
‘Le neutre’ and philosophical discourse

LOUIS MARIN
(Translated by Willis Domingo)

Introduction

The first part of this study takes its main inspiration from the article by P. Bourdieu and Monique de Saint-Martin: ‘L’excellence dans le système scolaire français’. For our purposes, however, this remarkable paper provides no more than a starting point, itself standing in need of a philosophical justification. For both the meaning and practical relevance of sociological statements and inductions are surely functions of their philosophical foundations, even though we may be brought in the end to recognise that this basis actually consists—*at present*—in its own absence; and even though we may demand that sociology should be established on the ground of evidence already built up by science, a ground that has not yet been laid down and of which it will be the purpose of this paper to draw the negative outlines. Perhaps this empty space prefigures ‘le neutre’, the very object of our undertaking; perhaps it is ‘le neutre’ that will provide the very foundations that we are seeking. Hence, as we work towards establishing the boundaries of sociological research—a process whose own nature depends on what are the fundamental presuppositions of sociology—we shall witness a remarkable assimilation of the form of our enquiry to its content and of its syntax to its semantics, or vice versa. Indeed, if a sociological enquiry into the neutrality of the French university educational system leads, if it is
to be justified philosophically, to one into the essential nature of ‘le neutre’ as providing an ontological basis, and if the language and terms of reference of this further enquiry are those of French academic discourse, then one must acknowledge that it has to take itself as an integral part of its own object and that the whole procedure of enquiry is brought into question to the extent that it brings into question its own proper object.

This movement takes place by means of a double contortion, a double turning-back-upon-itself. The first is involved in the position of whoever carries on such academic discourse on the very essence of academic teaching. For this position is itself academic or didactic; the form of language adopted is not that of the novel, fable or myth, but rather that of the university lecture. This is a surprising, meta-linguistic position which, so it may seem, must lead to an infinite regress. Alternatively, and more simply, one may accept that this meta-language, taking itself as the object of discourse, should find expression in its own disintegration and in the ‘dislocation’ of its own ‘facts’, thus presenting itself as the language of questioning, that is, as a language that is ‘neutre’. This would be the language of a form of discourse that was indeed fully critical, that recognised the myths and mystifications which it embodied and which were embodied even in its own exposure of them. It is a discourse that precedes the discourse of science, that provides the passage to science from ideology. It is unstable, as are all transitional formations; yet for this very reason it has to be understood in its essential instability.

The second turning back follows immediately on the first or is internal to it, in as much as the sociological investigation which provides our starting point and which bears for the most part on the neutrality of university teaching in order to expose it, cannot be directed upon its object—cannot be brought so to bear upon it as to break it down—without questioning its own presuppositions, its own neutrality, its own objectivity or its own scientific status. This is not to say that one has ultimately to deny the investigation any scientific standing. But the simple fact that it is possible to question this standing leads the investigation for a time into the sphere of ‘le neutre’, the domain in which standards of truth and falsity are determined. Indeed, the investigation bears on this very determination and on whatever may guarantee its outcome. It thus becomes itself a part of its own object and, more particularly, of that enquiry into the nature of ‘le neutre’ which epitomises ‘le neutre’ itself.

Such is the nature of this second and very radical turning back. To enquire into the nature of man, of society, of images, is to bring
each of them into the sphere of ‘le neutre’ and so to produce in them and in their overall positions certain subtle and radical modifications into which it will be our business to enquire. It is this second-order enquiry into the nature of enquiry itself which lies at the heart of the concept of ‘le neutre’. It should not be thought to constitute some kind of neutralisation of ‘le neutre’, as if beyond the desert region haunted by the ghosts of the rational entities that have been brought into ‘question’, one had access to a privileged land where reigned some ontological power capable of restoring them to being, of giving to these poor ghosts flesh and blood and life. Nor is it a neutralisation of ‘le neutre’ in the way in which one position may constitute the negation of another, itself already negative. This questioning of what is involved in questioning itself is the very epitome of ‘le neutre’ in its empty power of generating infinite repetition; it is the emptiness of all content itself, presenting itself as such to reflection and in which reflection is so drained of its strength that it is able to grasp ‘le neutre’ only in its figures; for in attempting to grasp it as it is itself, it would be wholly exhausted.

This infinite repetition is not to be confused with an infinite regress; nor is it a retreat towards some unattainable realm, the unattainability of which is posited as a limit and a goal. It is rather a sort of motionless mobility, a vibration or rhythm unable to move beyond its own pitch. But before we can achieve this grasp of the pure void, which is the foundation that we are seeking, it will be necessary to work through a whole examination of the figures of ‘le neutre’ figures in which it seems to reveal itself in its true nature, going here under the name of ‘objectivity’, there ‘disinterestedness’, there ‘authenticity’, elsewhere ‘justice’ or ‘independence’: though in fact each of these is but a mystification of ‘le neutre’ a mystification the characteristic of which is to be nothing but ‘le neutre’ itself. For it is one of its properties to turn out to be the very essence of dissimulation just when the investigation had seemed to have pinned it down as a dissimulation of being. But ‘le neutre’ would cease to be what it is, if it somehow took on substance. Underlying substantial being is incompatible with it – if, indeed, such being is even thinkable. Unless, perhaps, it is itself thought of as ‘neutre’; not at all as support or ground or base, (in which case one would be faced once again with the problem of foundations alluded to at the outset), but as the field of discourse which provides the passage from one difference to another.

