

MODERN FRENCH PHILOSOPHY.

THE IDEOLOGISTS—THE TRADITIONALISTS.

BY PROFESSOR L. LÉVY-BRUHL.

CONDORCET belonged to a group of philosophers who, under the Republic, the Consulate and the Empire, upheld the spirit and methods of the eighteenth century, and who gave themselves the name of "ideologists." Their doctrine has generally been judged with excessive severity. It has been represented as the tail of Condillacism; this philosophy, it is said, already narrow as it came from its founder, became more and more thin and poor in the hands of the ideologists, until it was reduced to a mere theory of knowledge, semi-psychological and semi-logical, devoid of originality and with no hold on men's minds. This picture is very much exaggerated; to be convinced of this, we need only remember how strong was Napoleon's anxiety to stop the mouths of "those ideologists." He would not have taken the trouble, had their philosophy really been so insignificant.

According to Destutt de Tracy, who is, together with Cabanis, the most noteworthy of the ideologists, we cannot know the beginning of anything, neither that of men, nor that of the universe. Questions of origin are unanswerable. What was formerly called metaphysics is the most shallow thing in the world. Researches on the nature of the soul or on the first principle of things are inevitably vain. Whether we examine the phenomena within or without ourselves, all that we may hope to accomplish is to acquire a deeper and deeper knowledge of the laws of nature. The proper object of philosophy, or ideology, is to study what takes place in us when we think, speak, or reason. It then becomes the basis of ethics, economics, legislation and the other moral sciences.

Ideology recognizes as its founder Condillac, who first clearly

propounded the problem of the origin of our knowledge, and pointed out a suitable method for its solution. But from the outset, Destutt de Tracy differs with him. He does not admit that attention is a mere transformed sensation, and consequently rejects the whole genesis of understanding and will as conceived by Condillac. He propounds another theory according to which there are four faculties of the soul, and only four : sensibility, memory, judgment, and volition, which he calls four irreducible "modes of sensation."

Condillac ascribed to the active sense of touch the acquisition of the idea of something outside ourselves. De Tracy shows the explanation to be insufficient, and felicitously completes it : "When a being organised so as to will and feel, feels within him volition and action, and at the same time resistance against this action willed and felt by him, he is assured of his own existence, and of the existence of something that is not himself. Action willed and felt on the one hand, and resistance on the other hand—these are the links between our *self* and other beings, between beings that feel and beings that are felt." Any other sensation than this, commencing or terminating independently of our will, would be powerless to give us this idea. De Tracy is here nearer to Maine de Biran than to Condillac. In a similar way, in his *Logique*, De Tracy does not admit, with Condillac, that our judgments are equations, that our reasonings are series of equations, and that ideas compared in a judgment or in right reasoning are *identical*. We must say, on the contrary, that equations are a kind of judgment ; and even in equations, the ideas compared together are not *identical* but *equiv-
alent*.

De Tracy is a clear, sincere, and vigorous mind, holding firmly to the principles of the eighteenth century philosophy, and not shrinking from any consequences of these principles. The French Revolution, to which he nearly fell a victim, did not shake his convictions. He will not admit that a true doctrine may be immoral or dangerous for society, and claims entire liberty for philosophical research. Even morality is concerned in this liberty. For moral principles are not innate, whatever Voltaire may have said to the contrary. It is a very ancient and absurd error to believe that moral principles are in some sort injected into our heads, and the same in every head, and to be led by this dream to attribute to them a more celestial origin than to all other ideas which exist in our understanding. Moral science is of our own making, as all others are, and similarly built up of the results of our experience and reflexion. But it is subordinate to a knowledge of human na-

ture, and the latter in its turn "depends upon the state of physics, of which it is but a part." So, though for his own part he made use of a purely psychological method, De Tracy did not, in theory, separate the moral from the natural sciences. Accordingly he said that ideology was a part of zoölogy, or of animal physics, and dedicated his *Logique* to his friend Cabanis, the celebrated author of the *Rapports du Physique et du Moral*.

Cabanis has been looked upon as a materialist, but without sufficient reason, for he purposely abstains from expressing any metaphysical opinion. Like De Tracy, he declares that first causes are not an object of science, not even an object of doubt, and that on this point we are in a state of hopeless ignorance. But from an experimental point of view, he ascertains that the brain is to thought what the stomach is to digestion. As impressions reach the brain they excite it to activity, just as food, when it enters the stomach, stimulates in it a secretion of the gastric juice. The proper function of the one is to perceive each particular impression, to attach signs to it, to combine and compare together the different impressions, and to form therefrom judgments and determinations, just as the function of the other is to act upon nutritious substances. From this Cabanis derives the notorious formula: "The brain in some sort digests impressions; it produces an organic secretion of thought;" a comparison which may be regarded as more or less happy, but which is meant to be nothing but a comparison.

