

THE PHILOSOPHER IN THE CLASSROOM:

A report from France

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About GREPH

The supplement 'Philosophy from Below' in RP15 raised once again the question of whether Radical Philosophy can be content with trying to change the content of philosophy in this country or whether it must also question the institutions and even the concept of philosophy teaching. A further question is that of the historical interdependence of philosophy and philosophy teaching; the question whether philosophy has not always been essentially a didactic practice.

Since 1974, GREPH (Groupe de Recherches sur l'Enseignement Philosophique: research group on philosophy teaching) has been working in France on precisely this question; and, because the French government is attempting, in the 'reform Haby', to eliminate philosophy as a compulsory subject in schools, GREPH has been compelled to link its researches to the formulation of counter-proposals for the progressive transformation of philosophy teaching.

In this article we present a survey of GREPH's activities within the French academic and political situation, including an interview with a GREPH representative and a report on a recently published collective study of philosophy essays in schools. We consider GREPH's work to be of real relevance for RP, and we hope that joint meetings will be arranged in coming months to explore possibilities of exchanges and cooperative activities. The interview below, portraying the harsh realities of the French academic scene, destroys the notion current in Britain that France is a radical theoretician's paradise. By developing contacts at the level of concrete institutional conditions and struggles, perhaps we will be able to put our ambitions of internationalism on a more solid footing.

GREPH was founded at a meeting at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris in April 1974, which agreed on a document outlining proposals for its activities. This was circulated among most French philosophy teachers and students in secondary and higher education. A democratic and decentralised organisational structure was adopted; at present the members of GREPH receive its national newsletter number 500. The group has had difficulty in organising among students, and most of the active participants are teachers. The group has been heavily involved in mobilising resistance to the 'reform Haby' and the philosopher and critic Jacques Derrida, who is a founding member, has pursued GREPH's counter-offensive to Haby in the national press. As well as the study of school essays described below, GREPH plans to publish an account of its experiments in philosophy classes for 11 to 13 year olds (see interview below), which will include extracts of recordings of the classes. A further volume is planned including studies on the age at which philosophy can be taught, on

spreading philosophy teaching in schools over several years (it is limited at present to the final year - the extension is one of GREPH's demands), on the relation between philosophy and the 19th-century idea of a moral reform of the people; and on the history of and constraints on philosophical work in universities. GREPH also has friendly informal links with two new radical journals, Revoltes Logiques and Le Doctrinal de Sapience. It has local groups in Toulouse, Bordeaux and Strasbourg, as well as Paris, and has cooperative links with militant teachers' and students' unions.

We hope that more of GREPH's work will be published in a future issue of RP. The following is a brief resume of the group's preliminary statement of aims.

1 To investigate the constitution and history of an essentially unified didactico-philosophical practice.

This would include a general survey of pedagogical institutions, from the Sophists to the 'quaestio' and 'disputatio' of the Scholastics and to modern schools, colleges and universities, and of such practices as the dialogue, the master-disciple relation, the oral and written examination, publication, the essay, the lecture, the lesson, the thesis, and so on.

2 To investigate how the didactico-philosophical system inscribes itself and is inscribed within economic, historical, social, political and affective fields of relations.

This proposal is not just for a philosophical criticism of philosophy as doctrine of discipline. It concerns the power which philosophy exercises, the general principles governing the historical modes of operation of the didactico-philosophical system, in such developments in France for instance as the 18th- and 19th-century interventions of philosophers - the Ideologues, Victor Cousin etc - in the politics of education, and the development of the role of the philosophy teacher.

3 To investigate what is involved in contemporary struggles in and about philosophy teaching in France. To the extent that this problem arises in the space of academic philosophy, the project must involve a philosophical critique - though not a politically neutral one.

As Jacques Derrida has emphasised, the theoretical and political facets of GREPH's object are inseparable. 'When, following a trivial formula, I say that it is power which controls the educational apparatus, this is not to assign power a position outside the pedagogical scene (power is rather an effect of this scene, constituted within it, regardless of what political or ideological forms of power are installed around it), nor is it to foster thoughts or dreams of a teaching without power, whether as divested of the power which it itself engenders, or as freed from a power standing above or outside it.

This would be precisely the idealist, liberalist conception which gives comfort to a teaching body which is blind to power.'

Interview

1. GREPH and politics

In November we visited a representative of GREPH in Paris. One of our questions was whether GREPH aspired to intervene in mass political movements.

- This could be done only in a revolutionary situation - which does not depend on us... In the current anti-revolutionary atmosphere, the conditions are not favourable.

- Very often there is a contradiction between teachers and students. Here (at the Ecole Normale Supérieure) for example, the work of GREPH is of no interest to the students. The students define themselves as far more conservative, aristocratic and dogmatic than their teachers.

