

Modesty, Rigor and Irony

Some remarks on *Prodiges et vertiges de l'analogie:
De l'abus des belles lettres dans la pensée,*
by Jacques Bouveresse

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When we wrote our little book denouncing the gross abuses of scientific concepts by a number of prominent French philosophico-literary intellectuals¹, we felt like foreigners — in more senses than one — entering a new and sometimes strange territory, where the local inhabitants did not, alas, turn out to be uniformly friendly (to put it mildly). So it is with great pleasure that we now read the vigorous defense — and extension — of our ideas that is offered by Professor Bouveresse in this volume. And in view of the fact that we have repeatedly been accused of being anti-French and anti-philosophy, it is particularly satisfying that this defense has come from an eminent philosopher teaching at the Collège de France.

But we were not really surprised by Bouveresse's reaction: indeed, while writing the section of our book dealing with Lyotard's musings about fractals, catastrophe theory etc.², we learned that a critique almost identical to ours had been published over a decade earlier by Bouveresse.³ In fact, the whole of Bouveresse's philosophical career — spanning nearly forty years — has been characterized by what one interviewer termed “a plea for a style of thought that is at once more modest, more rigorous and more ironic than is customary among French philosophers.”⁴

The reader will not, therefore, be surprised to learn that we agree with nearly all of what Bouveresse says in the present volume. But his book goes far beyond a mere defense or elaboration of ours: his criticism of the malaise in intellectual life goes deeper, and his tone is harsher and more indignant. Before illustrating this difference through some examples, let us first explain why this contrast in attitude can be understood by considering our very different backgrounds.

Being neither French nor philosophers, we are the typical outsiders in this debate. Bouveresse, on the other hand, is the perfect insider. A student at the École Normale Supérieure at the time when Althusser and Lacan were gurus there, Bouveresse was regarded with suspicion by his fellow students — who were then engaged in what Bouveresse later called “pseudo-science, bad philosophy and imaginary politics”⁵ — because he was studying such irrelevant subjects as formal logic (with the result that he now knows, unlike most of his former colleagues, what Gödel's theorem really means) and was interested in “Anglo-Saxon” (and therefore politically suspect) philosophers such as Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle.⁶ It is a curious, but nevertheless true,

¹ Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Impostures Intellectuelles*, Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1997; 2nd ed., Livre de Poche, Paris, 1999. English edition (UK): *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, Profile Books, London, 1998, 2nd ed. 1999. English edition (USA/Canada): *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, Picador USA, New York, 1998. Spanish translation: *Imposturas Intelectuales*, Paidós, Barcelona–Buenos Aires, 1999.

² *Intellectual Impostures / Fashionable Nonsense*, Chapter 7.

³ Jacques Bouveresse, *Rationalité et cynisme*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1984, pp. 125–130.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rosat, in Jacques Bouveresse, *Le Philosophe et le réel: Entretiens avec Jean-Jacques Rosat*, Hachette, Paris, 1998. This fascinating set of interviews provides a valuable overview of Bouveresse's career and philosophical ideas.

⁵ *Le Philosophe et le réel*, p. 80.

⁶ Jacques Bouveresse, *La Parole malheureuse: de l'alchimie linguistique à la grammaire*

fact about Paris in the 1960s that if you were, as a philosopher, interested in Russell or Carnap, you would be regarded as a reactionary, while if you were interested in Heidegger, you would be considered progressive if not revolutionary. Bouveresse's early experiences might very well lead him to agree with Noam Chomsky's remark that "French intellectual life has, in my opinion, been turned into something cheap and meretricious by the 'star' system. It is something like Hollywood. Thus we go from one absurdity to another — Stalinism, existentialism, structuralism, Lacan, Derrida — some of them obscene (Stalinism), some simply infantile and ridiculous (Lacan and Derrida). What is striking, however, is the pomposity and self-importance, at each stage."⁷

Bouveresse, as an insider, thus has a better grasp than we do of the intellectual and moral idiosyncrasies of some of the most fashionable sectors of the contemporary Parisian intelligentsia. Moreover, while our reaction to the fashionable nonsense we discovered was more bemused than angry, Bouveresse has ample reasons to be indignant. After all, Lacan's blather about compact spaces has not the slightest effect on mathematical research in topology, and Badiou's and Debray's lucubrations on Gödel's theorem are entirely ignored by professional logicians; but all three — and the style of thought that they epitomize — have had serious negative effects on the practice of philosophy and the human sciences, at least in France.