The search for a philosophical foundation for sociological enquiry thus takes on a fundamentally paradoxical character in that to enquire into the nature of ‘le neutre’ and of ‘la neutralité’ is to embark already upon the foundation of one’s own investigation; for ‘le neutre’ is this very foundation and any questioning of its nature already partakes of it. When we try, however, to give explicit formulation to this search for a foundation in the context of an investigation into the neutrality of the language of education, we ipso facto abandon the zone of foundations and simply fall back into the very language of education into which we are enquiring. In short, our discussion is bound to take forms that are either circular or oblique. The further our object falls out of focus, the closer we may come to grasping it; the closer we come to grasping it through our digressions, the further we may fall beside the point of the question of which we are treating. It is also possible, however, that these allusive or digressive aspects of our discourse should be recognised as belonging as such to the zone of foundations, a zone which they demolish in order to build it up.

In the following text, then, two levels can be distinguished. The first part will be sociological in orientation; the greater length of the text, however, will move on a philosophical level of analysis. We should emphasise that on neither level will the discourse to be developed be academic; or, if it is, it will be only through the direct or indirect use of discourses belonging to other contexts which are themselves academic. It remains true that distinction is difficult – if not impossible – between the knowledge that we acquire through reading and that which we gain through pure reflection. There are concepts or themes which, although chosen by an entirely arbitrary decision, subsequently turn out to be very highly determined by the positions that they already hold in the cultural field. Indeed, those very concepts or themes which appear to depend on purely arbitrary choice may be among the most strongly determined. They may be compared to the opinions of the common man as spoken of by Pascal. These are at once valid and invalid. Identical in their formulation to those held by men of knowledge, they are in a sense true; but – since their meaning shifts to the very degree that they come under closer consideration – not as true as they may appear. Thus they are also false as a result of their ambiguity or their equivocation; but for that very reason true, if it is indeed the case that natural ordinary language is capable only of ambiguity. In this way our discourse arises from and belongs to the very domain that it will study, the domain of ‘le neutre’, a domain which belongs in turn to the cultural field within which we have isolated it as a theme and as a concept; it is through its use that we propose to return to this field in order to work out (work through) the new and interminable differences to which our discourse will thus give rise. These sudden passages of learning and ignorance, which will be noticeable
throughout its course, are essential characteristics of the game which is played by ‘le neutre’, that mystified mystifier which our discourse has for its object, a discourse at once learned and ignorant and which will sink deeper and deeper as it unfolds, hoping thereby to mark out its object.

Neutral and educational discourse

When asked about the role of the university in society, a Head of State once responded by saying: ‘The University is neither a foreign body within society nor a national luxury. . . . It is rather that institution which prepares the nation for tomorrow. This implies that the University’s role is one of national utility and in saying “national utility” I in no sense exclude culture or disinterested research. All this is part of a nation’s greatness; but it is for the sake of the nation that it exists.’ In this way Caesar makes two points with respect to the sort of educational discourse which occurs in the context of a particular institution. The university and university education have a social function, a utility. It moulds useful citizens of global society, i.e. administrators, teachers and executives who, at a definite moment of their training, can be brought into the machinery of production in order to assume control over the ranks of those forces which are more directly involved in the act of production itself. This is the first end attributed to the university by such political discourse; its other and contradictory purpose, however, lies in the affirmation of the prestige value, the value as a luxury, of the very same institution and the very same educational discourse; thus it speaks of that ‘free and disinterested research’ which is part of ‘a nation’s greatness’. The strictly cultural function of the university is affirmed only to be immediately subordinated to its social function, as if it were merely a luxurious and gratuitous bonus of the latter, thanks to which the direct and immediate involvement of educational discourse in the socio-economic sphere may present a façade of independence in order the better to reinforce its very involvement and integration. For disinterestedness and freedom, as the primary forms of a ‘neutre’ rendered banal by the revelatory platitude of such political discourse, are simply the trade-marks of the interestedness and utility of educational discourse once it has reached a certain threshold of expansion; they make manifest its overall integration. Thus a primary contradiction already appears on the surface of such political statements as a guide to lead us on to others both more compelling and richer in meaning.