- Since 1968 there has really been a regression. '68 was a kind of liberation, an opening... But since then there has been a tightening control of universities, principally through the competitive exams for Agregation and CAPES. At this level, a closing up is taking place... It is always better to talk about Descartes rather than Freud. And now that philosophy is under threat, there has been a retreat. Alain (the first edition of whose Elements de Philosophie came out in 1916) has become a kind of model... Ten years ago, he was a standing joke. Nowadays, when students mention him, he is still a joke - but the 'mandarins' advise students to read him in order to prepare their exams; and those who have power (especially the Inspection Generale - the education ministry's inspectorate) give Alain as a model in all seriousness.

Our informant returned to the contrast with 1968 when we asked her what sort of consciousness she would like to see amongst students.

- I cannot reply directly, because to do so would be to take the place of the students. I can reply only indirectly, with an observation that comes from my own experience as a professeur in a lycee. There was a large strike and the students decided to conduct it in an active manner: all teaching was stopped, but when they wanted a lesson, they came into the hall where we were gathered, selected a teacher, and said, 'Look, we want to discuss such and such a point; please supply us with information about it.' Of course this was completely illegal... but it was obvious that something quite astonishing was occurring. Normally when one is teaching, it is as though one were confronting anorexics, people whose intellectual desire has been completely extinguished by the education system. But, given a revolutionary situation, the extraordinary thing was that the students had a demand, a wish and a desire for lessons, and for lessons which were very substantial, and the opposite of trivial... The lessons which I gave then were at the level of my own research - I was working at the extreme limits of my own knowledge and reflection, but my students, in the final year of the lycee, had no difficulty in understanding me; whereas in normal circumstances I am unable to get much simpler points across.

2. The Réforme Haby

The majority of GREPH's work has concerned secondary education, and has been in response to the Réforme Haby, a programme for restructuring education which would involve the phasing out of compulsory philosophy in 'terminale' (the final year of secondary education). But GREPH is careful not to be driven into a defensive position of 'protecting philosophy from all attack'.

- The work of GREPH is taking us in the direction of breaking up the concept of philosophy. That is, we are in the process of saying that 'Philosophy', in the singular, is no longer valid. This is why our title mentions 'philosophical teaching' rather than 'teaching philosophy'...

- There are three responses to the proposed reforms. First, that of the ministry, which implied a progressive diminution of philosophical studies; this can be labelled the reactionary stance. Secondly there is the position of the 'masters' of philosophical education, of the Inspection Generale, and of some of the 'mandarins', the great professors; this is the conservative position, which believes in maintaining philosophy as the crown of the student's work, its final culmination, the finishing touch. Finally, there is the position of GREPH... which is an offensive position, and consists in criticising the present situation.

- We have launched a petition, which has collected 1300 signatures so far, calling for the spreading of philosophical education over several school years. The theoretical effect of this is that GREPH has devoted much of its research to the question of the right age for studying philosophy. The offensive has had the theme that 'there is no such thing as an age for philosophy'... The notion of maturity is itself one that needs to be analysed.

- Last year three supporters of GREPH managed to get permission to teach philosophy in the premier cycle (11-13 years old), on an experimental basis. We have been absolutely delighted with the results...

- Broadly speaking, the three teachers involved in

socialist revolution

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the experiment all decided, independently, to put the emphasis on the mastery of the language people use.... Two of them included some study of Plato and the myth of the cave. One of these told the pupils the beginning of the story, and set the students an exercise which consisted in trying to work out how it would end. They gave very good answers. They showed a very good grasp of the relation of philosophy and violence, for instance.... There were also discussions of the fact that language is a cultural product....

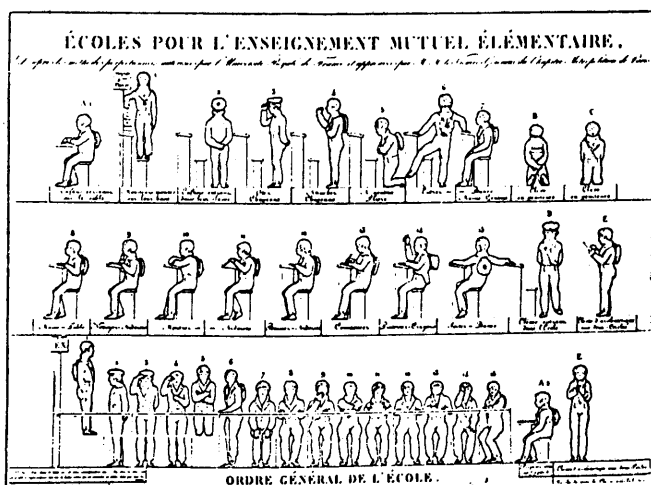
- There is a kind of speech which children of that age are capable of using, and with eighteen year olds it is too late.... At 11, children say what they think as they think it; whereas eighteen year olds say only what they believe is expected of them.... We believe that the education system creates a whole system of blockages, and that this is why it is opposed to the teaching of philosophy at an early age, since philosophy tends to remove these barriers.... It has now been proved that there is no such thing as an 'age for philosophy', or at least that if there is, it is 10 rather than 25.

