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Pedagogy of the philosophy dissertation in France: paths to freedom, or *thèse-antithèse-foutaise*?

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the philosophy dissertation as a cultural practice within the educational institution in France. It argues that this cultural practice has a strong association with the preservation and ongoing creation of French national identity. I present findings from a survey of pedagogic materials offering advice for students taking the philosophy exam at baccalaureate level. Having given an overview of the cultural importance of the philosophy dissertation, I present the ways in which the general principles of method and structure taught are justified. We then move into the advice given relating to the dissertation structure that is habitually recommended—an introduction and then three parts (most often thesis, antithesis, synthesis). The article considers the reasons why such pedagogic practices can seem to fall back into prescriptivism or formalism, but also seeks to draw out the ways in which the philosophy dissertation can be a more open, uncertain form of thinking.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article prend pour objet la dissertation de philosophie telle qu'elle existe dans l'éducation nationale en France, la caractérisant comme pratique culturelle. Nous suggérons que cette pratique culturelle a de forts liens avec la préservation et la création continue de l'identité nationale française. Nous présentons ce que nous avons appris d'un bilan des matériaux pédagogiques disponibles aux étudiants se présentant à l'épreuve de philosophie du baccalauréat. Ayant présenté au lecteur l'importance culturelle de la dissertation de philosophie, nous résumons les différentes façons dont les pédagogues justifient les principes généraux de méthode et de structuration. Par la suite, nous nous tournons vers les conseils donnés habituellement aux étudiants quant à la structure de dissertation qui est à suivre – structure qui comprend une introduction et trois parties (le plus souvent caractérisées comme celles de la thèse, de l'antithèse, et de la synthèse). L'article considère les raisons possibles pour lesquelles les pratiques pédagogiques en question pourraient sembler n'être que du simple prescriptivisme ou du formalisme ; mais nous nous efforçons aussi de souligner les manières dont la dissertation de philosophie peut devenir une forme de pensée moins certaine et plus ouverte.

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I. Introduction

Each year in France, around 500,000 *lycéens* and *lycéennes* sit a four-hour exam in which they produce a dissertation in philosophy. This represents the culmination of their *classe de philosophie* in the final year at secondary level, in which this subject takes a prominent role in their formal education, for the first and often last time. The June exam (along with other assessments) leads to the venerable, 200-year-old baccalaureate qualification, conferring the right to proceed to university study.¹ Each year the exam proves a major media event, with advice being offered on radio, television, and online, through manuals and subscription services, all competing for the attention both of contemporary students and of each previous generation that has sat the exam. This has led prominent figure Antoine Compagnon to state that the baccalaureate is a ‘vache sacrée pour les Français’, and that the role for students of the philosophy dissertation within it (alongside the final oral) is that these exams ‘couronn[ent] leurs études secondaires’ (Compagnon 2018, 28 minutes 10 and 17.22).

The philosophy dissertation therefore plays an important role in French national culture, and represents a—perhaps *the*—key vector for the importance of philosophy for that culture. This can be seen in the pronouncement by the education minister responsible for the recent reform of the bac, Jean-Michel Blanquer, that philosophy is a ‘universal’ subject (in Raybaud and Schauder 2022); or in a report by the Inspectorat Général de l’Éducation Nationale which states that ‘[l]a relation de la discipline “philosophie” aux “valeurs de la République” n’est pas simplement évidente ou naturelle, elle n’est pas non plus étroite ou inévitable, elle est tout bonnement architectonique’ (IGEN 2015, 36). There is thus scope to explore the central role this form of the dissertation reserves for philosophy, and the pedagogical and argumentative worldviews bound up in the dissertation as a cultural institution or practice. This is all the more the case given that baccalaureate reforms were announced in 2018, and implemented by 2021, providing the opportunity to evaluate the ongoing impact of institutionalised philosophy on French national consciousness.²

This article therefore proposes that time spent looking at the philosophy dissertation as an institutional practice will help us understand the way it functions as a site of cultural production. This functioning has not been adequately reflected in anglophone scholarship, which tends to focus instead on the cultural end-products, studying them as if they were literary works rather than instances of an ongoing practice of philosophising. A phrase that often comes up in discussions of the dissertation is Kant’s ‘on n’apprend pas la philosophie, on ne peut apprendre qu’à philosopher’ (in Derrida 1990, 360). Studying these questions aims to be useful for the study of French philosophical discourse as a process of production. Doing so allows greater attention to be paid to the elements that are produced again and again: these include emphasising methodological development, problematisation, oppositions and transitions, abstract conceptuality, and impersonal and universal thought.³ In order to look at such processes of production, this article draws on materials from the vast quantities produced each year in the run-up to the June exam.⁴ It is possible to see such materials as a reserve or reservoir in which modern French identity finds its expression (the dissertation thus being a passive reflection, a conservative force acting to slow societal change). But discourse around the philosophy dissertation also provides universalist French identity with a means of reproducing and projecting itself (in this scenario, the dissertation acts as something more future-oriented and—perhaps—more open too).⁵

The three parts into which this article will fall are as follows: first I introduce the cultural, perhaps even ritual importance of the philosophy dissertation, looking at the shape of this practice today, as well as notable elements from its history. Second, I present findings from a survey of the study advice for the dissertation, drawing out the way in which the importance of structure is emphasised in general terms. From here I precede, thirdly, to the pedagogic materials available, looking specifically at general structural principles, then the dissertation's introduction, and finally the habitual three main sections (*thèse*, *antithèse*, *synthèse*).