By dint of psychological abstraction, it seemed to have been forgotten that man is, to use Bossuet's words, a natural whole, composed of a soul and a body. Cabanis comes back to this idea. Being at the same time a physician and a psychologist, he shows, by the aid of several hundred observations made upon man, both in health and sickness, the reciprocal action of the body upon the mind and of the mind upon the body. The physiology of Cabanis is now quite out of date, but few have spoken better than he of the influence of age, sex, temperament, illness, diet, climate, on the formation of ideas and of moral affections.

If there are so many points of contact between the physical and the moral being, it is because they rest on a common basis. The operations called "moral," as well as the physical ones, result directly from the action either of certain particular organs or of the whole of the living system. All phenomena pertaining to intelligence and will take their rise in the primitive or accidental state of the organism as well as the other vital functions. The diversity of functions is no reason why principles should be multiplied. As we

do not assume a special principle for digestion, another for the circulation of the blood, another for respiration, etc., neither must we assume one for the intellectual functions. It is sufficient to



PIERRE-JEAN-GEORGES CABANIS.

(1757-1808.)

From an engraving by Ambroise Tardieu.

recognise that all functions, whether moral or physical, originate in sensibility, a property common to all living organisms. Indeed,

physical sensibility is, on the one hand, the utmost limit that we reach in the study of the phenomena of life, and in the methodical investigation of their connexion; and it is also, on the other hand, the most general principle discovered by the analysis of the intellectual faculties and the affections of the soul. Thus the physical and the moral life meet at their source, or, rather, the moral being is but the physical being considered from certain special points of view. The only principle of the phenomena of animal existence is, therefore, the power of sensation. But what is the cause of this power, what is its essence? Philosophers will not ask this question. Sensibility is the universal fact in living nature. We cannot get beyond it.

When Cabanis finds in his path any of Condillac's theories that are incompatible with the results of his own researches, he does not hesitate to reject them. Thus, Condillac maintained that there are no psychological phenomena unperceived by consciousness. Nothing, says Cabanis, is more contrary to experience. Although it is a fact that the consciousness of impressions always implies the existence and action of sensibility, the latter is, nevertheless, alive in many parts where the *self* nowise perceives its presence; it nevertheless determines a great many important and regular functions, though the *self* is not at all aware of its action. There may be sensibility without sensation, i. e., without an impression perceived.

Condillac said everything is acquired, even instinct. The paradox was bold, and Joseph de Maistre did not fail to laugh at it. Cabanis looks upon instinct as innate, and infers therefrom that external sensations are not, as Condillac declared, the sole principle of all mental life. Moral ideas and determinations do not depend solely upon what are called sensations, that is, distinct impressions received by the organs of the senses properly so called. The impressions resulting from the functions of several internal organs contribute to them more or less, and, in certain cases, appear to be the sole cause of their production. There is within us a whole system of inclinations and determinations formed by impressions almost totally unconnected with those of the external world; and these inclinations necessarily influence our way of considering objects, the direction of our researches concerning them, and our judgment of them. It is not, therefore, the external world alone that shapes the thoughts and desires of the "*self*"; it is rather the latter, pre-formed by instinct and by specific dispositions, that builds for itself an external world with the elements of reality that

interest it. Likewise, spontaneous activity precedes in us reflective activity. We are first determined to act without being aware of the means we employ, and often without even having conceived a precise idea of the end we desire to attain.

The consideration of instinct naturally leads to that of final causes. Cabanis admires the mutual dependency of all parts in living bodies, and is not surprised that observers of nature "who were not close thinkers" should have been deeply affected by it. But in truth, these marvels are inseparable from the very organisation of animals. One may recognise them, and even extol them with all the magnificence of language, without being forced to admit in the causes anything that does not belong to the necessary conditions of every existence. What seems to us finality is merely the result of natural laws, inasmuch as they make possible the appearance, propagation and permanence of living species; if this ordering of parts which we think wonderful and intentional should cease to exist, living beings would disappear. So that, even when the naturalist has recourse to final causes, the philosopher cannot without imprudence seek in them an argument in favor of beliefs concerning the author of nature. But such reserve must be very difficult to adhere to, since Cabanis, who recommends it, does not himself observe it. In his *Lettre à Fauriel sur les Causes Premières* published after his death, Cabanis inclines toward a conception of nature akin to that of the Stoics, in which ideas of order and finality occupy a predominant place.