In Marxist terminology we could express such a contradiction more or less as follows: Once it became bound to the expansion of modern industrial society, the university, whose cultural function

had hitherto been predominant, began to emerge as an institution belonging to the superstructure of that society and relatively independent of its economic and social infrastructure. It recruited its students from certain definite social classes, offering them a kind of knowledge (i.e. the discourse of teaching and of research) whose determination by the economic and social situation was neither immediately obvious nor openly expressed by the political and ideological machinery of the state. Nowhere was this phenomenon of independence and freedom more clear cut than in the Humanities and especially in that discourse which was the crown of all others, namely the discourse of philosophy. In this case the production and transmission of knowledge – i.e. research and teaching – were asserted to be completely free, subject only to the practices and requirements of the scientific disciplines as such and not to the infrastructural necessities of industrial production in all its aspects. Philosophy appeared as universal-abstract knowledge, something distinct from the society in which it appeared and determined only by itself, as an all the more faithful expression of the ideology of the ruling class, both in form and in content, in that it was detached from this ideology, thus becoming its mirror image, its inverted reflection.

From now on the university falls within the realm of fundamental infrastructural contradictions. Having become one social element among others with which it is on an equal footing and having lost its privileged position for the expression, through the type of knowledge that it produced, of pure ideology, the university finds itself directly subordinated to the expansion of industrial society and the reproduction of capital. It has to furnish qualified white collar workers and to respond to a diversified and global demand from the employment market, whose structure, jobs and articulations are defined by the capitalist industrial system. From now on the university’s cultural function, the production and transmission of knowledge, is subordinated to its social function, a subordination which becomes more and more pronounced with the growing integration of the whole system. In a sense if the term ‘ideology’ is taken as designating at least provisionally ‘the representation of the imaginary relationships which the individuals of a given society have with their real conditions of existence’, that is, the relationship they maintain with existing relations of production, the university ceases to be a purely ideological phenomenon, since its involvement in the economic and social situation and its explicit integration as a moment in the relations of production are now clearly defined.

It is, on the other hand, the ideological factor which constitutes the resistance to this subordination, a resistance which is made just as explicit as is the integration of the university into existing relations of production and which is expressed in the assertion of the university’s independence with respect to any political or economic power. Such assertions are ideological in so far as they express the representation of the imaginary relationship between individuals and the real conditions of their existence, that is to say their economic situation. The coexistence of two contrary assertions, namely that of the involvement of the university in the infrastructural domain of production and that of the university’s independence of this domain and of the political power which is one of its determinations, was already apparent in the political discourse referred to above; here it is presented in full clarity in Marxist terminology. The first assertion derives from fundamental political and economic necessities, the second from the ruling ideology. We have now to point out the ambivalent mechanisms of this subordination of the cultural to the social functions of the university; for these purposes we shall follow very closely the lines of Bourdieu’s analysis.

The university considers itself and seeks to be independent of society as a whole; it is free, disinterested, ‘neutre’ in relation to its social context both in space and in time; it is a centre of ‘frank and open discussion’, which benefits from a sort of extra-territoriality: its teaching, its subjects of research, its methods, its criteria for the selection and assessment of students, its control over their studies are all decided upon by the university itself, its autonomy being more pronounced in the cases in which the disciplines concerned — such as literature, philosophy, the dead languages or history — are in themselves free of all direct social involvement. How could university teaching in disciplines such as these aim at the formation of managers in the middle and upper levels of the machinery of production? Because these disciplines do not aim at forming such managers, this area within the university, these aspects of its course, should in their turn be free from the requirements of the machinery of production. To this extent the university definitively establishes its own independence. This implies that the entire system of teaching within the university and, furthermore, the whole system of the ranking of students and the establishment of hierarchies and differences which appears as the objective side of the system of teaching, rests solely on university values and scholarly criteria. The independence of the university means that the way in which it functions depends solely on itself and that its content and role, i.e. knowledge and the transmission of knowledge, exist and take place within a closed system.

If such are the functions of the university, i.e. the conservation, production and transmission of knowledge, they are accomplished within the framework of an institution, that is, a body of individuals which is subject to laws, rules and structures and entrusted with the production, conservation and transmission of this knowledge in accordance with the rules of the institution. By considering the university as an institution we treat it together with other institutions as forming a nation. In the words of the Head of State already quoted: ‘It is not a foreign body within the nation.’ On the contrary, every institution has its role in the state, its social function. As an institution, the social function and utility of the university lie in the formation of administrators; and here we return to the other side of our problem. It is at this same point, however, that the ‘solution’ presents itself to the primary contradiction to which this problem gave rise; for the university is never more determined in its institutional essence, never fulfils more thoroughly its role of a teaching institution, never demonstrates more convincingly its social ‘utility’ than in its formation of teachers. It is in this very way that the university can also assert both its social utility and its integration as one among all other institutions of global society — namely by fulfilling institutionally its social role and in so doing establishing its independence, its definitive separation from society, in as much as its privileged social function is precisely one of self-perpetuation, self-replacement and self-reproduction. Thus one might describe the university as that educational institution whose essence, truth or ideal is to be a system closed both as to its content and as to its form and whose social product is its own self-reproduction and thus the realisation, through its integration into global society, of its own fundamental independence.