3. The philosophy curriculum in schools

We asked next about the content of school philosophy courses.

- There, what we have criticised is the baroque eclecticism of the syllabus, in which one has to cover, let's say, perception, memory, the unconscious, politics, morality etc, all in one year - compiling a kind of encyclopedia, and this in a period in which philosophical encyclopedism has become meaningless. We still live in the reign of Victor Cousin (1792-1867), who believed that philosophical education could be based on a kind of grand reconciliation of all philosophical schools, from the Pythagoreans to Victor Cousin.... This created a colourless philosophy, in which there were no great disagreements, and where all schools were amalgamated. This approach is still alive in philosophy teaching today, enabling the teacher to move happily between Plato and Freud, between Descartes and Durkheimian sociology...

To some extent this syllabus has changed, in that it is now possible to teach philosophy in terminale from collections of modern extracts - La Philosophie Contemporaine edited by Huisman and Vergez, and Textes Nouveaux pour une Philosophie Nouvelle edited by LeGall and Bredeloup. These texts allow the courses to centre on Marx or Freud, or on Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan and Althusser.



- This poses a serious problem.... Rather than leave modernism out, they adopt it and remove all its offensiveness, passing it through the mincer of philosophical teaching... without disturbing the atmosphere of humanism. This is the colonisation of explosive matters by the education system - as though education were an enormous stomach, capable of digesting anything.... So why say, 'we must teach Freud, we must teach the moderns?'; there is nothing to stop us doing so; nothing could be easier. We have to recognise that teaching's capacity to defuse ideas makes the determination of the content of courses a very secondary question.

4. GREPH and the 'Dominant Philosophy'

Our informant clarified her conception of the field in which GREPH is trying to intervene by distinguishing between the dominant philosophy, the philosophy of the academy, and modernism.

- The dominant philosophy is difficult to define. Roughly speaking, it is the philosophy which is sustained by power, and specifically by the structures of philosophy teaching. It dominates even when it is not explicitly taught, as a result of the particular way in which philosophical study is organised. It is a structural effect.... It is a wishy washy humanism which is what one always finds when one approaches philosophical study from the point of view of the student.... It is to some extent the implicit ideology of the practice of philosophy, but it is not wholly implicit: it is explicitly stated by the Inspection Generale and there are many professors in universities who perpetuate it too.

- However their practice is really academic philosophy, which consists basically of history of philosophy... and epistemology or history of science....

- Then there is modernism (represented by names like Foucault, Deleuze, Chatelet, Lyotard and Derrida)... This can be seen as the workshop of philosophy; but it is very marginal. It remains marginal even when introduced into secondary schools. Althusser may be taught in lycee, but when he is... nothing happens!

- This marginality is demonstrated by an experience of teaching Freud (in a lycee).... A supporter of GREPH gave an extended course on Freud, which went very deep and was taught in an imaginative and varied way. But in a test which the students took at the end, the Freud who emerged was a proper little Plato!... Thus trying to teach a special content is a waste of one's time, because of the tacit philosophy of the structures of teaching....

GREPH's active members are mostly teachers. We asked if they had experienced contradictions in a project which is in part an act of self-criticism.

- Yes! Many teachers active in GREPH are unhappy with the objective conditions of their professional work, doubtful of their right to be there in the school as teachers. But this contradiction has made us ask 'what can we do in spite of what we are?'; it also demands a permanent self-criticism directed against 'the illusions which are part of the position of the teacher'. To be a teacher is to suffer a certain blindness which obscures a whole area of the reality of education.

Finally, we asked whether GREPH subscribes to a particular mode of philosophical critique, and whether it shares Jacques Derrida's programme for the 'deconstruction of metaphysics'.

- GREPH is committed to a project of deconstruction, but as such this is not a specifically Derridan undertaking. The object of GREPH's deconstruction has its own anchorage, in philosophical institutions.

School philosophy essays

The first GREPH research project to have published its results is the study carried out by Grephon, a group at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Fontenay.¹ It deals with sets of essays written by students in three lycées at the start of philosophy courses taken during their final school year. One of the schools was in inner Paris, another in the Paris suburbs and a third in a provincial city.

The idea of the project was to read the essays of 'beginners' in the philosophy class as philosophical texts, allowing them to speak and listening to what they had to say. From a traditional viewpoint, the enterprise would appear senseless: 'To read school essays as texts to be explicated, as documents to be analysed, means changing, or trying to change, their official status - making a use of them other than that for which the institution destined them, and (conversely) applying our supposed powers of textual analysis to an object for which those powers were not designed.'