There are two ways of approaching these materials: on the one hand, they leave little room for any sense of balance between method and content, with method being presented as more important. Method does not sit harmoniously alongside content, but instead transforms that content, in so doing inaugurating or instituting the writing subject as a 'disciplined' citizen (not for nothing are teachers in France, albeit at primary level, referred to as *instituteurs*). This would be to see the pedagogy of the philosophy dissertation in France as prescriptive and conservative, not least in the tripartite structure classically recommended. On the other hand, an alternative reading might focus on patterns of dissent within this cultural practice, such as the lampooning of tripartite structures as *thèse-antithèse-foutaise*, and therefore argue that the dissertation could allow students to build paths to freedom. But before moving to the detail that will allow us to explore these alternative readings, let us begin with some of the broader traces of this singular cultural practice.

II. Dissertation pedagogy as ritual

The French philosophy dissertation is a broad-based and powerful institution, bringing under its sway nearly 500,000 students each year. Whether in the technological or its most traditional and academically prestigious 'general' version of the baccalaureate, philosophy features on students' timetables in their *terminale* year.⁶ Its placement within the bac's broad, liberal-arts-style curriculum goes far beyond the scope of any individual subject studied within the English/Welsh A-level system (philosophy included); the philosophy dissertation is a cultural practice involving massive participation, and one of the most deeply rooted manifestations of philosophical learning in modern democracy, anywhere in the world. Despite (or due to) these characteristics of belonging to mass, modern, democratic culture, a certain ritual element has come to be associated with the philosophy dissertation. Timetabled as the first exam of the summer session (in the pre-2021 bac), and retained as one of only four non-coursework assessments under the reformed system, the exam starts with the examiner uttering 'vous avez quatre heures'. Although a simple instruction, this phrase has a life of its own in wider French media culture, acting as the title for innumerable bac revision materials, but also forming an expression to be uttered when a difficult question arises in general conversation.

Compagnon's assertion that the baccalaureate is a sacred cow seems uncontroversial when placed in the context of the vast production of materials vying for the attention of *lycéen(ne)s* preparing for the bac and the philosophy dissertation specifically.⁷ These include course manuals or textbooks (Cerqueira et al. 2020; Bernard et al. 2020; Durozoi 2021); a large and annually replenished archive of programmes on state-sponsored radio station France Culture (see Works Cited); abundant media commentary, live-streaming,

and *corrigés* or suggested answers with annotations in newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, and more; regular numbers and special issues (e.g. Pépin 2015) of *Philosophie magazine* (which on 1st April 2021 claimed to have located the philosophy dissertation written by 18-year-old Emmanuel Macron (Eltchaninoff 2021)); anthologies and *fiches de lecture*, bringing together short texts by canonical thinkers on philosophical themes allowing students to relate them to the ‘notions’ of the philosophy programme (see Bourdin (2000) and the series to which Dupouey (2004) belongs); online guides and subscription services; twitter accounts (@LePhilotron and others) publishing one philosophy question or ‘sujet’ daily; and many more similar phenomena in more or less every imaginable format, including a TV sitcom that ran to 98 episodes, *La philo selon Philippe* (Azoulay 1995–96).

But what is actually required by the exam around which all these materials gravitate? As mentioned above it is a four-hour exam, and students must answer one question. They can choose between several *sujets* or philosophical questions that are proposed, or instead write an *explication de texte* on a canonical philosophical passage. The questions set for the general baccalaureate’s philosophy paper in 2022 were:

- Les pratiques artistiques transforment-elles le monde ?
- Revient-il à l’État de décider de ce qui est juste ?
- *Explication de texte* of Antoine-Augustin Cournot, *Essai sur les fondements de nos connaissances et sur les caractères de la critique philosophique* (1851).

In order to prepare for questions like these, *lycéens* study a curriculum corresponding, in the words of the Education Ministry, to ‘le principe qui constitue la norme constante et reconnue de la discipline: [...] un programme de notions auxquelles s’adjoint une liste d’auteurs’ (Ministère de l’éducation nationale 2019).⁸ This list of authors features ancient authors (largely Greek and Roman, but with five non-Western thinkers); it takes in medieval and early modern thinkers but the majority are taken from the nineteenth and—weighted most heavily of all—the twentieth century. In the reformed version first sat in 2021, the number of authors rose from 57 to 84, with the number of women expanding from one to seven, all from the mid-twentieth century or later (Van Reeth 2021a). As for the ‘notions’, these are all-purpose concepts to be employed across all types of philosophical discussion, and numbering 17 in the current curriculum (see Table 1).

Table 1. The 17 notions of the baccalaureate philosophy programme (Ministère de l’éducation nationale et de la jeunesse 2019).

