

An Alternative History of French Epistemology

by Lucie Fabry

Through his research into little-known aspects of twentieth-century French thought and authors sensitive to the diversity of modes of knowledge, Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos has issued a manifesto for empiricism and a rallying cry against ethnocentrism.

Reviewed: Frédéric FRUTEAU DE LACLOS, *La connaissance des autres*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2021, 351 pp., €29.

Restoring the forgotten tradition of French empiricism

La Connaissance des autres ("Knowledge of Others") is the culmination of research undertaken by Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos since the early 2000s. As a specialist in twentieth-century French epistemology, he devoted his early studies to the work of Émile Meyerson, helping to bring it out of the oblivion or denigration into which it fell when Gaston Bachelard established himself as a dominant figure in French epistemology. His early research led him to advocate the work of minor authors, a position that is fully developed in this book: he invites us to revisit the history of French epistemology, taking us down little-traveled paths to explore the work of Émile and Ignace Meyerson, Paul Masson-Oursel, André Varagnac, Michel Navratil, Edmond Ortigues, Noël Mouloud, Robert Blanché, Etienne Souriau and Edmond Goblot, as well as little-known authors such as Pierre Janet and Raymond Ruyer.

Fruteau de Laelos seeks to prove that these lesser-known authors have something in common: they were sensitive to the diversity of modes of knowledge, and to the fact that the most highly developed forms of knowledge remain deeply rooted in its most spontaneous forms, in the earliest bodily and pre-reflexive relationships we establish with the world.

Conversely, the dominant currents in French philosophy, such as Sartre's phenomenology, Bachelardi's epistemology and Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology, shared an intellectualist tendency that caused them to widen the gap between superior and inferior forms of human thought. Fruteau de Laelos argues that the history of French epistemology—and, more broadly, the entire history of philosophy since Plato—reflects a struggle between the rationalism of the great and the empiricism of the small, in which rationalism has always prevailed: in keeping with an aristocratic conception of knowledge, rationalism was the natural position of authors who dominated the philosophical field, while empiricism, because it focused on denigrated forms of knowledge, was always dismissed as a minor philosophy.

This assertion is an invitation to engage in the sociological study of processes of minorization in the history of philosophy. However, Fruteau de Laelos' priority is not to analyze this process of minorization as such, but to undertake what he calls, in psychoanalytic terms, a task of "epistemological anamnesis" (p. 107), which aims to combat "the repression suffered by individuals [...] deemed 'small' by others who regard themselves as 'great'" (p. 421) by "actively recalling the theoretical possibilities raised in the debates of a particular time, but not retained by contemporaries nor bequeathed to posterity" (p. 166).

An empiricist return to the Kantian question of the conditions of possibility of experience

This exploration of the neglected tradition of French empiricism is solidly structured, not along chronological lines, but by a philosophical problem the author raises. In doing so, he breaks with the rigid stance of a historian of philosophy in order to construct a problem and formulate an answer of his own, albeit one that draws heavily on references to authors from his own corpus. His structuring problem is borrowed from Kant: under what conditions is experience possible? The book is indeed presented as a revival of the transcendental analytic project of the *Critique of*

Pure Reason, in which Kant examines the processes that lead to the constitution of a world of objects and to the structuring of the diverse impressions received in intuition.

Although it may come as a surprise that a proponent of empiricism should revisit a problem of Kantian rationalism, the author seeks to show that it is indeed possible to address this question as an empiricist. Such an approach consists in refusing to give an *a priori* answer to the question of the possibility of experience by invoking the immutable principles of a pure reason, and instead examining the concrete operations by which subjects order their experience: the work of constitution is thus reconceived as the approximate and fallible attempt of living subjects to navigate their environment and discover the world around them. In the middle section of the book, devoted to French psycho-philosophy, Fruteau de Laclos turns to the work of psychologists such as Pierre Janet, Albert Burloud and Michel Navratil to provide an empirical study of the processes involved in constituting a world of objects. Here, he continues the work he began in his 2012 book, *La Psychologie des philosophes*, and returns to the history of the relationship between psychology and phenomenology in the history of French philosophy, from the late 1920s to the early 1950s.