The university’s ‘neutralité’ of conduct and discourse depends therefore on the concept of its own institutional independence, and any social function it may have — at least as regards its ‘nobler’ disciplines — comes about by rebound as a sort of bonus. Indeed, in order to express as perfectly as possible the ideology of the university we should reverse the words of the politician: ‘The role of the university is that of free and disinterested research and the teaching of high culture, but this does not exclude its utility or its having a social function...’

Nevertheless, within such a self-proclaimed ‘independent’ society, contradictions begin to appear deriving from deeper contradictions belonging if not to the infrastructure, at any rate to society as a whole. This implies that such an independence is a sort of camouflage or, more precisely, that the assertion of independence is the inverted form of an assertion of strict dependence.
Such contradictions will not be manifested directly, but rather in certain ambiguities where ‘le neutre’ makes a practical appearance in one or another of its guises. One such ambiguity lies in the tension which exists between teaching and research in the university and which is expressed ideologically in the idea of making research into a way of teaching and teaching into a form of research. Such a tension or equivocation centres around the difference between the production and the transmission of knowledge. It is obvious that the transmission of knowledge is always and necessarily temporally subsequent to its production. Furthermore, transmission always produces a certain loss of content in the knowledge which is transmitted. This is simpler, more schematic, and more allusive when transmitted than when first produced. Why? Because transmission is always re-production of a message. As Bourdieu and Passeron have demonstrated, repetition has the effect of making the messages repeated homogeneous in order that they may be inculcated more easily, of regularising them and making them routine as a result of their multiplication. In the relationship between the functions of teaching and research there appears therefore a first aspect of ‘le neutre’, that is, the ‘neutralisation’ of what has been produced through transmission by way of repetition, or, rather, by way of a necessary reproduction of messages affecting the very content of the messages in question.

Moreover, knowledge is only re-produced if it is in one way or another socially legitimate and its transmission equally so. Hence the neutralisation of what has been produced as knowledge (i.e. the results of research carried out in the university) by its reproduction as part of the discourse of teaching is merely one aspect of the de-neutralisation, by making it socially legitimate, of its transmission. Its content — as content — is neutralised in its transmission, but the forms of transmission are themselves far from neutral, for the simple reason that they are bound to rules of legitimisation which are actually the value requirements of some social class, society or group. This point calls for an exact analysis along the lines established by Bourdieu and Passeron, an analysis which we need to see how the transmission of any knowledge whatsoever by means of established discourse necessarily requires the authority of an institution which manifests itself externally by means of standards, supervision, programmes or schedules. This institutional authority is in turn projected less necessarily onto the teacher as if to consecrate him in his role. As the functionary of an institution he is endowed by that institution with a certain authority just as any other functionary of any other institution. It so happens, however, that his function is the transmission of knowledge (a knowledge which, as authorised knowledge, is itself legitimised by the institution). As Bourdieu so powerfully expresses it: ‘The authorisation of this knowledge by the institution gives to the teacher the authority of knowledge itself.’ In other words, the authority of the teacher already has a secure foundation in the institutionalisation of the knowledge that he has to pass on: consequently he has no need to justify it at the moment of its transmission, for the public has already been converted.’ Bourdieu goes on to quote Durkheim: ‘The “master”, like the priest, possesses recognised authority because he is the organ of a moral authority which goes beyond him.’ Such a primitive institutionalisation is necessary because the teacher does not produce knowledge in the act of teaching, but merely reproduces it. He is the author of a discourse which is bound to escape from its paternal origin and yet it is he and he alone who transmits it. Since he does not create his knowledge as he transmits it, but has inevitably to transmit it within and through an institutional framework, he is necessarily dispossessed of his discourse at the moment of its utterance, being able to regain it only in his role as a functionary of the institution.