L’art	Le bonheur	La conscience
Le devoir	L’État	L’inconscient
La justice	Le langage	La liberté
La nature	La raison	La religion
La science	La technique	Le temps
Le travail	La vérité	

Notions were added to the previously author-based canon in the 1970s and can be seen as pedagogically innovative—they take the curriculum beyond the model of learning canonical doctrines or oeuvres, orienting it instead to a form of questioning that is more mobile, being less identifiably tied to any particular cultural arena, and therefore more powerfully universalising (something more widely accepted as positive in a French setting). It certainly seems possible to imagine that the notions' longstanding presence on the curriculum feeds into the ease with which established philosophical figures in France utilise abstract terms. In doing so, they rely on the principle that abstraction represents the core methodology of philosophy, and would question whether a philosophy without concepts would still be worthy of the name. The objection to this would then be that concepts can be applied with greater or lesser degrees of readiness, and that their presence on the French philosophy curriculum allows them to be applied too readily. Is it methodologically vivifying, or alternatively violent, when the reader encounters such applications in action?⁹

Attitudes within French thought do vary on this point: for Deleuze, the similar category of concepts is in some ways key ('La philosophie est l'art de former, d'inventer, de fabriquer des concepts' (Deleuze and Guattari 1991/2005, p.8), whilst in other ways not sufficient to exhaustively explain away what philosophy is. For Valéry on the other hand, placing too much emphasis on individual notions or terms serves to reify matters: 'ô philosophes ce qu'il faut élucider ce ne sont pas des mots, ce sont des phrases' (Valéry 1994, 376). Whichever position one prefers, it seems reasonable to present these 'notions' as making up a language, as it were, used by prominent figures in philosophy in France, but above all one understood by their large, bac-trained audiences. Indeed, such an impulse towards a mobile and universalising reflection over the ingurgitation of fixed canon or doctrine was behind the historical emergence of the baccalaureate. In the words of Giuseppe Bianco,

The dissertation progressively replaced the *rédaction*, an exercise consisting of a summary of the lectures given by the professor. By the 1870s, the *rédaction* was almost unanimously considered an outdated dogmatic practice aimed at the formation of students' minds and associated with the July Monarchy and Cousin's eclectic spiritualism. By contrast, the dissertation was presented as a creative exercise training adults to understand and express a personal position on a given topic. This was associated with the progressive politics of the Third Republic and Kantianism. Imitating the *leçon* performed by the professor, the dissertation was supposed to harmoniously mobilize the faculties, led by a freely-willing subjectivity. (Bianco 2018, 17)

Far from being a neutral exercise, then, the philosophy dissertation—and specifically the two-part curriculum of authors and notions studied in preparation for it—bears the mark, even in its latest reform, of a longstanding history of Republican pedagogy aiming at the propagation of democratic subjecthood.¹⁰

The philosophy dissertation in France therefore sets out to teach *lycéens* to be responsible, reflective citizens within a political body. But due to the importance of this task, there is a concern to police the way this education takes place, and as we shall see in the following section, this policing means that the aspiration for democratic citizenry to take part in free and frank discussions leads to institutional practices that are more formalised than one might expect, given the democratic nature of the impetus behind it. To what extent does this mean that the circle has been squared, that contemporary pedagogic

practice has ended up recreating a form of prescriptive scholasticism? The danger is that the claim to be egalitarian and universal might collapse back into rigidity and exclusion; indeed, the emphasis on the baccalaureate dissertation's long history and cultural cachet militates in this direction. Such at least is the view of one teacher recently interviewed, Thomas Schauder: 'la philosophie telle qu'elle est notée au bac est un miroir des inégalités sociales: ceux qui la réussissent le mieux sont ceux qui arrivent à l'école avec un capital culturel et symbolique déjà acquis' (Raybaud and Schauder 2022). With this danger in mind, let us move to the detail of the pedagogic advice being given.

III. General structure in the philosophy dissertation in France

Given the formalism or prescriptivism which we shall see characterising much pedagogical practice concerning the form of dissertation in question, the term has a surprising etymology. Latin *dissere* combines the prefix *dis-* with the verb *serere* 'to bind, connect, join words, compose' (*OED*); the term is also present in the modern French *serrure*, clasp or lock). If taken at face value, this would suggest that a dissertation is akin to a loosening, opening, unbinding, or fragmentation. Something of this remains in the sense that a successful dissertation involves moving away from one's initial position (more on which below), abandoning dogmatic certainty, preconceptions and prejudices. But what we can note most of all from the etymology of 'dissertation' as loosening is the sense that a piece of writing of this length, composed over four hours, inevitably involves dealing with a disparate collection of materials. One way to understand the pedagogic approaches employed in teaching *lycéens* to write philosophy dissertations is as teaching students to follow predetermined pathways, and as inculcating strategies for binding the looseness back together.

Several salient points emerge from the pedagogic materials for philosophy dissertations that I have surveyed: on the one hand, varying and interesting justifications are given for the approach that is taken; on the other, there is a high (but not absolute) degree of uniformity between the approaches being taught. In order to try to unpack this, in a final [Section I](#) will look at pedagogic advice relating to the dissertation's introduction, and then to each of the three parts of the *thèse-antithèse-synthèse* model which remains dominant (despite protestations at its well-worn status). Before that, however, it seems worthwhile to use the present section to address the way methodological advice is given at the general level.