Cabanis has been widely read, and still deserves to be, were it only for the abundance and the choice of the facts he brought together, the justness of most of his reflexions, and the pleasing elegance of his style. His influence extended not only to philosophers like Maine de Biran, Auguste Comte, H. Taine, but also to novelists like Stendhal and his successors. Yet he has not escaped the disrepute which overtook ideology. Metaphysics, reviving, threw into the shade those philosophers who had thought it finally banished. The ideologists had followed the way opened by the encyclopædists and the scientific men of the eighteenth century, and were the first victims of a reaction which aimed higher than at them.

The name given to the traditionalist philosophers exactly indicates the position they assumed over against the eighteenth century. To a body of doctrines, the common characteristic of which was that they were based on the independent effort of individual reason, they opposed a doctrine which discovered truth in tradi-

tion, and particularly in tradition that is universally found among men, viz., religious tradition. Shall we say that this is not a philosophical doctrine, but the very negative of philosophy? Were this true, such a negation was at least grounded on philosophical reasons, that is to say, on a criticism of the opposing principles. No doubt the traditionalists thought that they, as Christians, possessed the truth at the outset, before any discussion. But they, nevertheless, meant to combat the "philosophers" on their own ground, to unmask their sophistries, to refute their errors, and finally to compel them, by sheer force of demonstration, to confess the weakness of individual reason. De Bonald, De Maistre, the two most illustrious representatives of this school, were looked upon by all their contemporaries as formidable logicians, and, in the judgment of Auguste Comte, for instance, De Maistre dealt the philosophy of the eighteenth century some most telling blows.

Wherever this philosophy had seen "nature," De Bonald sees "God." Nature to him is a vague and equivocal expression, and cannot stand for a real cause. Nature is rather an effect, a system of effects, a set of laws; but these laws imply a legislator who founded the system and who maintains it. The universe is unintelligible to him without a Creator who is at the same time a Providence. Language, likewise, was attributed by the eighteenth century philosophers (Rousseau excepted) to the invention of men. This also is an untenable theory, all the more absurd as these philosophers understood perfectly well that language is inseparable from thought and social life. Men never could have invented language had they not already lived in society; and they never could have lived in society had they not already possessed language. You cannot, De Bonald claims, get out of this circle unless you admit this marvel—for language is no less marvellous than the organism of living beings—to be a gift from the Creator to rational beings. And it is the same with all similar questions: the philosophy of the eighteenth century looks back in the series of causes, up to a certain point, where it stops, thinking it has reached the fundamental principle; but this so-called principle explains nothing, and must in its turn be explained. Religion alone, which is a deeper sort of philosophy, attains to the first principle on which all things depend.

Truth is therefore to be found in tradition. The pride of individual reason, which has despised this tradition, inevitably leads to error. Even such a well-balanced mind as that of Montesquieu did not escape it. All his theory of constitutions is false. Modern

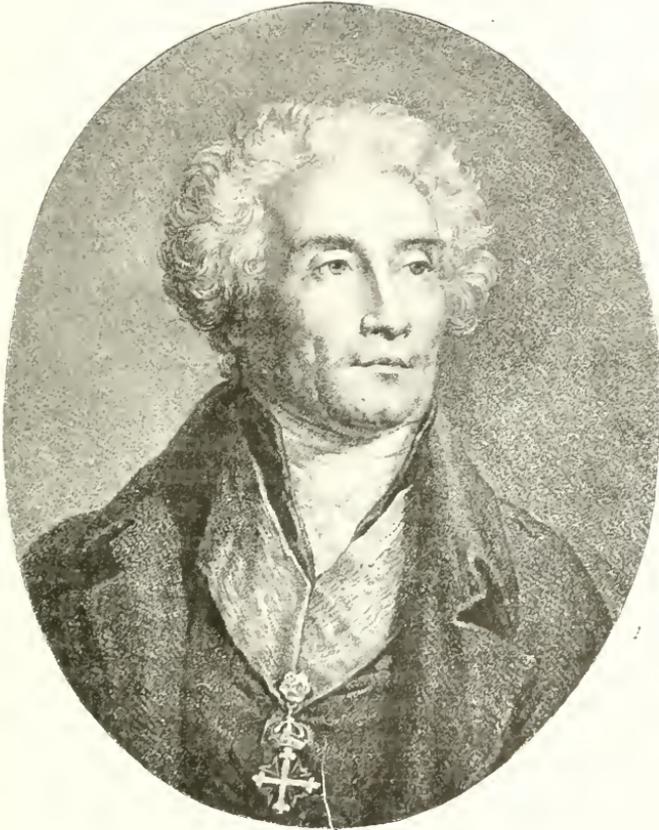
philosophy, says De Bonald, is the wisdom of man and not that of society; that is to say, the wisdom of the depraved man and not that of the social or perfect man; it tries to make the intelligent man turn to natural religion. But this philosophical religion, the pure worship of Divinity, of the Great Being, of the Being of Beings, in a word, theism, infallibly leads to atheism, as the philosophical government of political societies, the division and balance of power in the state, or representative government, inevitably leads to anarchy.