Hence arises the psychologically understandable attempt to re-neutralise the transmission of knowledge in the university by what Bourdieu calls the complementary ideology of the master against the teacher. The institutional functionary whose position is that of a university teacher denounces the institution within which and thanks to which he exists as a teacher by taking up a non-institutional position from which he can assert his independence from the most obvious or outward requirements of his institution such as its curricula or its discipline. . . . The knowledge which he transmits from such a standpoint may seem to recover a tentative ‘neutralité’ with respect to the teaching institution. ‘The teacher can place himself at a distance from his institution because he is already endowed with the symbols of authority which are attached to his role as teacher: . . . these symbols are essentially constituted by certain ways of speaking . . . and by various codes of rhetoric characterised by their own particular premises, figures, mannerisms and styles.’ This is an essential point and we should consider it more closely. The teacher’s craft is exercised through the spoken word; his function is an essentially discursive one with a very special relationship to language. His position in and with respect to the institution of the university is one of discourse. It is perhaps a peculiarity of language in general, of discourse in particular and especially of the discourse of teaching that, in its very utterance and at the moment of its expression, it should cause its listeners to forget the situation of its utterance and the position of
the individual expressing himself. Such discourse is able to realise the topological paradox of being simultaneously within the (teaching) institution, because such a 'teacher' speaks within and through it, and yet outside and independent of that same institution, because a teacher will be considered all the more brilliant and all the more a teacher to the extent that he acts more like a master, i.e. someone who speaks from outside and even against his own institution (even though it provides him with a place in which to speak, an audience, and even the matter and ends of his discourse). The discourse of such a teacher will be defined primarily by its content and will necessarily conceal any of its other functions in favour of this content's transmission. In this style of language, that is, in the discourse of teaching, we may perhaps grasp the reason for the necessarily interested gratuitousness, the indentured 'neutralité' and dependent independence of the transmission of knowledge within a university framework. To the extent that discourse takes the form of one designed for the transmission of knowledge it must necessarily conceal its place of utterance, the respective positions of speaker and audience and the highly elaborated codes set in play by the messages it transmits. Bourdieu speaks of a rhetoric of educational discourse whose function is to symbolise institutional authority, i.e. to express and at the same time to conceal such authority behind the autonomous and independent play of language with itself. But is it not a peculiarity of language in general that it should be unable to speak of itself at the same time as it speaks of something else? Can it ever be simultaneously language and meta-language? There can be no doubt that not only the codes, but also the functions of the sender and receiver of a message are identifiable only at the level of meta-language. In so far as educational discourse is one by which already produced knowledge is then transmitted, it cannot take itself as its own object. Essential to its presentation, therefore, is the fact that its origins, ends, ways and procedures are hidden or masked. Once analysed, however, it is these very origins, ends and procedures which would reveal the involvement of this discourse in global society and its dependence on the 'values of the ruling class' of such a society. It is precisely because educational discourse – and perhaps all discourse – necessarily disguises its figures, its system of enunciation and the positions of those involved in its utterance that its very independence and 'neutralité' function as means utilised by the class, group or society from which it proclaims its independence. As Bourdieu writes so convincingly, 'This is a very special way of making it serve external (i.e. social) ends... The educational system never fulfils so effectively its social functions nor its ideological functions of concealing its own social functions, as when it appears to pursue exclusively its own ends.'

In other words, while 'neutralité' as independence is 'overtly' a process of rejecting certain ends, it is 'immanently' the index of a logic of such ends and one which aims at their realisation. We must here emphasise as clearly as possible that such dissimulation is not simply an inert screening off of a deeper reality. It is, rather, a means to an end, a means possessed by an end for its own self-realisation. It is the mark of a force aiming at a goal, a mask of the violence of this force or, in different terms, its 'reactivity'. What is this force and what are its goals? It is the force of class domination aiming to ensure as completely as possible the domination of the ruling class.

Just as Bourdieu's analysis has shown, therefore, that it is natural and necessary for the practice of education that it should dissimulate and repress its own theoretical consciousness (for the reasons which he gives himself, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, for those which stem from the very essence of discourse), so the problem we are obliged to face is that of producing within the very practice of educational discourse the theoretical and critical consciousness of the conditions of its reproduction, i.e. of its dependence on the values and requirements of the ruling class. If, however, it is characteristic of the practice of education to ensnare and repress this consciousness within such practice itself, are we not then obliged to step out of this practice (that is, out of the university and out of any position within such an institution) in order to accomplish our criiicotheoretical work and thus to produce as a separate form of consciousness that which this practice effaces in the discourse belonging to the transmission and reproduction of knowledge? But where is this 'standpoint outside the university' from which that other discourse on discourse itself will have to take place, that discourse which – in so far as it does take place – will perhaps necessarily collapse once more into the object of its own critique? This circle, into which all critical reflection on discourse and more specifically on educational discourse seems doomed to enter, may perhaps be the scheme (schema) of that neutral (neuter) foundation which we are seeking and whose terrain we hope to map out.

