

Jean Wahl (1888–1974)

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Jean Wahl was born in Marseille, France, where his father, who was professor of English, succeeded to Mallarmé. He studied in the lycée Janson de Sailly (Paris) and, after a preparatory year in the lycée Louis-le-Grand (Paris), he entered the École normale supérieure (Ulm) in 1907. In 1910 he became “agrégé de philosophie” (first in his year, just before his good friend Gabriel Marcel, 1889–1973). Docteur ès lettres in 1920 with a thesis devoted to *Les Philosophies pluralistes d’Angleterre et d’Amérique* (translated into English by Fred Rothwell as *The Pluralist Philosophies of England and America*, London: Open Court, 1925) and a supplementary thesis (“Thèse complémentaire”) on Descartes’ concept of the instant (*Le Rôle de l’Idée de l’Instant dans la Philosophie de Descartes*). He then successively taught in secondary schools (“lycées” in Saint-Quentin, Tours and Le Mans), in the universities of Besançon, Nancy, Lyon, and finally at the Sorbonne—from 1936 to 1967. His career was interrupted, however, by World War II: first, by the exodus of May 1940; second, in December when Vichy ordered the retirement of all university professors with Jewish roots; third, in July 1941 when he was arrested by the Gestapo, imprisoned and finally interned at the Drancy deportation camp (north-east of Paris), from where he was released in November thanks to the mobilization of his family and friends. He then left for the U.S. where he taught from 1942 to 1945 at New York’s New School for Social Research, Smith College, Mount Holyoke College (where he created the *Decades* inspired by the famous “Décades de Pontigny”) and Pennsylvania State College. After the war, he returned to France and became President of the *Société française de philosophie* (1946), founding member of the *Deucalion* journal (1946) and of the *Collège philosophique* (in Jan. 1947, rue de Rennes), and, in 1950, Director of the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, a position he kept until his death. Wahl has also been visiting professor at Chicago, Berkeley and Tunis.

Wahl was first inspired by his peers—Henri Bergson (1859–1941), Émile Boutroux (1845–1921) and Léon Brunschvicg (1869–1944)—and by William James’ and George Santayana’s works. Indeed Wahl always looked beyond the French intellectual horizon, which is sometimes in danger of ignoring foreign innovatory speculative ventures. Fully aware of the contemporary debates across Continental Europe (Analytic thought, Phenomenology, Existentialism, German Idealism and the like), he was also very keen to engage in dialogue with “outsiders” such as English and American philosophers, but also the early Heidegger, whose reading he was already recommending in 1927.

His books display the rare ability to renew the interpretation of well-known historical figures and themes and of introducing new actors and fields into the French intellectual scene. Besides his two theses mentioned above, of special interest are his 1926 *Étude sur le Parménide de*

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Platon, his 1929 *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (prior to Kojève's 1947 work!) and his 1938 *Études kierkegaardienne*s. He has also authored *The Philosopher's Way* (reviewed by Hartshorne in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LVII, N° 5, 1948, pp. 509-511), a book that bears the typical verve we also discover in his monumental *Metaphysical Treatise* of 1953 (in which Whitehead frequently appears as the white knight who saves the day) and in *Vers le concret* (i.e., *Towards the concrete*), in which Wahl, far ahead of most of his contemporaries, provides beautiful meditations on three complementary thinkers—William James, Whitehead and Marcel.

Vers le concret (1932) gathers three introductory studies of authors who, Wahl claims, provide us with similar (radical) empiricist *quests*. In each case, it is indeed a radical empiricism that it as work (to make sense of all experiences)—and this premise involves a biographical consequence: we are confronted with philosophies in the making. The Preface (written in 1931–1932) shows the unity of these sketches primarily through the importance of the Bergsonian roots of the three respective worldviews, and secondarily with the help of the explication of the importance of three Jamesean traits: the concept of (pure) experience (its pristine vagueness and confusedness, but also its spiritual and emotional density), the necessary gearing of internal and external relations, i.e., of durational and physical temporality (to allow both freedom and determinism, existence and being), and the constitutive opacity of the concrete (its non-rational thickness) and of the witness of the body itself.

The chapter on James (originally published in 1922), along with his correspondence (including some letters unpublished at the time), shows the extent to which philosophy was instrumental in his battle against illness, despair and madness. All the major conceptual issues are evoked and their historical significance clarified (except, however, the obscure relationship with C.S. Peirce). This is an amazing feat coming as it does prior to Perry's *Thought and Character of William James* (1935). The introduction to Whitehead (originally published in 1931) shares the same holistic concern: to make sense of the "Philosophy of Organism" through the works of the Harvard epoch (from PNK to PR—sometimes at the price of conceptual shortcuts) and thus to show how the intended destruction of the materialistic fallacy necessitates the powerful concept of event that, in turn, allows the renewal of the construction of causality, space and time. The contrast with Husserl is, however, at times rather daring. The study of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy (originally published in 1930) exploits his *Metaphysical Diary* (1927) and is based on his confrontation of Hegel, Bradley and Bergson. Again, the key concepts are subjectivity, embodiment and the emotional night of experience. As he works towards the restoration of the ontological primacy of existence and grants its religious immediacy, the special focus becomes the self-validating virtues of faith.

In conclusion, let us mention that Wahl was not only a learned and systematic thinker, but also a published poet himself who translated poems of, e.g., Wallace Stevens and Thomas Traherne. Actually, he held that poetry constitutes the highest of all arts and that it *is* metaphysics.

In his time a towering figure of the French intelligentsia but since the seventies somewhat forgotten even in his own country, Wahl is now being rediscovered and his books are republished. His metaphysical insights, that match Whitehead's and are well served by a lucid

style and an impressive historical-critical scholarship, are once more being widely acknowledged.

Works Cited and Further Readings

- There are two “Wahl Collections”: one at the Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (Paris); the other at the Bibliothèque nationale itself. Probably the best biographical notice is Maurice [Patronnier] de Gandillac's obituary, published in the yearbook of the *Association amicale des Anciens Élèves de l'École Normale Supérieure* (1975, pp. 38-45). See also Alquié, Ferdinand. 1975. “Jean Wahl”, *Les Études philosophiques*, n°1, janvier-mars, pp. 79-88. Jankélévitch, Vladimir. 1953. “Mystique et Dialectique chez Jean Wahl”, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 58, 4, oct.-déc., pp. 424-431. Kremer-Marietti, Angèle. 1970. “Différence et qualité”, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, n°3, pp. 339-349. Levinas, Emmanuel with Xavier Tilliette, Paul Ricœur. 1976. *Jean Wahl et Gabriel Marcel*. Présentation de Jeanne Hersch, Paris, Éditions Beauchesne. Mimoun, Rabia. 1985. *La Pensée de Jean Wahl ou de la tradition vers la révolution en philosophie*. Thèse de doctorat ès lettres et sciences humaines, préparée sous la direction de Paul Ricœur, Université de Paris X-Nanterre.

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