This insider's knowledge of the Parisian intellectual scene also leads Bouveresse to make a deeper analysis of the disease than we felt competent to do. Indeed, we stressed that our criticism was limited to abuses of concepts in mathematics or physics, and said that:

It goes without saying that we are not competent to judge the non-scientific aspects of these authors' work. We understand perfectly well that their "interventions" in the natural sciences do not constitute the central themes of their œuvre. But when intellectual dishonesty (or gross incompetence) is discovered in one part — even a marginal part — of someone's writings, it is natural to want to examine more critically the rest of his or her work. We do not want to prejudge the results of such an analysis, but simply to remove the aura of profundity that has sometimes intimidated students (and professors) from undertaking it.⁸

Here, Bouveresse makes a related remark (p. 33): when one sees the utter vagueness of some intellectuals' writings concerning subjects, such as mathematics, where it is

philosophique, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1971; *Wittgenstein: la rime et la raison; science, éthique et esthétique*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1973; *Le Mythe de l'intériorité: expérience, signification et langage privé chez Wittgenstein*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1976, nouvelle éd. 1987; *La Force de la règle: Wittgenstein et l'invention de la nécessité*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1987; *Herméneutique et linguistique, suivi de, Wittgenstein et la philosophie du langage*, Éditions de l'Éclat, Combas [France], 1991; *Philosophie, mythologie et pseudo-science: Wittgenstein lecteur de Freud*, Éditions de l'Éclat, Combas [France], 1991.

⁷Noam Chomsky, *Language and Politics*, Black Rose Books, Montréal, 1988, pp. 310–311.

⁸*Intellectual Impostures*, p. 6; *Fashionable Nonsense*, p. 7.

possible, and in fact natural, to be precise, one should hardly be surprised to find even greater barbarities perpetrated when they are addressing fields (such as semiotics or psychoanalysis) where a special effort is needed to achieve the maximum of precision compatible with the nature of the subject. But, while we tend to remain agnostic as to the depth of the problem, Bouveresse makes clear that “the problem of which we are speaking is linked to deep habits of thought, which are of a quite general nature; the effects are simply more comic when the authors attempt overtly to imitate the methods of scientists”.

Another area where Bouveresse goes beyond our claims concerns the relation between the two parts of our book, which, as we emphasized, is in reality two books under one cover: the first dealing with the “impostures”, that is, with the gross abuse of scientific concepts by a coterie of postmodern *maîtres-à-penser*, and the second dealing with the far subtler question of epistemic relativism. We emphasized that the link between the two issues is primarily sociological rather than conceptual; moreover, it seemed to us that epistemic relativism is more widespread in the U.S. than in France. But Bouveresse thinks that the link goes deeper (p. 93): epistemic relativism licences sloppiness and, conversely, sloppy thinking tends to need the “help” of relativism to justify itself. “If science is, after all, just one particular species of literature, with no special privilege compared to others . . . , it is hard to see what could stop its most technical instruments from being employed in all types of literary manipulations and deformations.” (pp. 40–41) Furthermore, Bouveresse thinks (p. 92) that we underestimate the influence of epistemic relativism in France.

A third area where Bouveresse’s criticism is harsher than ours concerns the problem of honesty — not only about the authors that he and we criticize, but also about their many defenders in the French media (especially in *Le Monde des livres*, the literary supplement of *Le Monde*). While we explicitly leave open the question of whether the texts that we quote arise from dishonesty or simply from gross incompetence, Bouveresse is tempted to answer: “both”. He demonstrates unequivocally that some contemporary French philosophers display an astounding level of ignorance when they speak about mathematics or formal logic; he also suspects, however, that they are perfectly aware of their limitations and that they nevertheless persist in portraying themselves as more knowledgeable than they really are. Concerning their defenders in the media, Bouveresse makes a very apt comment (p. 8): whereas our background as scientists should allow us to understand the technical concepts invoked by Lacan *et al.*, were they to make any sense, we face people who, without having any scientific competence, “nevertheless claim that what they do not understand may actually very well be understood” (without, of course, actually explaining *in what way* these texts should be understood). Again, Bouveresse does not seem to think that this attitude can be attributed to incompetence alone.