Proposals for a pure analysis of 'le neutre'

As a point of departure we shall propose an abstract definition of 'le neutre' (etymologically ne-uter, neither one thing nor another) which, grammatically speaking, being neither masculine nor feminine has no gender and being neither active nor passive is non-voiced. Thus in the realms of botany and zoology we call 'neutre' those flowers or insects or indeed any plants or animals which are
deprived of reproductive organs, which have no sex and which are therefore unable to couple or to reproduce. Similarly those verbs are 'neutre' which are intransitive, which express actions in themselves, such as marching or dying, and to which it is impossible to assign a direct object. Such verbs express an action which is to be attributed to the subject, which does not impinge on any object and of which the subject is not in some sense the source. This intransitive quality of 'le neutre' has a double meaning: in the first place, it appears as the expression of a pure action, in which sense any verb in the infinitive is 'neutre'; in the second place, it is the closing off of a subject enclosed within itself and whose actions are the passions of a subject which is its own object, in short a form of self-consciousness. The first case is one of an indeterminate action without subject or object, a 'thinking' or 'speaking' without any indication of who speaks or about what, of who thinks or about what he thinks - a pure virtuality which is the ground on which language will piece out its figures. In the second case, however, 'le neutre' is no longer the insignificant ground from which meanings are elaborated only to detach themselves from and to obscure it. It is rather a divided being which introduces distance into itself only to blot it out again in presence and whose acts burst out of themselves only to return immediately to their source, a self-consciousness which cannot yet be counted as consciousness of something, but which all the figures of consciousness will preserve for the sake of anchoring themselves in the active reality of a subject, though they will forget it for the sake of finding themselves embodiments in the world. The game of grammar, as we have sketched it, clearly designates the zone in which 'le neutre' is circumscribed at the very beginning of the movement of dialectically double negation of two opposing sides - circumscribed but non-determined, as Aristotle forcefully points out in De Interpretatione. Thus, basing ourselves on such grammatical considerations, we may give the following two definitions in which the concurrence of the two negations and the distance taken with respect to that conjunction can be read simultaneously as if 'le neutre' were to be found in some other place (neither the One nor the Other), but also as if it were other than any place at all - that non-place or nowhere (utopia) which, according to the verdict to be rendered by the tribunal of history, is the place of all true 'neutres':

(1) In chemistry we call those bodies 'neutre' which are formed by the chemical combination of an acid and a base in such a way that certain properties are reciprocally annulled. In this case 'le neutre' is the bare empty residual matter left over from the mutual destruction of its qualities, the substratum of all formal compositions, which is only perceived thanks to such a destruction: neither base nor acid, but 'neutre'.

(2) In politics we call 'neutre' he who takes no side in a debate and in particular he who does not take sides between parties who are at war with each other. This latter definition is difficult, the difficulty it presents being that of the indeterminate or non-determinate itself. For while 'le neutre' does not take sides neither is he or it completely foreign to the conflict nor without any relation to it. With respect to that towards which he is 'neutre', therefore, 'le neutre' must sustain a relationship which cannot, however, be considered as binding him to the conflict or to the war. In the same way that which is 'not-man' is non-determinate, not non-determinate in general, but rather non-determinate of 'man', constituting its pole and anchorage in determination. It is the non-determinate in relation to 'man', which thus admits, in a form devoid of content, a first determination which will in turn permit - and ground - all the others.