Emphasis is often placed on the importance of method over content when writing a French philosophy dissertation. For instance, a sample dissertation given a mark of only 7/20 receives the following feedback:

Votre copie s'efforce de traiter le problème méthodiquement mais maladroitement. Il faut essayer de développer vos idées plus systématiquement pour bien faire le lien avec le sujet. Bien souvent, vos idées sont pertinentes, mais, parce qu'elles sont trop succinctement exposées, la transition avec ce qui précède et le rapport avec le sujet échappent au correcteur. En les reliant mieux au sujet, votre note montera considérablement! (N'Diaye and Odam 2015, 45)

Whereas a sample essay that received the excellent mark of 18/20 was praised in the following terms:

Excellent devoir: vous avez ce talent proprement philosophique d’oser poser les choses très simplement et très progressivement, en prenant bien soin de vous arrêter sur chaque moment. Votre cheminement est indiscutable et conduit à une réponse claire, engagée, affirmée avec force. (N’Diaye and Roux 2015, 25)

In other words, dissertations that are insufficiently systematic and do not link their ideas together will receive poor marks, those that progressively set out their ‘cheminement’ will receive good marks. The term of *cheminement* is key—it is more active than a simple path, more akin to path-finding or even path-making. And it is far from irrelevant that the etymology of method is precisely a path or a ‘path beyond’ (*meta* + *hodos*, ‘beyond-path’), perhaps one that cuts through the otherwise pathless forest narrativised by Descartes in his *Discours de la méthode* (Descartes 1968, 46; part III, second maxim).¹¹ We could call this a path to freedom—in which case, freedom would be understood as a discursive construction, not as some self-same, prelapsarian state awaiting to be rediscovered or regained by an isolated individual. This freedom can be usefully characterised as emerging from the relationship established between the student writing the dissertation and the essay-marker. There is something peripatetic here: it does not ultimately matter where the path leads (or, in other words, there are no straightforwardly correct, and certainly no final answers in philosophy).

The importance of the *cheminement* method comes across strongly in the radio programmes advising students how to write a dissertation. *Professeur de philosophie* Mathieu Chauffray uses no less than the language of theological salvation to claim that ‘la méthode est ce qui peut sauver absolument un lycéen au bac’, before going on to advising students against approaches consisting in ‘faire une sorte de catalogue. [...] empiler toutes ces réponses-là, faire un plan qui amène à passer de l’une à l’autre, sans qu’il n’y ait plus la moindre tension, le moindre problème’. He tells us that this ultimately leads to ‘une sorte de foire aux réponses’ (Van Reeth 2021c, 6.00 and 10.35ff.). This approach seems to differ considerably from the notion of speaking from one’s experience, affirming what one knows, or privileging the concrete over the abstract, which have become prevalent in marketised, anglophone educational settings. Chauffray is far from alone in these views, with highly similar positions being adopted by teacher Bernard (Van Reeth 2021d, 12.15) and by host of the radio series and prominent media philosopher Van Reeth (2021b).

This uniformity on the point of the general importance of method is reproduced on a more specific level in two ways. First, the advice on how to spend the four hours of the *épreuve de philosophie* is consistent. In line with what we have seen of the relative privileging of method over content, it is recommended that a relatively long time (1 hour 15 minutes, or 1 hour 30, or even 2 hours) be spent planning and sketching out a first draft, with a shorter time than perhaps expected (2 hours 30 or 2 hours) writing one’s actual answer (Van Reeth 2019, 4.00; Chauffray 2021, 7.20; N’Diaye 2021). It is at least possible that the ultimate effect is a conservative one, when such weight is given to method rather than to content (and however surprising it might be, this is where the emphasis in the pedagogic advice given lies). It is notable that this attitude can be found in Descartes’s *Discourse*, which advises us ‘to follow no less constantly the most doubtful opinions, once [one has] determined on them, than [...] if they were very assured’ (46). On

this view, the importance of sticking to one's argumentative pathway serves to exclude problems or tensions encountered as one engages with uncooperative external reality.

Secondly, the advice on how many sections to give to one's dissertation is remarkably uniform. Although writing two sections is sometimes mentioned, it is almost always followed by the recommendation to avoid this structure, due to its tendency to fall into a simple for/against pattern. Four sections is sometimes also mentioned in passing. But the overwhelming recommendation is to produce three sections, and we shall see shortly the way in which these sections are usually further characterised as *These-antithèse-synthèse*. For the moment we can note that it is often advised that these three sections be divided into further sub-sections. Chauffray for instance suggests that each of the three sections should itself have three sections, falling into a rough yes-no-yes pattern of responses to whatever question the main section was intended to answer (Van Reeth 2021c, 12.40). Each of the three main sections of the dissertation, and each sub-section, if possible, should make a reference, preferably to a philosopher studied on the curriculum (but possibly to popular or contemporary culture too). For her part, Fanny Bernard goes even further in this formalistic prescriptivism, suggesting that each of the three parts should have five sub-sections, and that these sub-sections should follow a uniform and pre-determined pattern. Her mnemonic for this pattern is ADREC (an anagram of *cadre*), which is to say that the five sub-sections should have the following roles: *Argument/Développement/Référence/Exemple/Conclusion* (Van Reeth 2021d, 13.34).¹² This catch-all solution might seem to sit uneasily with the principle of questioning all foundations and all authority, as a mobile philosophising rather than a fixed philosophy. But the adherents of this approach would doubtless reply that this freedom is to be arrived at through disciplined thought—not merely discovered through what comes naturally, but constructed in, through, and as a cultural practice, carved out of the messy realities of the institution.