What about anthropology?

When opening a book entitled *La connaissance des autres*, which depicts a Dogon mask on the front cover and calls for a shift away from ethnocentrism on the back cover, one might expect to find a work on the anthropology of knowledge, exploring the diversity of forms of knowledge around the world. Up to this point, however, only French philosophy and psychology have been discussed. To understand the role of the anthropology of knowledge in this work, we need to examine the connection that Fruteau de Laclos makes between two major divisions that have been established within knowledge: the Bachelardian epistemological division, which separates scientific knowledge from prescientific knowledge within Western knowledge itself; and "the Great Divide", which separates Western science from the forms of knowledge found in other human societies (p. 35). The phrase "knowledge of others" thus brings together certain forms of Western knowledge that have been discredited as prescientific or irrational, and the body of non-Western knowledge that has been compared to them—a comparison seen, for example, in the way Lévy-Bruhl's work on primitive thought was received by authors such as Abel Rey and Gaston Bachelard.

In the first part of the book, Fruteau de Laclos sets out to revitalize non-Western forms of knowledge. This part opens with a discussion of ethnologist Jacqueline Roumeguère-Eberhardt's epistemological work on Bantu myths and initiation rites, which Fruteau de Laclos (re)discovered in a special issue of the journal *Socio-anthropologie*¹. To deepen his reflections on the diversity of forms of thought, he considers the particular case of philosophy and the question of whether philosophy has been developed outside the West. In so doing, he recounts a fascinating controversy between Paulin J. Hountondji, Mamoussé Diagne and Niamkey-Koffi, who sought to clarify whether it is possible to speak of African philosophy, and in what sense. This controversy illustrates both the limitations of the position adopted by authors such as Deleuze and Guattari, who concluded the "geophilosophy" of *What Is Philosophy?* with the claim that there can be no true philosophy outside the West, and the limitations of the position that, since Father Placide Tempels' work *Bantu Philosophy*, has sought to show that African philosophy does exist, by scrutinizing all Bantu cultural productions according to Western categories. By pointing out this twin pitfall of ethnophilosophy, Fruteau de Laclos shows the full scale of the task facing the anthropology of knowledge: to recognize the legitimacy of forms of thought and knowledge from countries and eras other than our own, without denying their specificity.

The diversity of human knowledge

As we conclude our journey, a feeling of tension emerges between the two objectives that Fruteau de Laclos pursues in this book: first, combating ethnocentrism by becoming sensitive to the diversity of forms of knowledge, which is particularly evident in the book's early section on anthropology; and second, developing an empiricist theory of knowledge, which is the focus of the following sections on French epistemology and psycho-philosophy. This raises the question of how these two parts of the book fit together, and, more importantly, how compatible their respective aims are. Indeed, in the passages where he emphasizes that all forms of knowledge are rooted in the immediate physiological relationship that individuals have with the world around them, the author gives few clues as to how, starting from this common ground of sensitive experience, forms of knowledge can be developed that differ

¹ J. ROUMEGUÈRE-EBERHARDT, « Sociologie de la connaissance et connaissance mythique chez les Bantu », *Socio-anthropologie*, n° 36, Publications de la Sorbonne, December 7, 2017, pp. 203-215.

radically from one culture to the next. He does offer an avenue to explore, however, when he suggests, like André Varagnac, that this diversity is the result of a "dialectic between humans and their environment" (p. 169): the diversity of forms of thought is therefore rooted in the diversity of relationships that human societies establish with the environment in which they evolve, inspired by Vidal de la Blache's possibilism (p. 168). While not wishing to prejudge the fruitfulness of this line of research, it could be argued that it is accompanied by a weaker conception of the diversity of human knowledge than what was asserted in the first part of the book, which placed the fight against ethnocentrism at the forefront: rather than presuming that there is an irreducible diversity of forms of knowledge, here human knowledge seems to be conceived as fundamentally one, and diversified only by the environments in which human societies evolve. Fruteau de Laclos' work seems to be shaped by a tension between the desire to move away from ethnocentrism and the desire to develop a unified theory of knowledge, and exploring this tension is one of the fundamental issues at stake in this philosophical study of "the knowledge of others".

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