The radical originality of the undertaking meant that Grephon could not follow ready-made methods, and it is not surprising that contradictions emerged. Grephon's report is presented not as a finished piece of research, but as a collective work fissured by internal divergences. The crucial disagreement within the project seems to have emerged when they realised that, in freeing the students' essays from the correcting pencil of the teacher, they might be promoting them to the rank of texts only to subject them to the higher correction of an ideological critique. For this reason the group defined its object as the 'discourse' of the essays, rather than their 'ideology', thus directing attention to the features peculiar to the production of this discourse rather than simply considering it as a reflection of a dominant ideology in society. Nonetheless, Grephon came to recognise that the project could not be insulated from the effect of their position as teachers or future teachers and that didactic habits could not be neutralised by a mere act of political will. In giving the essays the status of an autonomous discourse, Grephon were identifying it as different from their own in a number of senses: the discourse was 'pre-philosophical' - it expressed attitudes from which the members of Grephon had learned to dissociate themselves, and even the germs of philosophies hostile to and in competition with their own; more fundamentally, the legitimisation of the teaching role as such implied a distance from the discourse of the taught, which became the raw material to be worked on and transformed by the teacher. Thus, while students display ambivalent attitudes towards philosophy, teachers experience a conflict with their own repressed, pre-

GREPH is not committed to a point of view as to the 'deconstruction of metaphysics', though some of us think that it is necessary. Moreover, Derrida has widened the object of his own enterprise, from metaphysics to the whole pedagogical, the 'didactico-philosophical' tradition - the effectiveness of philosophical, textual critique itself calls for a practical, political involvement.

philosophical discourse. Grephon experienced occasional outbursts of revulsion and hostility to the views expressed in the essays, no doubt partly in consequence of standing outside the more comfortable, proprietorial relationship one can have to the essays of 'one's own' students.

Grephon proposed the following conception of what they were studying. Students entering a philosophy class are bearers or possessors of a discourse which is 'already in place'. Thus the different discourse transmitted by the philosophy teacher can take root only in so far as this is permitted by the lines of force already established within the first discourse. But as it is manifested in the student's first efforts at philosophical essay writing, this first discourse should not be regarded as spontaneous, for two reasons: first, it is the product of a prolonged previous training, and secondly, its philosophical forms and contents can emerge only through articulation with the 'obligatory rhetoric of a text submitted for the judgement and approval of another'.

This meant that the discourse of the essays ought not to be seen as an immediate reflection of the lived situation of its authors as 'students' and 'adolescents', a situation of economic, political and sexual exclusion, subjection and deprivation and of linguistic and cultural domination. However, 'students feel obliged to mime an "adolescent" discourse whose features are provided by the myth of "youthful romanticism" and by the mandatory modesty of the disciple. When they say that the individual is helpless in the face of society and destiny, they conform to a ready-made image of adolescence, and define themselves as adolescent in their discourse ... by adopting the manner of paternal discourse ("Victor Hugo is quite right in saying that we must seek the key to happiness in virtue"), they mimic a submission which suits their age. In their docile submission to a Kantian or Platonic mode of utterance, they are only adopting their expected position of pupil. As long as adolescence is not taken as the cause of this discourse, it is legitimate to speak here of an adolescent discourse, similar to a colonial discourse (as defined by the expectations of the colonist): a 'youthfulness', expected or thought to be expected by others, just as childishness is expected of children by adults, and delicious inconsequence is expected of women by those whose delights they provide.

Thus the group point out the danger inherent in the 'substantialising' assumption of 'attributing to the subjects writing them the characteristics of the discourse of the essays'. 'We realised soon enough ... that students do not conduct a discourse which is their own, but one which is required of them, first by their notion of what is expected, and secondly by the imperatives inherent in the essay form as such. The determining factor is the pedagogical

1 Les Cahiers de Fontenay, No. 3. Le discours philosophique des Lycéens (May 1976). By Martine Cauvin,

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relation as it functions in existing institutions, by which the discourse of the pupil is alienated in the desire of another, namely the teacher.'

They add, however, that some properties of the essays' discourse can properly be considered as ideological in that it operates objective distortions in communication. 'When a friend gave her class the essay subject "What is a citizen", the students wrote essays on the question "What is a good citizen?", and proceeded to list the qualities which a good citizen must possess. Clearly after this no sort of critical analysis was possible; the moralising mode of discourse bars the way.'

Having described what Grephon set out to do, and before summarising their findings, it may be appropriate here to say why their project seems to us interesting from the point of view of Radical Philosophy. Firstly, it reminds us that the school or college is the site not only of the transmission and reproduction of cognitive schemas, but also of the production of discourses, writings whose function is to be judged rather than read. Before now it never occurred to us that to understand how education functions it is necessary to read what the students write; we have acquiesced in the official view that these productions are valueless. And at the same time the problems encountered by Grephon (especially the temptation to indulge in straightforward denunciations of the essays' political content) are a useful reminder that radical campaigns in education, such as RP and GREPH are engaged in, must constantly guard against becoming apotheoses of the pedagogical mentality.