IV. Specific structure in the philosophy dissertation in France

The first pedagogic advice we can look at concerning a specific moment of the dissertation relates to the introduction. True to the spirit of proliferating sub-sections, it is usually recommended that this introduction be divided into several smaller parts. In some of the very numerous web resources available, these parts are variously described as follows:

Accroche (facultative) / définition des termes du sujet / énoncé de la problématique/annonce de plan. (Guillaume n.d.)

Amorce littéraire / définition des termes / problématisation / annonce du plan. (Anonymous n.d.)

Accroche / définition des termes / problématiser le sujet / formulation de la problématique / annonce du plan. (Treffel n.d.)

Despite minor differences, these ways of dividing the introduction share a similar shape: they begin by providing a hook, using a rhetorical or literary technique if appropriate. They then proceed to unpack the terms of the question—in the words of teacher Sabrina Cerqueira, 'le sujet doit être déminé en quelque sorte, c'est-à-dire clarifié' (Van Reeth 2021f, 4.32). Thus far the introduction broadly resembles the writing advice given in

a variety of pedagogic settings beyond France—but the following part, the notion of *problématiser* or a *problématique* is pushed more explicitly in the French dissertation. A problem and the broader problematic it reveals is presented in the following straightforward terms by teacher Thomas Sentis: ‘un problème c’est quoi ? On a envie de répondre oui, on a envie de répondre non, du coup il faut continuer la discussion’ (Van Reeth 2021e, 11.00).¹³ David Lebreton goes further, suggesting that such problematics are a necessary condition if philosophising is to take place: ‘il ne peut pas y avoir de réflexion philosophique sans un problème’ (Van Reeth 2019, 12.55). In other words, having led the reader into the issues, and staked out the terrain by defining the terms, the problematic provides the engine that drives the dissertation’s philosophical work, or provides the mobility necessary for it. Once this has been put in place in the introduction, the remainder of that section is dedicated to setting out one’s plan, which should be animated by the tension or contradiction identified by the problematic. And as a tension or contradiction relies on the existence of multiple factors, arguments, or interpretations, the plan of the dissertation is then able to unfurl itself (loosen itself, dis-art itself?) in the sections that are to come.

We therefore come to the first section in the body of the dissertation, usually identified as the ‘thesis’. It is recommended with a high degree of uniformity that this section be based on the student’s own intuitive views about, or experience of, the question at hand. However, this is not to say that this experience has a right to be considered philosophical material by dint of being included in a philosophy dissertation (this would be circular logic). If anything, the effect is the reverse: students are encouraged to begin with what is closest to them, in order that it can all the more completely be set at a distance, overcome, translated and traduced into the philosophical discipline—in order that it might be ‘disciplined’. Students must submit to the authority of the system, they must agree to codify their experience in acceptable terms. Whilst to some extent this is a perennial theme in education and reflections of the phenomenon are to be found from Plato on, we can also recognise here a close mirroring or prefiguration of the assimilationist model, and unease over straightforward identity politics, prevalent in many aspects of French society. This means that we are at some considerable distance from the sentimentalist notion of individual subjective experience being recognised, valorised, or ‘heard’ (this can be seen in marketised settings, in which students become consumers seeking to receive what they have supposedly paid for: see discourses of consumer choice and satisfaction, proliferating evaluations, sites such as *ratemyprofessor.com*, and more). This notion is more prevalent in anglophone societies, arguably largely driven by an individualist or sentimentalist strain within American culture, linking back to the forging of American national identity in the eighteenth century, and in this light the more austere or impersonally rationalist character of French pedagogical practice can be seen as an alternative legacy of the Enlightenment.¹⁴

The uniformity of the pedagogic approach on this issue is striking. Of the teachers surveyed, Sentis states ‘l’idée est vraiment de dire, je vais essayer de changer de point de vue’ (Van Reeth 2021e, 16.03); Chauffray’s presentation of this stage leads his interlocutor Van Reeth to suggest that its aim is to subsequently set students up to ‘penser contre soi-même’ (in Van Reeth 2021c, 12.08); Cerqueira characterises this first section as requiring ideas that are (too) ‘évidentes’, and which therefore need to be re-formulated subsequently (Van Reeth 2021f, 14.30); Lebreton suggests students should include in this