It is a mistake for man to assume the task of constituting society or establishing government. His intervention can only spoil the work of Providence. It is society, on the contrary, which, being founded on necessary relations, that is, relations established by God, *constitutes* the individual man, and dictates the rules that must govern his conduct.

The same leading ideas are expressed by Joseph de Maistre, but with such eloquence and passion as to make them wonderfully impressive. The eighteenth century, according to him, is one of the most shameful epochs in the history of the human mind. Its philosophy is a most degrading and fatal system. It has robbed reason of her wings and made her grovel like a filthy reptile; it has dried up the divine source of poetry and eloquence, and caused all the moral sciences to perish. And why did it produce these frightful effects? Because this whole philosophy was nothing but a veritable system of practical atheism. To pronounce the name of God in its presence would throw it into convulsions. It was the work of the "Evil One," it was "the denying spirit," like Mephistopheles. Moreover, according to De Maistre, the eighteenth century merely applied to politics the principles of the Reformation, or, as he says, of the "rebels" of the sixteenth century. The sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries might be called the premises of the eighteenth, which in fact was but the conclusion of the two preceding ones. "The human mind could not suddenly have risen to such a pitch of audacity as we have witnessed. . . . Philosophism could not have been erected except on the broad foundation of the Reformation."

The hostility of De Maistre is clear-sighted, and he struck home when he pointed out the inconsistency of those philosophers, who praised so highly the experimental method, yet had not patience enough to practise it, so anxious were they to substitute something for the traditions they were pulling down. "It was a singularly ridiculous trait of the eighteenth century to judge of everything

according to abstract rules, without regard to experience ; and it is the more strikingly ridiculous because this very century at the same time kept continually sparring at all philosophers who took abstract principles as their starting-point, instead of first looking for them in the light of experience." Every one of the "philosophers" in turn is roughly handled by De Maistre. I do not speak



JOSEPH DE MAISTRE.

(1754-1821.)

After a sketch by Bouillon. Lithographed by Villain.

only of Voltaire, against whom he feels a sort of fury which almost overpowers him ; but Locke, whom the philosophers all hailed as master, is no longer "the wise Locke," the "greatest of all philosophers since Plato ;" he is a short-sighted, narrow-minded man, not wicked, but simple, shallow, spiritless, a poor philosopher, a mere pigmy beside the "Christian Plato," that is, Malebranche

who has been sacrificed to him. The infatuation of which he has been the object is simply ludicrous. The same is said of Bacon, whom De Maistre honors with a special indictment. His dislike is no less for Condillac, "who sees the truth perfectly well, but who had rather die than confess it;" an odious writer, perhaps, that one of all the philosophers of the eighteenth century who was most on his guard against his own conscience.

These philosophers tried to persuade individual reason that it was the sovereign judge of what is false and what is true, that the progress of mankind depended upon that of the sciences, and that ignorance and superstition were the causes of moral and social evil. De Maistre denies all this as confidently as they asserted it. He disparages reason as much as they exalted it. Reason, he declares, stands manifestly convicted of incompetence as a guide for men, for few men are in a fit state to reason well, and none can reason well on all subjects; so that, generally speaking, it is advisable to begin with authority. "I do not mean to insult reason," says De Maistre, "I have infinite respect for it in spite of all the wrong it has done us; but whenever it stands in opposition to common sense, we must put it from us like poison." And, indeed, the general feeling of all men forms "a system of intuitive truths" against which the sophistries of reason cannot prevail. It is a "mysterious instinct" which we are bound to obey. This instinct often guesses aright, even in the natural sciences; it is almost infallible in dealing with rational philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, and natural theology, "and it is infinitely worthy of the supreme wisdom, which created and regulated all things, to have enabled man to dispense with science in all that most greatly concerns him."

