisions.

What is probably wounding for philosophers is the fact that, from the point of view I have adopted, I am obliged to posit that there is no principle of choice between a classical type of ontology and the deconstruction of that ontology. There is no reason to choose one rather than the other. This is a problem I discussed at great length in my book [*Les philosophies de la différence*]: whether there can be a principle of choice between philosophies. Ultimately, it is the problem of philosophical decision. And I sought a point of view ?one may then query the way in which I arrived at it, or constituted it? which implies the equivalence of all philosophical decisions, or in other words, what I call democracy and peace.

Obviously, I defined democracy and peace only insofar as these might be pertinent for a community of philosophers, and only within the bounds of that framework. So I am in no way conflating your work with a classical ontology, not at all. But in the name of the principle of sufficient philosophy, and since I adopt a point of view which allows one to discover the latter principle, I am obliged to stipulate that equivalence. Because the principle of sufficient philosophy cannot be discovered from within philosophy. It can only be discovered from elsewhere.

But I would like to return to this point about terror, because it is really close to my heart.

There is no overturning of philosophy. There isn't even a reduction in the Husserlian sense, or a bracketing of philosophical decision. There is, if one wants to take up the term reduction ?but you will take me up on my use of philosophical vocabulary so I will come back to this in a moment? what I call an already accomplished, already actual reduction of philosophical decision by science. Because science is precisely not constituted in the way in which a philosophy is constituted, through a set of operations among which there may be



transcendental reductions; science is already a transcendental reduction in act. And that is why the order I follow, the real order, is the order which proceeds from science to philosophy. If you follow the opposite trajectory ?and as a philosopher, someone who is in a certain sense governed by the principle of sufficient philosophy, you cannot but follow the opposite trajectory? you will necessarily register my gesture as a particularly aggressive one. But I am bound to tell you ?and this is the consistency proper to my own position? that your impression of terrorism and aggression is an impression that is internal to philosophical resistance; it is a philosophical self-defence mechanism.

On then to the second problem, that of the new science. It seems to me that, unless I made a mistake, I did not speak of a 'new science'?

JD: I am absolutely sure of it.

FL: If I did then it was in a certain sense a philosophical lapse, precisely. Philosophy is always stronger than one imagines. In no way do I want to talk of a 'new science, precisely because what I mean by science is what everyone else means by science. What I don't want to do is reiterate the philosophical distinction between the so-called empirical sciences and transcendental science. This is precisely the distinction I don't want to make because to do so would be to reconstitute a hierarchy whereby philosophy can characterize itself as thinking while relegating science to the status of a merely blind, technical production of various kinds of knowledge.

Since my concept of the transcendental differs from the use to which philosophy puts it, likewise, my concept of the empirical will also differ from its use in philosophy. For me, all sciences, even those philosophy degrades by calling them 'empirical; all these sciences partake of transcendental structures. They are already consistent in themselves, they already have access to the real. On the other hand, what is possible is a science, maybe a new one ?or at least one that could be called 'new insofar as it still has to be constructed? , a science that I will call transcendental and whose goal will consist simply in describing the transcendental constitution of those sciences which philosophy calls 'empirical. But this transcendental science is not superior to those empirical sciences, since it no longer relates to them in the ways in which philosophy related to them. It is a science absolutely on the same level as the others.

There is in a certain sense a community, a kind of equivalence among all sciences, whether ordinary or transcendental. I wanted to break the relation of domination which philosophy enjoys over the other sciences.

JD: This is what you wrote:

"Thus a community of researchers in philosophy will be democratic and peaceful only if it refrains from founding itself upon the principle of sufficient philosophy in order to consider itself



as the subject of science. And if it then contents itself with treating philosophy simply as the object of a new science and new practices elaborated upon that foundation ...”

FL:What I describe with the term ‘essence of science’ are the structures of any science whatsoever. Once these transcendental structures have been elaborated, or rather once these already existing structures have been described (it is not my description which creates them), it then becomes possible to envisage a specific science *for* philosophy and to extend, so to speak, scientificity as I understand it to the study of philosophy itself. So in this sense, yes, there would indeed be a new science to create, but the science I describe is the most banal, most ordinary kind of science.

You also asked me: Isn't there also a *socius* in science? Yes, obviously; I alluded to it when I said, with regard to the politics of science, that the latter are an overdetermination of transcendental structures, which I have not analyzed here.

I left it to one side precisely because it is an overdetermination. But obviously, the sociological, political, economic intrications of science need to be analyzed, and its transcendental structures include or may be affected by the effective conditions for the production of forms of knowledge. I do not deny this.

You ask: Where does this essence of science come from?