Our preliminary glance at dictionary definitions has already given us an outline of the pure analysis of the notion of 'le neutre'. It can accordingly be defined in relation to a dynamic totality whose constituent parts are in opposition to each other in a position of marked difference, such a relationship having, however, the peculiar characteristic of placing 'le neutre' itself outside the totality in question and in a position of difference with respect to the system of internal differences which constitutes the totality. 'Le neutre' thus gives rise to the paradoxical idea of a part of the whole which is somehow outside of the whole, a part which is, as it were, supplementary to the complementary parts of a totality which is itself fully accounted for by their sum. In other terms we might call it the difference which may be added to the closed system of differences. Just as relative non-determinacy, so this too is an idea which is difficult to think. But is it really impossible to find a way of thinking it? Could we not perhaps attempt to grasp it as the transitory and fleeting term which allows us to pass from one opposite to the other, which acts as the mediating term of these opposites, but which can so act only because it possesses the characteristic of being neither the One nor the Other in relation to the 'One and the Other'. We may, for example, see how it functions in the logic of myth (Lévi-Strauss, Greimas) as the instrument and constant repetition of the originary contradiction and its displacement in view of the final conjunction (which is both its term and its goal). How else might one pass from forbidden to prescribed sexual relations? Hence to speak of a term that is 'neutre' in this sense is to substantiate or ontologise a process, a movement, a passage from sameness to otherness. The neutral term will be, then, the One which is no longer the One without yet being the Other; it is a sort of logical attempt to say (to
rationalise) the passage between the two in such a way as to overcome the impossibility of saying 'le neutre' (legeren = gather together) which is, as it were, the surplus of the system in the double sense of being a supplement to it, while nevertheless belonging to it. Equally, if 'le terme neutre' functions logically as an instrument for the conjunction of opposites, then it is on its basis and around it that these opposites will find an equilibrium in their opposition. As Jacques Derrida has pointed out, 'le terme neutre', placed as it is at the centre of this structure, acts as its principle of organisation, as the rule of its coherence, in that it allows for the substitution of elements within the overall form. It is the term which, at the moment that the conjunction between opposites is accomplished, designates this very process. It ontologises this movement as a synchronic opposition which it henceforward orders and controls. It is thus 'le neutre' which constitutes the principle of the conjunction of opposites; it is precisely that relation which joins them in their very opposition. It is the sign or mark of their opposition and of their being as opposites controlled by their relation of opposition to one another, in this way it both dominates and binds them together. It is the oppositiveness of opposites which sets and holds them in their relation of opposition to each other and in so doing escapes from this relation of which it is the ground. One of Pascal's political Pensées might help to illustrate this movement of thought: 'Great and small are liable to the same accidents, the same annoyance, the same passion, but one is at the top of the wheel and the other near its centre, and this less shaken by the same movements.9 The axle of this wheel is the king himself, the motionless centre around which turn, more or less rapidly according to their remoteness from it but all turning with the same motion, the great and small of the realm, the interchangeable and replaceable elements of the state, subject all to this circular dynamic, ruled and organised by its own centre which, while belonging to it, yet stands itself outside the circulation that it governs. We should understand, however, that there is a difference, at once indiscernible and all-embracing, between Derrida's indifference which grounds the play of differences and the difference which is added to the system of differences as a supplement excluded from it. For the centre of a wheel is both within and yet outside the wheel itself, a paradoxical situation of which that of the unthinkable supplement of a difference to the system of differences is the reverse. But such a reverse situation, such an inside-outside inversion, is essential; through it alone does it become possible to produce, to bring to light, that which is other than the royal position of mastery and domination, that which is other than the violence of the central administration of the whole structure, that other which consists in the uninhibited liberty of the play of differences or the open infinity of their production - all this may be brought about only though the introduction into the system of differences of a further gratuitous difference that causes the rules of the system to break down. Such an inversion, however, is just as difficult to think as was 'le neutre' in its role of supplementary difference. One of the most effective ways of thinking it, therefore, is negatively, that is by means of the critical thought of 'le neutre' as the intransitive centre of the structure, a centre which is nevertheless brought back to the purely verbal position of a term that links two opposites. 'Le terme neutre' thus appears between two opposites as being neither the one nor the other, but rather as the still missing yet awaited third term. 'Le neutre' is not itself this third term; it is rather its weakest form = 0. It is the zero degree of synthesis, that is, the synthesis of opposites, a synthesis which has been reduced to a state of pure virtuality. If the synthesis of opposites itself consists in the simultaneous cancellation and preservation of both terms, then 'le neutre' marks the empty slot waiting to be filled. In itself neither term, it awaits the being of both. It is the emptiness which calls for the plentitude of the organisling centre, the dispenser of order in which both opposites will recognise the figure of their higher unity, their master.

From this point we can take a further and fundamental step in our pure analysis of 'le neutre'. The centre occupies a position of potential reference for the two parts of the totality which are in conflict with each other; the existence of the centre means that the conflict is no longer a mere confrontation, but carries with it the possibility of a new beginning. This position is tied to the opposition of opposing parts reciprocally neutralising one another in a state of tension, which Kant, writing against Leibniz in his Essay on the Concept of Negative Magnitudes, has identified as 'a real zero of opposition'.4 In other words, the position of the third term 'neutre' (neither one thing nor the other) is somehow the projection of the dynamic 'neutralité' of the forces in conflict, of the magnitudes or values in opposition. It marks the point of equilibrium in the tension between these forces, while receiving its own force from the forces in conflict. These forces in their state of reciprocal 'neutralisation', these parts of the totality in the tension of their conflict, neutralise each other in the neutrality of 'le neutre' ('se neutralisent dans 'le neutre'), of which their tension is the negative mark. The third term, 'le neutre', first points to this tension and then regulates

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2 As opposed to 'a logical zero'.

it. Here lies the source of that which we called above the paradox of ‘le neutre’, which is both within and outside the totality. Once ‘le neutre’ is made into an object of thought it can be seen as making manifest the ‘neutralisation’ of opposites or, to put it another way, their opposition as the reciprocal annulment of their forces. ‘Le neutre’ is that which presents to thought this movement of mutual annulment as such: it makes it appear as a theme in itself before returning to the conflict from which it, ‘le neutre’, arose and over which it will henceforth assume its authority as judge and arbiter.