Science! that is the source from which proceed dangerous extravagancies, rash self-assumption and proud blasphemy. Not that it is bad in itself; but it must be pursued only under certain indispensable conditions. For want of this precaution the more things our mind knows the more guilty it may be. Bacon is quite "ludicrous" when he is provoked at scholasticism and theology. Teach young people physics and chemistry before having imbued them with religion and morality, and you will see the result. There lurks in science, when it is not entirely subordinate to "national dogmas," a something which tends to debase man and to make him a useless or bad citizen. Science is not and ought not to be the chief aim of the intelligence. Whence come, for instance, the multiplied complaints, and, one might say, revilings against Providence? From this great phalanx of men called scientists, whom

we have not in this century been able to keep in their proper place, which is a subordinate one. In former times, there were very few men of science, and among these few only a very small number were impious. Now they are legion, and the exception has become the rule. They have usurped a boundless influence. Yet it is not for science to guide men. Nothing really essential is entrusted to it. Science is an intellectual pastime, and in the material order of things it is capable of useful applications; but there its domain ends. "It belongs to the prelates, the nobles, the higher officers of the state to be the depositories and guardians of saving truths, to teach nations what is wrong and what is right, what is true and what is false, in the moral and spiritual worlds. Others have no right to reason on such matters. They have the natural sciences to divert themselves with; of what can they complain? As to the man who speaks or writes in order to take away from the people a national dogma, he ought to be hanged as one who robs the hearth and home."

It would be difficult to carry the reaction against the favorite ideas of the eighteenth century further. Yet De Maistre is in this not merely obeying the desire to restore the rights of tradition and religious authority and to abate the chimerical and sinful pretensions of such men as Helvetius and Condorcet. He founds his opinion also on a conception of the universe and its relation to God, which leaves to positive science but limited scope and range. The world of visible phenomena and of the laws which regulate them is a world of appearance and illusion which hides from our sight the world of true and essential reality. Therefore, the closer our science grasps phenomena and their laws, the farther it is, with all its air of truth, from being really true; or, at least, it is only imperfectly and comparatively true, like the appearances which are its object. The religious man who sees God everywhere in the world; the poet, moved by the beauty of the universe and by the tragic character of human destiny; even the metaphysician who discovers the invisible beneath the visible, are all three infinitely nearer to truth, harmony, and the eternal substance, than the man of science measuring and weighing atoms in his laboratory.

Consequently De Maistre has a constant tendency to explain nothing by secondary causes, and always to appeal to mystery and God's unfathomable designs. He gives an admirable description of the struggle for life, and of the competition between living species; he sees clearly that war is a particular phase of this great fact; but instead of seeking the cause, as Diderot or Darwin did,

in the general laws of nature, he sees in it simply a "divine" law, and founds thereupon a whole theory of sacrifice. "The earth, continually deluged with blood, is only an immense altar on which all that has life must be slain, and that without end, or measure, or rest, till the end of all things, till the death of death." He likewise insists upon the mutual responsibility of all the members of one family, and of all the members of mankind, and upon the reversibility of penalties; but instead of seeking the origin of these beliefs in the constitution and religion of primitive societies, he sees here again a "divine" law. The words superstition and prejudice are to him meaningless. God's directing hand is everywhere in the world; if we do not see it, it is because we *refuse to do so*. A family is thought to be royal because it reigns; whereas, on the contrary, it reigns because it is royal.

We shall not set forth here De Maistre's ideas on the spiritual sovereignty of the Pope, the significance of the French Revolution, and the constitution best suited for modern nations. We must lose no time in returning to more properly philosophical doctrines. But more than once, in these doctrines, shall we observe unquestionable traces which prove the influence of the chief traditionalists, De Maistre, De Bonald, Ballandré and Lamennais. De Maistre, especially, made upon many minds a deep and lasting impression. Even if Auguste Comte had not formally acknowledged the fact, his very doctrine would be sufficient to prove his indebtedness to De Maistre for many of his historical, social, and religious ideas.