This is obviously the principal question, in a sense, because it means: From where do you derive what you are telling us? There are two ways of answering this question: a philosophical answer, which I don't want to give, and a rigorously transcendental answer. The philosophical answer would be to say: Having reflected upon the philosophical decision and the ultimate prerequisites for transcendence, for the mixture of transcendence and immanence, I concluded that philosophy assumed something like the One and the One had always been presupposed by philosophy but that the essence of the latter had never been elucidated by philosophy.

But I have to say that this answer did not satisfy me at all, because it led me to position myself in your territory, which is that of philosophy, and to want to give a ‘false (the term is not quite right) description of what is at stake. The true answer I must give to you? maybe it will seem rather cavalier to you? but ultimately it is just as simple as the question:

“Where do I get this from?”

I get it from the thing itself. This is as rigorous an answer I am able to give. Because the criterion for my discourse was a rigorously immanent or transcendental criterion, there is no other answer I can give on pain of placing myself upon the terrain of effectivity, and I neither can nor want to think science on the basis of transcendental effectivity.



JD: I don't understand what 'transcendental' means outside of philosophy. But when you tell us: My answer is the thing itself, I want to put two questions to you: Isn't this a philosophical move, the appeal to the thing itself? What; which; *what is the thing itself?*

FL: The One is the thing itself.

JD: You think that the relation to the One as the thing itself is a non-philosophical relation or experience?

FL: Yes, precisely because it is not a relation. This is the crux of the misunderstanding, which is to say that you insist on wanting to make a philosophical reading, through the prism or optic of the philosophical decision, albeit a decision which has been worked upon ?you persist in trying to read what I am doing through the medium of philosophy.

No doubt, you will object: "But you yourself constantly use philosophy. In the name of what do you allow yourself to use the term 'transcendental' or the term 'One' if not in the name of philosophy?"

I have to tell you that this is an absolutely standard, normal, common objection; it is always the one people put to me first: "You use philosophy in order to talk about something which you claim is not philosophical." Listen...the objection is so fundamental that it is tantamount to indicting me of a crude, rudimentary self-contradiction. It is entirely obvious that I allow myself the right, the legitimate right, to use philosophical vocabulary non-philosophically.

It is a defining characteristic of philosophy, of the principle of sufficient philosophy and its unitary will, to believe that all use of language is always ultimately philosophical, whether sooner or later. Philosophy, which I characterize as a 'unitary mode of thought, cannot imagine for an instant that language can be used in two ways: there is the use of language in science, which is not at all philosophical, contrary to what philosophy itself postulates in order to establish itself as epistemology or fundamental ontology of science; and the use of language in philosophy. Philosophy postulates that every use of language is a use with a view to the logos, or what I call a use-of-the-logos, language being taken as constitutive of the being of things. From this point of view, if this were the only possible use of language, then obviously an escape from philosophy would be out of the question. But I postulate ?actually, I don't postulate it, since I begin by taking them as indissociably given together from the outset ?the block of the real as One and a certain use of language which corresponds to this particular conception of the real. Since I take as indissociably given from the outset a certain use of language, which is not the use of the logos, and the One which founds it, I do not contradict myself, I do not relapse into philosophical contradiction. Philosophy has a deeply ingrained fetishism, which is obviously that of metaphysics, but which may not be entirely destroyed by philosophical



critiques of metaphysics, and this is the belief that ultimately all use of language is carried out with a view to being, in order to grant being, or to open being, etc.; that all use of language is 'positional.

But science ?I dont have time to develop this here? makes a non-positional, non-thetic use of language. There is an entire theory of scientific representation waiting to be elaborated, because the latter does not have the same 'ontological structure as philosophical representation. I think that most of the objections put to me are a consequence of this belief that there is only one use of language, and that not only does being speak through language, but as soon as you begin to speak, it is ultimately being that speaks and you are no more than an intermediary. It is this belief that science extirpates. That is why I allow myself the right to use the term 'transcendental under conditions that are no longer ontological, my only problem then being to display a requisite degree of internal rigour or consistency, which is to say, to transform the word 'transcendental so as to render it better suited to describe this non-thetic experience which the One is. So if I continually oppose the One of science, which from my point of view explains scientific thoughts profoundly realist character, its blind aspect, its deafness to the logos, its unbearable character for philosophy; if I distinguish this particular One from philosophical unity, this is for reasons that are relatively precise, ones which provided the starting point for these investigations. It seems to me that philosophy cannot help but deploy itself through a hybrid structure that combines transcendence and immanence. Whatever their modes, however varied these two coordinates, philosophical space is a space with two coordinates, transcendence and immanence. It may be that metaphysical transcendence has a kind of tain or lining of alterity; that may well be possible, in which case there would no longer be just two dimensions, but three or four, one could try to discover them. But it seems to me to be a defining characteristic of philosophy to combine something like a position with something like a decision, and hence to deploy unity, but to always deploy unity along with its opposite.