We must also keep in view the limitations of Grephon's project. They are careful to point out that the sample of essays they had to work on was very limited. The essay titles included: 'What is a citizen?', 'What is happiness?', 'Are we in a position to understand and free ourselves from our prejudices?', 'Philosophy cannot be taught, only philosophising', and passages for commentary from Plato and Levi-Strauss. This selection of titles, even if it is typical, is not insignificant in itself, and to fully understand the essays produced would require information about the rationale for setting the essays, as understood by the teachers and the students; one would need to know what conception of correctness, as opposed to simple acceptability, the students had or were supposed to have; why the students were, apparently, overwhelmingly motivated by the desire to please, and what other aims they might have had; what relations there were between the content of the essays and the system of rewards and punishments surrounding their production, and whether these included effects of 'positive reinforcement' as well as of censorship. No doubt Grephon were unable to conduct such investigations in the lycees; and their concentration on reading the essays as texts involved a well-justified refusal to interpret them as documents of the students' character or intentions. But this need not prohibit looking for determining factors outside the texts. For instance, could it be that the paucity of thought and the threadbare routines which Grephon noted in the essays result in part from the culture-shock felt by students suddenly transported into a new and unfamiliar pedagogical terrain? Their real deprivation of intellectual reference points, their exposed and invidious situation, might explain why the texts are so nakedly symptomatic of their institutional determinants.

English readers will find much that is familiar

in Grephon's report; other factors no doubt are peculiar to France, not least of course the existence of the philosophy class in schools. But an adequate differentiation of national and international conditions will have to await a comparable study of English essays.

'What is philosophy?'

The essays on the Kantian dictum, 'Philosophy cannot be taught, only philosophising can be taught', allowed some of the students' feelings about starting philosophy to emerge explicitly. 'A subject as exciting as it is indefinable...'; 'one always embarks on it with apprehension'; 'To learn philosophy is beyond our powers, whereas learning to philosophise is within the range of our modest means'. Philosophy has a quite special position: 'Man needs philosophy to question, if only once, himself and the meaning of life.' Generally the subject emerges in an aura of quasi-initiatory mystery: at the beginning of the year teachers are regularly pressed by students to answer the question, 'What is philosophy?' The way students conceive philosophy is conditioned by its prestigious place in the school syllabus: taught only in the final year, the philosophy course is the 'couronnement des études', the culmination of the school career. To study philosophy is 'a proof that I am an educated person, that I already know about all kinds of things'. The difference between philosophy and other earlier studies is that 'one now ceases to learn'. 'The time for learning is over, now we will "reflect about all the great problems of existence. Our task is to ask questions, not to answer them"': an illuminating formula which locates the debate at the level of duty - meaning what is required of a schoolchild writing an essay, and what allows them to conclude essays by declaring that the problem is insoluble and decreeing that we must all choose our own solution. At this point the break appears which philosophy represents in an institution where pupils have hitherto had to reproduce what they have learned from books and teachers, and where questions - and, here, questions which demand answers - are in principle the prerogative of the teacher.'

The definitions of philosophy in the essays commonly expound the formula 'love of wisdom'. Wisdom is characterised as 'self-mastery', 'temperance', 'discretion', 'calmness', 'tranquillity': 'the wise man must be calm, balanced and capable of reflection, in order to have a sound judgement. His ideal is the mastery of conduct, thanks to rational thought'. 'The (Platonic) "taming of desires" by the practice of reason is the special competence of philosophers'. The philosophy course consists essentially in a brief and decisive moment of initiation. 'I initiate myself by ceasing to think, in order to reflect alone. When students have heard something of Descartes, the method of doubt becomes the model for this conversion, which allows us to suggest that if certain texts of Descartes "go down" in class without resistance, this is because they convey to the pupil nothing other than the place assigned to philosophy in the syllabus.' This implies 'a break with what has come before, correlative with a (fictitious) repudiation of prior beliefs, the famous "calling into question" of things by philosophy...'

'Students think that there is an innate philosophical faculty, while the institution believes that philosophical aptitude comes all at once at a certain age, at which students can instantly switch from the accumulation of information to "calling things in ques-

tion"; no one speaks here of educating a capacity. And is the concession to the teacher, the restriction which permits and legitimates his presence in class (we want to learn, but not too much) - is this any different from what can be read in the Short Treatise on Action by Huisman and Vergez:

"Philosophy is not a question of knowledge. In all other disciplines you have to learn something ... in philosophy there is nothing of the kind. No doubt you will be asked to retain a few of the ideas and themes of the great philosophers. But ... 'if the pupils' discourse converges with that of the authors of standard textbooks, this is not because the pupils have read the textbooks, but because the organisation of school itself serves to transmit a certain conception of philosophy deriving from the sociological function of its teaching.'