section lived experiences or those drawn from novels or plays, which can reveal a ‘problem’ despite their appearance as ‘anodins’ (Van Reeth 2019, 14.28). However, the most pronounced example of this attitude towards the first section is to be found in the recommendations by Carole Diamant. She tells us that ‘raconter sa propre expérience’ is ‘très nuisible’. Her interlocutor Raphaël Enthoven suggests that ‘il ne faut pas que les élèves se prennent pour des artistes le jour du bac’, and she concurs: ‘cela, ils le paient très cher. Qu’ils gardent leurs belles idées pour eux, ou qu’ils arrivent à les introduire dans un exercice ordonné’. The seemingly hard-line traditionalist, anti-experiential approach being expounded in this dialogue does soften slightly when Enthoven raises ‘l’une des difficultés d’enseigner en terminale’, namely that: ‘il s’agit de donner l’envie de philosopher, et en même temps d’encadrer ce désir dans le cadre extrêmement rigide et formel d’une dissertation cicéronienne’ (in Enthoven 2008a, 4.05, 10.15, 10.35). This recognises that to formalise one’s experience completely, slavishly following Cicero’s rhetoric, would be to lose the desire to philosophise. Nonetheless, Enthoven and Diamant provide the most extreme example of an attitude that is present uniformly across the materials surveyed: one begins the philosophy dissertation by speaking of one’s experience, the better to move beyond it.

Let us move on to the customary second section, *antithèse*. In truth, the materials surveyed do not make particularly salient or unexpected points about this section. Once the principle of ‘cheminement’ has been put in place, the section containing the antithesis or statement of an opposing argument follows on automatically.¹⁵ We can therefore turn briefly, instead, to two canonical philosophers who allow us to think about the role of antithesis within an argumentative strategy. The first is Leibniz, whose intervention comes within the horizon of comparing philosophy to mathematics. He writes: ‘if controversies were to arise, there would be no more need of disputation between two philosophers than between two calculators. For it would suffice for them to take their pencils in their hands and to sit down at the abacus, and say to each other [. . .]: Let us calculate’ (Leibniz 1890, 125). The implied sympathy here seems to be with hard calculation, rather than with humanistic conceptions of philosophical antithesis, debate, or dialogue. Leibniz contrasts the functioning of a calculator with that of a philosopher: if one were to ask two calculators the same question, they would produce the same answer. Doing thus with two philosophers, however, is likely to lead to different answers, and an extended dialectic. Someone adopting such a reading of antithesis and its role within a philosophical dissertation would therefore be inclined to be sceptical: the move to antithesis would be just so much theatrical gesticulation, a probabilistic, best-going performance of thought in place of a dedication to uncovering truth in all its acultural and amoral forcefulness. The second philosopher we can consider adopts a similar position, and what’s more, relates it explicitly to the French practice of the antithesis. Nietzsche writes that

The Greeks were indescribably logical and plain in all their thinking [. . .]. In this regard they were unlike the French, who often are quite happy to make a little leap into the antithesis, and who in fact only tolerate the spirit of logic at all when it betrays by many such leaps its *sociable* courteousness and self-abnegation. [. . .] In polite society, one must never wish to be completely in the right, as all pure logic requires; hence the little dose of irrationality in all French *esprit*. (Nietzsche 2018, 93–94 [II:82])

Again, there is a contrast between, on the one hand, philosophy as humanistic dialogue which makes unreasoning ‘leaps’, and on the other, an allegedly rigorous, logical discipline. Unlike elsewhere, here Nietzsche is patronising towards the institutionalised habits of French philosophy, with its ‘little leap into the antithesis’. This leap, or series of leaps (for the second, antithesis section of a dissertation is not the final one), does not completely exclude ‘the spirit of logic’, but the two do sit together awkwardly. The notion of exploring alternative ideas, ‘penser contre soi-même’ in Van Reeth’s words, is reduced to social or peer pressure, the need to protect others’ egos and sensibilities being just as important as the search for truth.

Nevertheless, in the dissertation model we are exploring, this search leads to the habitual third section, that of the synthesis. In much of what we have seen so far, there has been significant (though not total) uniformity across the pedagogic materials analysed. There is more variety when it comes to *synthèse*—this seems to be because in the classic French philosophy dissertation, it followed ineluctably on from *thèse* and *antithèse*. See, in just one example of many, Lévi-Strauss when he writes that

[j]’ai commencé à apprendre que tout problème, grave ou futile, peut être liquidé par l’application d’une méthode toujours identique, qui consiste à opposer deux vues traditionnelles de la question; à introduire la première par les justifications du sens commun, puis à les détruire au moyen de la seconde; enfin à les renvoyer dos à dos grâce à une troisième qui révèle le caractère également partiel des deux autres [...]. Cinq années de Sorbonne se réduisaient à l’apprentissage de cette gymnastique dont les dangers sont pourtant manifestes. D’abord parce que le ressort de ces rétablissements est si simple qu’il n’existe pas de problème qui ne puisse être abordé de cette façon. (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 52–53)

This statement from *Tristes tropiques* provides a description that matches reasonably neatly the way we have seen the philosophy dissertation being taught today, in the 2020s. It can also be seen in a prominent Sartre essay on Camus. In just one of multiple potential examples, we see two approaches being brought together in a paradox, the better to prepare the way for the author’s synthesis: ‘Camus parle beaucoup, dans *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, il bavarde même. Et pourtant, il nous confie son amour du silence’ (Sartre 1947, 112). So well ingrained was this synthesising method that its influence remains strong: in general culture, we think of the catchphrase ‘en même temps’ adopted by President Macron (who trained in philosophy with Paul Ricoeur), or of the explicit mention of ‘capacités de synthèse’ as a criterion in job specifications, or of the practice of French employers asking interviewees to submit a written *synthèse d’entretien* as a final stage in the recruitment process. Whilst not precisely the same in all details, these non-academic practices of synthesis surely draw strongly on the synthesis which 500,000 *lycéens* and *lycéennes* annually are trained to carry out in their philosophy baccalaureate, an experience further amplified by the media attention this exam receives as part of a process of national memory-formation and self-projection.