This opposite may not always be immediately given, one may have the impression that it has been expelled from immanent unity, but in reality transcendence returns in the form of a pedagogy: you are told that the soul has to identify itself with the One...Philosophy thereby shifts to a pedagogical stance which reintroduces transcendence, and as a result the One of philosophy...(there is no doubt that the subject is obliged to identify with the One) simultaneously transcends the subject.

But I claim that sciences paradoxical nature for philosophy, its fundamentally obscure, non-reflexive character from the viewpoint of philosophy ?which explains why philosophy has denigrated it throughout the centuries, since Plato at least and right through to Heidegger ("science does not think")? follows from the fact that with science immanence is given right from the outset in itself and solely by itself. Absolutely immanent data, Husserl used to say, are without "the slightest fragment of world". I am in fact very close to Husserl, obviously, but with one slight difference, which is precisely the crucial, non-philosophical difference, and which is that with Husserl, in spite of everything, a transcendental reduction is required in order to



actualize the transcendental ego. But I claim that in science, no preliminary transcendental reduction is required: we already necessarily start from the One. Which obviously seems very odd: this is not where we expected to find science! We start from the One, we don't arrive at it. We start from the One, which is to say that if we go anywhere, it will be toward the world, toward Being. And I frequently use a formulation which is obviously shocking for philosophers, particularly those of a Platonist or Plotinian bent: it's not the One that is beyond Being; it's Being that is beyond the One. It's Being that is the other of the One.

Hence this great upheaval, this seismic shift in philosophical concepts, which philosophy is in a certain sense obliged to suppress. But as I have often repeated, it is neither a permutation nor an overturning.

As for the distinction between the possible and the real, obviously, it is initially a philosophical distinction. But in philosophy one distinguishes between the empirical real and the possible (the *a priori*), and then the real of possibility; one envisages a synthesis or mixture of possibility and the real. All I am saying is that science is a type of thinking that is realist in the last instance and that it is exclusively realist. At least initially, or in the last instance, because obviously I have not developed the analysis of science, particularly the problem of objectivity, which would have complicated matters a bit. But science in its principle or absolute foundation does not acknowledge the possible, it knows only the real. Obviously, it will make use of the possible and effectivity, but it will make use of them on this basis, which is to say that contrary to philosophy, which very often starts from the empirical in order to posit the possible or the *a priori* in opposition to the empirical? and you know all the problems this generated for Kantianism, and how the neo-Kantians tried to overcome this problem of the *a priori* posited in opposition to the empirical, a problem the disciples of Kant and Fichte were already aware of? science starts directly from the One, which is to say from the most radical experience there is. You have to start from the real, otherwise you'll never get to it.

Who *wants* the real?

Philosophy. And because it wants the real, it never gets it, which is to say it has *realization* instead, in other words, war.

The force in the name of which peace is imposed?

If I grant myself this force as One, through a use of language which corresponds to this anteriority of the real over representation, then I am quite straightforwardly obliged to deduce peace from it, an undivided peace, as I said; I must deduce it from science, I cannot do otherwise, it is simply a matter of rigour. So either you're saying that this entire project is an act of force, in which case, obviously, all of its details are also acts of force; or we have to start from this One and this real.

As for this interpretation in terms of an 'act of force, I am perfectly willing to acknowledge its



plausibility if I position myself on the terrain of philosophy. But I think that once one has, not made the leap, because it is precisely not a leap, but rather realized the 'stance proper to science, there is no act of force. I did not claim to be exiting philosophy, that is not my project at all... My project is quasi-scientific and science is not governed by any practical ends, at least not to my knowledge. In this regard, I am very Spinozistic: all teleology must be absolutely eliminated. Science contents itself with description and my attitude is purely descriptive. In reality, science contents itself with describing the order of the real, and the order of the real goes from science toward philosophy. It is philosophy which transcends science; science is not some sort of black block or black transcendence for philosophy, contrary to what some claim.

I understand why one may have the impression of terrorism or of a totally uncompromising set of demands. I think that in theory there can be no compromise, unless compromise is constitutive of the real. But since I don't think that compromise is constitutive of the real, I make none, I remain content with being consistent, which is to say that I try to elaborate a rigorous science.

1-*Les philosophies de la différence*, Paris: P.U.F.,
1986.

Paru en français dans *La décision philosophique* n°5.

Translated by Ray Brassier