'The reason why it is said officially that a certain age is necessary before beginning philosophy is that the teaching of philosophy during the final year at school has perhaps as its primary function to make the students feel that a page in their lives is being turned. If we scandalise certain of our colleagues by calling for philosophy teaching in schools to be extended over several years, it is because such a step would mean leaving the world of ritual. Can you imagine suggesting to a Hopi headman an initiation ceremony lasting several years?'

Another set of essays studied is worth particular mention because it caused the group to draw markedly pessimistic conclusions about the opportunities for progressive teachers. These are the essays produced after the experiment of teaching Freud in philosophy, in which the students were asked to use Freud to criticise Plato's remarks on dreams, and responded by Platonising Freud (see interview above): mandatory respect for the great philosopher dictated that the teacher's request should go unheard. 'A school essay is not a letter directed to a particular teacher but a text destined for a Reader/Corrector who is defined either through the institution or by the formal category of the text. Indeed it would be uncomfortable for teachers if things went otherwise.'

Themes in the essays

After sections containing detailed readings of the essays on philosophy, happiness, Plato/Freud and Levi-Strauss, the report presents a survey of the system of thematic elements which recur in all the essays.

A pervasive theme is the contrast drawn between learning and understanding. Learning is represented as essentially passive, as the laborious quantitative acquisition and possession of knowledge, motivated by a goal of encyclopedic coverage which is seen, characteristically, as a Utopian and useless ambition: this applies in particular to philosophical knowledge, the 'preserve' of an 'elite'. Moreover the learning process has overtones of a moulding of, and even an assault on, the learner. Understanding, in contrast, is seen as something which is to be achieved by the individual spontaneously and on his own, as the personal transcendence (in the sphere of his 'private life') of prejudices engendered by and for the sake of society. A connected contrast is drawn in the essays between book learning and learning from life: the latter is irrefutable, it recognises 'facts' which just 'are there' and are 'undeniable'. This mode of knowledge is essentially negative: its facts are brute facts about society and human nature. Often it is transmitted through

popular (and traditional) proverbial wisdom; 'modesty' and 'good sense' are invoked. Individual self-expression and creativity are universally, often passionately, extolled, at the same time as a spontaneous need for communication, though the latter concept is always empty of specific content.

The themes of prejudice and self-criticism noted above belong to the characteristic problematic of the relation between the individual and his ideas, which the group argue to be intimately linked with the polarity 'individual'/'society', in a way identical to that affirmed by Durkheim: 'Social life is essentially made up of representations', 'types of conduct and thought' external to the individual and 'possessed of an imperative and coercive force in virtue of which they impose themselves on him, whether he wills it or not' (Rules of Sociological Method).

The contrast 'objective'/'subjective' is employed in the essays as meaning neutrality versus idiosyncrasy; 'errors' are always viewed as characteristics of particular ages or societies - deviations



from objective external norms. Hence an antinomy seems to prevail in the essays between the extremes of the particular individual with his personal truth and the abstract universal (e.g. 'Man') endowed with objective impartiality. But in fact as they operate in the discourse of the essays these terms are complementary: the essays normally assign epistemological primacy to the neutral, objective position, but where this position cannot be determined because of 'conflicts of opinion', the essays are able to take refuge again in the mandatory respect due to (diverse) individualities. This is also connected with the essays' psychology: radical contrasts are drawn between reason and the heart, spontaneity, imagination, fantasy etc, between reason and desire, and between fantasy and both work and knowledge.

The group describes the effect of these systems of themes as a closure of the essays' discourse. They describe notions like 'society' and 'communication' which feature in the essays as 'screen' and 'phantom' notions - notions which resist all closer determinations; the discourse they figure in is an 'algebra of unknowns'. Certain of these notions, like 'freedom' and 'individual' are also absolute, admitting of no possible qualification, sacred and untouchable.

The closed discourse of the essays is self-sufficient in its materials, fabricating for its needs a mythical history with a fictitious past - 'The Past', indifferently pre-20th century, pre-1789, pre-industrial, troglodyte etc - and a Present which is identical with Eternity - things 'have always' been

like this. Similarly, 'society' is always referred to in the singular, never in the plural. Relations between normative and descriptive formulations function only as velleities, exhortations and implicit renunciations; 'must' is never a contestation of 'is not'. The authors describe this 'must' as 'the category of the wish, which makes it possible to say nothing about the relations between what is and what ought to be'. Frustrated 'aspirations' are converted into good resolutions; 'the authorities should not ...' passes over into 'everyone should ...' Again, personal solutions - freedom, enlightenment, etc - are blocked as 'utopian', or as 'only for an elite' - one from which the student modestly excludes himself. Desires and gratifications are never 'forbidden', only 'impossible'.