In terms of the pedagogic materials currently under analysis, Chauffray hesitates to call the third section a resolution, as ‘ce serait trop prétentieux’; however, ‘c’est une espèce d’entente qu’on essaie de faire entre les deux premières parties’ (Van Reeth 2021c, 49.15). Chauffray’s hesitation to evangelise on the spirit of philosophical reconciliation or the harmony of contrasts is notable, and in fact seems to be part of a wider contemporary trend. Sentis refers to this section, with its reputation for *synthèse*, as a ‘bête noire’, and Van Reeth as a ‘fourre-tout’ (in Van Reeth 2021e, 15.04ff.). And other thinkers go further: Bernard

Defrance instructs students to ‘[é]viter le piège: “thèse, antithèse, synthèse”! Cela se ramène dans 99% des cas à juxtaposer deux opinions contraires et à conclure “ça dépend”!’ (Defrance n.d.). An online study advice site tells us that ‘[[l]e classique “Oui/Non/Peut-être” est désormais classé parmi les indésirables’ (Monteils 2021). And when presenting radio revision programmes on the dissertation, Enthoven converts the schema of *thèse-antithèse-synthèse* first into the *oui-non-peut-être* just seen, then into the ribald ‘thèse, antithèse, foutaise’ (Enthoven n.d., 0.26 and 2.59). He attributes this phrase to Sartre who is said to have used it when teaching the philosophy dissertation in *terminale* in Le Havre.

We can legitimately interrogate the significance of such dissent from *thèse-antithèse-synthèse*. Is it just the inevitable consequence of a mass education system, in which the nearly 500,000 scripts produced annually during the philosophy dissertation exercise simply wear down the patience of teachers, examiners, and media commentators? If so, it would mean that the protestations against formalistic, predictable synthesising in the third section are themselves merely socio-cultural by-products, just one more part of the pedagogic ritual, noise not signal. Or are we instead looking at a more delicate version of historical dialectic, where the predominance of one cultural form at one period—stretching from Nietzsche to Lévi-Strauss and beyond—inevitably leads to its being first questioned and then abandoned in subsequent periods? If so, it seems reasonable to state that the newly emergent cultural form would be less formalistic and prescriptive, less easy to caricature and less sure of itself, less concerned with monumental fixity than with responsiveness and flexibility.

V. Conclusion

We have seen that the writing of philosophy dissertations in the baccalaureate exam is an important moment in French pedagogic culture, and indeed in the national culture generally. It both informs and is informed by French exceptionalism’s resistance to the consumerist models of sentiment and experience, education and citizenship, which have become prevalent in anglophone settings. We have examined the major characteristics of a style of writing and of thinking that outsiders often find formalistic and prescriptive, one that might therefore be characterised as some strange, locally specific cultural ritual, a performative moment when those seeking anointment as educated citizens must pay obeisance to established authority. At the same time, various elements within the institution or practice of dissertation-writing—for instance the existence of ‘notions’ alongside canonical authors, or the emerging dissatisfaction with grand syntheses—suggest that this system demonstrates a tendency towards malleability and adaptability in line with a changing society. To this extent, we can argue for its continued relevance and perhaps even for the general applicability, beyond formal academic exercises, of the ways of thinking it encourages. Ultimately, might the insistence, in pedagogic practices around the philosophy dissertation in France, on *cheminement* or path-making lead us down paths of freedom? If it does so, then it is by refusing to allow students writing dissertations to be defined by either where they have come from (the essentialist argument) or where they are going (the formalist-prescriptivist argument). Rather than proposing a synthesising step-beyond, an approach based around *cheminement* sees it as more properly philosophical to perform a side-step. This would consist in observing one’s path-

making even as one does it, recognising that it is always provisional, liable to shift direction, and always prepared to start again.¹⁶