Bouveresse also astutely analyzes the sociology of intellectual life and the tactics used by some media stars (and their supporters) to immunize their ideas from reasoned critique. Here is one (pp. 64–65): First, you make some ambitious and revolutionary philosophical claim, citing in its support a prestigious scientific result such as Gödel’s theorem; then, when critics become too precise and insistent, you explain

that your use of science was “only metaphorical” and you berate your critics for being so bloody literal-minded.⁹ Here is another (pp. 18–20): Start again by making a flamboyant assertion that is either illogical or unsupported by evidence; then, when challenged, pose as a victim and accuse your opponents of being “flics de la pensée” [thought cops], “gendarmes” and “censeurs” [censors].¹⁰ When people who control major collections in the publishing houses, hold chairs in the universities and have prominent positions in the media repeatedly pretend that any criticism of their views amounts to censorship, it is, as Bouveresse observes, quite comical indeed.

The end result of this “star system” is that, in intellectual life as in economics, the rich get richer: “When criticisms, even the most well-founded ones, are directed against intellectuals of a certain stature, they are considered *ipso facto* prosecutorial and inquisitorial. . . . Intellectual confusion, if it pleases enough people and is sanctioned by undeniable success, is considered necessarily more important than the intellectual clarity that a few people obstinately seek. . . . The most famous thinkers must be, and must remain, the most important.” (pp. 136–137) The irony, as Bouveresse goes on to note (p. 138), is that “all this shows the extent to which the law of the market, against which our thinkers continue to protest as if by obligation, is in reality today fully accepted and internalized by the representatives of the mind.”¹¹

We thus find ourselves in complete agreement with Bouveresse when he discusses the issue of hero worship versus democracy in intellectual life. “It should not be forgotten,” Bouveresse notes (p. 41), “that the community of intellectuals — in France probably even more than elsewhere — is unified far more by a form of piety towards its chosen heroes than it is by open scrutiny and the critical use of reason.” And it goes without saying that obscurity can be used as a tool of social control: it allows those who master the jargon to avoid answering objections and even to avoid having their views soberly scrutinized. For this reason, deliberate obscurity is worse than a waste of time; it is also profoundly inimical to democratic ideals. As George Orwell noted a half-century ago in his essay “Politics and the English language”, the main advantage of writing clearly is that when you say something stupid it will

⁹See, for example, Julia Kristeva, “Une désinformation”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 25 septembre–1 octobre 1997, p. 122; Robert Maggiori, “Fumée sans feu”, *Libération*, 30 septembre 1997, p. 29.

¹⁰“Flics de la pensée”: Marc Ragon, “L’affaire Sokal, blague à part”, *Libération*, 6 octobre 1998, p. 31; “Gendarmes”: Élisabeth Roudinesco, “Sokal et Bricmont sont-ils des imposteurs?”, *L’Infini* **62** (été 1998), p. 27; “Censeurs”: Jacques Derrida, “Sokal et Bricmont ne sont pas sérieux”, *Le Monde*, 20 novembre 1997, p. 17. In the present volume, Bouveresse recounts two situations in which he was subjected to similar accusations (pp. 141–143).

¹¹Here the disease is not solely French; it can also be found in some fashionable sectors of North American academia, as has been pointed out by Katha Pollitt, “Pomolotov cocktail”, *The Nation*, 10 June 1996, p. 9; Barbara Epstein, “Postmodernism and the left”, *New Politics* **6**(2) (winter 1997), pp. 130–144; Barbara Epstein, “Corporate culture and the academic left”, in *Market Killing: What the Free Market Does and What Social Scientists Can Do About It*, edited by Greg Philo and David Miller, Longman, New York, 2000; Carlos Reynoso, *Apogeo y decadencia de los estudios culturales*, Gedisa, Barcelona, 2000.

be immediately apparent to everyone, including to yourself.¹² Bouveresse's struggle on behalf of clarity and logic, like that of Orwell before him, is thus marked by a profound ethical and political concern.¹³

When we wrote our book, we secretly hoped that professional philosophers and intellectual historians would use this opportunity to continue where we left off and to sharpen our criticisms. The book of Bouveresse has fulfilled this hope beyond all our expectations.

¹²George Orwell, "Politics and the English language", in *A Collection of Essays*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1953, p. 171.

¹³See also Pierre Jacob, "Jacques Bouveresse, prix de l'Union Rationaliste 1999", *Les Cahiers Rationalistes*, no. 542–543 (mars–avril 2000), pp. 10–17.