The primary axis around which the discourse turns - the individual/society contrast - has obvious political consequences: theoretically it serves to mask actual contradictions and prohibit analyses of social reality in class terms; practically it condemns as utopian any project for political change: 'the subject of such a transformation being of necessity the individual, the question of its possibility in terms of relative forces cannot even be posed, for the strength of individual and society are incommensurable. Discontent can only lead either to a vague feeling of aspiration, or to escapism (a centrifugal tendency), or to a sterile revolt.' Before the philosophy course begins, the students are already imbued by Durkheimian conservatism. 'When one reads Durkheim, one has no conception of the seductive power of the dominant philosophy. But reading the school essays, and re-reading Durkheim over the essays' shoulder, one begins to have some idea of it.' This does not contradict the fact that nearly all the essays include expressions of malaise, of impotence and revolt, even of denunciation, rejection, repudiation; the essay serves to accommodate every kind of discontent, provides it with a code of expression (the individual as victim of society) which at the same time disguises it in an acceptable form, and provides it with a rhetorical means of consolation, which completes the process of defusing it. In this consists perhaps one of the pleasurable functions of writing the essay. The institutional function of this discourse would seem then to be that of providing an outlet, a 'catharsis' for the 'malaises' which permeate it.

Rhetoric and strategy

The final section of the report relates the themes of the essays, outlined above, to the major function which the essays have to fulfil: satisfying the person who corrects them. It is possible to recognise, beyond the practice of the school essay, the ideologies - and philosophies - contained in the essays' thematic materials. 'The students know Durkheim already, without having read him, they platonise before reading Plato; already they are travelling companions of Levi-Strauss, disciples of Alain, fond listeners of Bergson.'

An essay has to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Here, already, the ready-made materials show their usefulness. The writer justifies himself for beginning to write: the subject at hand has an eternal status, 'Man' 'has always' been troubled by it. The problem developed in the course of the essay is also ready-made: many diverse opinions have been held on this issue: Marx, Sartre, Freud... Finally, the necessity of closure, the means of bringing the discourse to an end: there is nothing to be done; or,

each of us must choose for himself. The availability of a neutral, impartial standpoint protects the writer from running risks. The author must speak as representative of the consensus. 'The I who writes has no rights, except to indeterminateness and neutrality, to nothing, that is; I can only preach interiority (in a theoretical sense: not my own), the profound self, radical subjectivity, originality, singularity, everything that is in which the real evaporates; or else I can preach the abstract universal ("Man") and the objectivity in which everything particular is wiped out.' The faults of essays which examining bodies regularly and monotonously attack - banality, mechanical formulations etc - are manifestations of the 'code of the essay', the system which organises the expressions and operations which are convenient in the production of an essay. 'We are not entitled to say that the students are sceptics; rather, they are in a situation of producing sceptical discourses.' The textbook mentioned above quotes Karl Jaspers: philosophy 'betrays itself when it degenerates into dogmatism', and observes that 'philosophy is an unquiet consciousness, dissatisfied with what it possesses'. The student, required to demolish all particular substantive positions on an issue ('To do philosophy is to be always on the move' - Jaspers), draws on an eclectic stock of arguments culled from his previous schooling, adaptable to every subject. 'If the essays reduce every topic to a few constant themes, this does not mean that the students are incapable of more than three or four ideas which are always the same. Nor does it mean, as one regularly reads in examiners' reports, that they use the topics merely as pretexts for ready-made procedures. But it may well be that students are only sure of the validity in school of a small number of themes' - precisely those which have survived the selection operated by correction throughout their essay-writing careers.

At a linguistic level as well, the essays showed a marked lack of those logical and syntactic formations necessary in critical and analytical discussion. But, again, this cannot be taken as meaning that the students are somehow linguistically deficient; the students display in other school subjects their mastery of these resources. Their absence in philosophy is the mark of a censorship; already in their school career students have learned that ideas are no more to be criticised than colours or tastes. A taboo exists on the scrutiny of opinions. This prohibition of analytical and critical procedures as applied to ideas is frequently asserted explicitly and dogmatically by state education officials. In the words of the president of the French League of Education, teachers must 'accustom pupils from the beginning to the idea that all opinions, all sincere beliefs deserve the respect which is due to any creative human effort', and 'one either espouses or rejects an idea, but in any case one doesn't play around with it'. Those essays which call for analytical/critical commentary on a text of Plato or Levi-Strauss are instead written as paraphrases of opinions held by Plato or Levi-Strauss. The student falls back on certain resources to produce a substitute for the impossible undertaking, such as vehement expressions of approval or disapproval. 'For the student to appear indifferent to the problem or text would be inadmissible; it would show a lack of interest insulting to the teacher.'

At the same time, such procedures serve to constitute, within the text, the officially defined identity of the author - the pupil - and of the destined recipi-

ent, the teacher. 'They inscribe themselves in the texts as pupils and adolescents by adopting the discourse of malaise, of romantic revolt, generous and sterile, exalted and intransigent.' The agnostic confession 'I don't know' is incongruous and inadmissible in a teacher (how would he then have authority to teach?), but admissible and acceptable in a pupil. The pupil-teacher situation possesses a certain ambiguity which emerges in the essays: the writers 'inscribe their supposed recipient in statements aimed at showing an interiorisation and incorporation of certain values supposed to be those of the recipient'; at the same time the flights of pomposity express the fact that the student is trying hard, and even having some success in becoming a grown-up.