Notes

1. The baccalaureate is both a secondary leaving qualification and the first grade of a university qualification—we can relate the term to Bachelors' degrees in anglophone countries (Mergnac and Renaudin 2009, 70–71). This double status is reflected in two contrasting etymologies given for the term: *Le Petit Robert* claims that the term reflects the *bacca laurea*, the laurel berry forming part of a wreath (thus having a sense of finality or achievement). Alternatively, a bachelor is someone with junior status, ultimately deriving from agricultural workers on grazing farms named *baccalaria* (*bacca* or *vacca* meaning cow; *O.E.D.*).
2. Reforms to the baccalaureate were announced in 2018, with the first exams in the new system sat in 2021. The reform led to union opposition, occupation of educational institutions, and markers of the 2019 exam refusing to enter the marks into the system, meaning that the education ministry decided to use marks from *contrôle continu* instead. Even under the special dispensations made during the CV19 pandemic, students had the option of sitting the *épreuve de philosophie*—they could retain either this mark or their mark from continuous assessment throughout the year, whichever was higher.
3. For instance, Derrida implicitly refers to both to the importance and the ritualistic quality of setting up one's 'problématique': 'Un problème [...] c'est souvent une architecture protectrice. *Problema*: ce qu'on anticipe ou ce qu'on se propose, l'objet qu'on place devant soi, l'armure, le bouclier, l'obstacle, le vêtement, le rempart, la saillie, le promontoire, la barrière. On se tient toujours et devant et derrière le problème' (Derrida 1987, 510, emphases original).
4. Dissertations exist in other subjects too, e.g. French literature, and have very similar structure. Compagnon claims that the dissertation originated in philosophy, with French literature instead having a *discours* (Compagnon 1983, 39–40). However, Mergnac and Renaudin (2009, 16) claim that the dissertation was first introduced in French literature, as part of the new focus on national frameworks over classical ones (especially Latin) from 1880 onwards.
5. It is possible to argue that philosophy's prominent role is overwhelmingly cultural, rather than beneficial to the discipline itself. In the context of proposed curriculum reforms in the 1970s, prominent thinkers such as Derrida and Sarah Kofman argued that if this subject were so important, it should also be studied earlier, and that studying it as the 'crowning' of secondary education also condemns it to be previously ignored and subsequently abandoned. See the discussion of GREPH (*Groupe de recherches sur l'enseignement philosophique*) in Orchard 2008.
6. Students on the *baccalauréat professionnel* (around 200,000) do not write a philosophy dissertation, though there have been attempts to introduce this subject, as a way of closing the gap with the general and technological versions, and opening up the option of subsequent university study. In the new general and technological baccalaureate first taken in 2021, in *terminale* there are 4 hours of philosophy weekly for the 'tronc commun', with additional hours if the 'Humanités' specialism is taken, consisting of literature and philosophy. Under the previous system, the literary option for the general baccalaureate saw 8 weekly hours of philosophy classes. The consensus over recent decades saw the 'S'/scientific option as the most prestigious.
7. This context also has its own vocabulary: the verb *bachoter*, the noun *bachotage*, the *argument à tiroirs*, and at least two verbs denoting strenuous study: *plancher* and *bûcher*.
8. In addition to notions and authors, the curriculum specifies three 'perspectives' embracing the totality of the programme, as well as 'repères' consisting in conceptual pairings (*absolu/relatif, abstrait/concret*, etc.), which, however, 'ne font en aucun cas l'objet d'un enseignement séparé ni ne constituent des parties de cours' (Ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse 2019).

9. We can briefly examine this by looking at a classic encounter where the question of how to philosophise is at stake: Sartre's text on Camus, 'Explication de *L'Étranger*'. Here, the procedure of compacting discursive materials into the form of notions or concepts is clearly on display: Camus's exploration of a radical upturning of hierarchised social experiences is presented by Sartre as an 'éthique de la quantité' (104); the various absurd characters presented by Camus (Don Juan, the Actor, the Conqueror, the Creator) are at once unified and mocked by Sartre's labelling of them as 'les saints de l'absurdité' (107); and concepts are coined at high intensity: 'l'absurde, c'est le divorce, le décalage, *L'Étranger*, sera donc un roman du décalage, du divorce, du dépaysement' (110), or in an alternative formulation not directly translatable into English, less for linguistic than for cultural reasons: 'Kafka est le romancier de la transcendance impossible' (112).
10. Those with a longer view might argue that argumentative subjecthood long pre-dates the French Republic, for instance in the scholastic traditions of dialectic and disputation; see Knowles 1988.
11. Derrida regularly refers to this etymology, for instance here: 'le devenir-route méthodique d'un chemin, *odos* [sic], qui n'est pas nécessairement méthodique' (Derrida 1990, 293).
12. She also characterises (at 13.10) the roles of the three main sections as being to establish that 'certes ...' in section 1, 'mais ...' in section 2, and 'donc ...' in section 3.
13. A similar view is expressed by Pépin: 'Ce qui fait problème, c'est que les deux réponses sont séduisantes, ce qui fait une problématique, c'est qu'on a envie de défendre les deux camps finalement, et c'est comme ça qu'on pose une introduction' (Enthoven 2008b, episode 2, 8.30).
14. Attitudes within French dissertation pedagogy have nonetheless evolved. Danielle Rancière tells us what practice on this point was in another era: 'Quant aux "exemples personnels", *L'Art de la dissertation philosophique* [2nd ed. 1958] de Denis Huisman en déconseillera l'usage à tous ceux qui ne veulent pas "faire petite fille"' (Rancière 1989, 830).
15. The term is cleverly used by a study exploring the relationships of major authors to ways of thinking inculcated by the educational establishment in France. Charles Coustille, *Antithèses: Mallarmé, Péguy, Paulhan, Céline, Barthes* (2018).
16. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers, as well as Marine Orain, Julie Loison-Charles, and Stephen Thomson, for their constructive comments on drafts of this piece.

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