The authors recall here that one of their members with experience of teaching burst out at one point in protest at the nonsense contained in some of the essays and proclaimed that her students would never have written such stuff. But this reaction of shock and revulsion at the materials is, they argue, a natural consequence of stepping out of the closed situation of reading essays in the role of a corrector: the situation in and for which the essays themselves are produced. 'If the essays have a meaning only in the pedagogical situation which commands them, if their discourse is only plausible in the eyes of a reading itself inserted within the relation, perhaps that is because a good deal of their content exhausts itself in the inscription of the fact of writing an essay which is supposed to be about philosophy and which is addressed from a pupil to a teacher. These are texts, perhaps, in which "nothing takes place except the place".' Nevertheless, the rhetorical conclusions of the essays may represent a real effect of the act of writing the essay: the authors emerge full of good resolutions. 'Should this phenomenon perhaps not be directly linked to the mythical figure of the philosophy teacher as a moral director-confessor?'

People generally consider that ideological impregnation operates with pupils in the situation of listeners. A striking consensus can be observed on this point. Philosophy teachers complain about the moral bludgeoning to which pupils are subjected outside the school (mass media etc), and about the instilling of the dominant philosophy by other school disciplines; parents often protest at their children's indoctrination by the school, as though the teachers' discourse formed a sedimentary deposit in the children's minds.' Against this consensus, it is worth reflecting instead on the positive functions embodied in the notion of a school "exercise". 'What does it signify, except that the transmission of knowledge, the interiorisation of schemas, is not produced simply by the words of the teacher, but demands work in which the pupil is required to intervene actively.' 'It is true that by the time the student writes his first text of philosophy, everything has already been played out; but it has been played out, in part, in written exercises of the same form. In these texts, the pupils show themselves to be not so much beginners in philosophy as veterans of the essay.' 'If the essay is a dead or dying form in schools, this is not because the students no longer know how to write it. They understand its rules and techniques very well; what they no longer know is how to conceal this knowledge.' Comparison of the texts with similar essays written a decade earlier shows a certain decline, but this process consists only in the students' declining

capacity to hide the guiding threads of rhetorical convention which structure the essays. The essay form acts as a conservative, deadening factor in the didactico-philosophical system; but it also continues to be congruent in its tendencies with the reproduction of a certain, official philosophy; and this congruence is not an accidental one.

Le Doctrinal

A new magazine called Le Doctrinal de Sapience has many of its aims, and supporters, in common with the GREPH. It is basically for teachers of history and philosophy in lycees, normal schools, and colleges. It comes out four times a year (at least in theory) and has had two issues so far. They look quite like RP, are about half the length, and cost 5 francs.

The historians and philosophers have allied themselves because they see their disciplines as targets of a single attack: philosophy having to face the 'death of philosophy', and history the redistribution of its theoretical content to various social sciences; at the same time both are being threatened by proposals for imposing technocratic regulation on the aims and methods of education in France.

The objective of Doctrinal is to promote collective reflection and research on 'our educational practices, on their explicit aims, and on their objective functions'.

The first issue contains three historical analyses of the development of ideologies of education in France - one describing the idea of 'lay' education, another the concept of 'laziness' ('faineantise'), a third the state of schools in Aube at the end of the nineteenth century, based on inspectors' reports. There are also two excellent articles on problems of philosophy teaching - one analysing the official reports on the competitive exams through which all prospective philosophy teachers have to pass, and the other describing the new teaching manuals edited by Huisman and Vergez and by LeGall and Bredeloup (see above). The author of this article, Jean Pierre Hedoin, tries to describe the mechanisms which enable these manuals to assimilate what is supposed to be subversive thought, and then raises the question 'whether the materials taken from what is new in philosophy are not in some way pre-adapted to this kind of treatment, whether the texture of this new material is not such as to make it easy to fit into the pattern of scholastic philosophy. In short, is there not a special construction in this modern discourse which is what enables it to be easily integrated into the forms of traditional philosophical didactics?' Hedoin's hypothesis - which needs a lot of further development - is that the cause is the reference, if only unconscious and negative, which the new philosophy makes to Kant.

The second issue of Doctrinal contains a collection of documents, mostly by schoolchildren, on the meaning of discipline and indiscipline in education; including an excellent questionnaire for students which includes such questions as 'Regardez-vous physiquement vos profs?' On strictly philosophical issues there is one article on the fictional character of 'experiments' in school science courses, and on the problems of linking literary and philosophical teaching (eg Sartre and Sartre). Altogether an admirable venture, deserving every help from supporters of Radical Philosophy. The address of Doctrinal is c/o G. Navet, 42 Rue Thiers, 10120 Saint-Andre-les-Vergers, France.