This analysis of the reflection of the conflict in the third term, ‘le terme neutre’, allows us to come closer to the ‘juridical’ force of ‘le neutre’ over the forces in opposition. The real zero of opposition, which characterises dynamic equilibrium, centres upon the third term a force = 0 which gives it the right to intervene. This force = 0, which by no means an absence of all force but rather the location in a third term of the real zero of opposition, plays in this case on the articulation of force and law. It is a force of right or law, a regulatory force which appears in the real and reciprocal annulment of opposing forces in a state of tension; in other words, it is an effect of the ‘neutralisation’ of the conflict.5

These analyses may be given generalised expression in the opposition of the binary and the ternary. Polemical opposition is characteristically binary. It is a contrast of symmetrical, egalitarian and infinite exchange, of conflict without end. The third term creates in such a structure an asymmetry in which we may note, together with Lévi-Strauss, the conditions for the possibility of hierarchy, of institutions and of the state, which presents itself as the arbiter between different groups and the judge and moderator of the class struggle and thus as the ‘neutre’ occupant of the paradoxical position of this third term, at once part of and outside the totality. It is perhaps this that is the essential function of ‘le terme neutre’, namely to create the possibility of a hierarchy in which it will denote the empty slot. Lévi-Strauss cites in this respect certain zero type institutional forms, forms which have ‘no intrinsic property other than that of establishing the necessary conditions for the existence of the social system to which they belong; their presence in itself devoid of significance enables the social system to exist as a whole’.6

From the state that is ‘neutre’ to discourse which is ‘neutre’, we can see how, through a desire to overcome oppositions in conflict through the product of some synthesis, there is reproduced a kind of juridical force, a kind of authoritative speech which, while subduing the conflicting parties, is yet no more than their ‘hypostatised’ reflection. It is as if the opposing parties saw bearing down upon them the unrecognisable mirror image of their own opposition and took such fright that they abandoned themselves to it as if it were a principle of transcendent justice and law, a justice and law which is perhaps no more than the disguised reflection of their own force.

Children, who are scared of the face they have daubed, are just children . . .’, and Pascal adds, ‘but how can someone who is so weak as a child become really strong when grown up? Only our imagination changes . . .’. The same misunderstanding is at work in childhood and in the founding of an institution, of justified force, one of the figures of ‘le neutre’.

Three paradigms of ‘le neutre’

Each stage of our pure analysis seems first to offer the possibility of a general definition, which then turns out to be merely one determinate figure of ‘le neutre’. Each of these figures does embody certain possible relational aspects of the essence of ‘le neutre’, which seem to exist in a coherent unity up to the point at which the development of our analysis brings to light new relations and the first figure is displaced by another and different one. Approaching ‘le neutre’ thus becomes a process of continuing displacement and essential instabili.

We propose, therefore, the direct study of three paradigms of ‘neutralité’, whose concrete character will better illuminate the essential traits of the figures which are intertwined, grounded and linked together in the field which has been opened up by our pure conceptual analysis: the referee, the judge and the father. All three paradigms do indeed occur as ‘natural’ examples of ‘neutralité’ in the various discourses, be they psychological, sociological or analytic, which take ‘neutralité’ as their subject.

The referee. What, then, is the position of the referee in a game or sport? What is his peculiar status in relation to the players? The usual answer, which will serve as point of departure for our descriptive analysis, is that in a competitive sport the referee represents the rules of the game. This answer presupposes, indeed, that the two sides recognise the rules as valid for the game they are playing. If not, either they would not be playing at all or they would be playing a different game. Such a recognition naturally reflects a decision.

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5 We shall refer later on in what will appear as a somewhat naïve passage to this recourse, by way of ‘neutralisation’, to ‘le neutre’, a recourse which confirms on the latter a force of right or law. This is to say, a force which possesses the reality of the zero of opposition.


Pascal, op. cit., p.379 (no.88).
both personal and collective, to observe the rules and to submit to
them in the course of the game. These rules define the limits of the
competitors' freedom of play and of their mock combat. In this
sense they prohibit a certain range of acts or moves, but at the same
time circumscribe – negatively – the acts and moves permitted, that
is to say the relatively indeterminate field of action in which acts
occurring during the competition may be considered lawful. 'It is
forbidden to hit below the belt' signifies negatively that all blows
above the belt are legal. By what they forbid the rules give focus to
the struggle; the competitors must strive to win within the field
defined by the rules of the game, which thus close it off, giving it a
relatively determined and systematic form within which they are
free to act as they choose. There is, of course, a constant danger of
the rules being broken – the latent risk that the players may be car-
ried away and their desire to win become stronger than their origi-
nal commitment to observe the rules defining their participation
in the game. The risk involved is, then, that one side might win without
observing all the rules. This is the paradox of the cheat who wins a
different game from the one that he is playing to the extent that he
chooses deliberately and consciously not to play game G as defined
by a set of rules $n$, but rather game $G$ as defined by sets of rules $n-1$ or
$n-2$. As long as the gap between $n$ and $n-1 \ldots$ passes unnoticed by his
opponent, the victory of the cheat is assured, his only risk being that
his opponent might eventually discover the 'misunderstanding' and
refuse to go on playing with him with the result that the cheat can no
longer play and win.

The referee, as we have said, represents the rules of the game. By
his presence he incarnates the pure form of the *agon* by which his
particular game is defined. We could conceive of a 'pure' referee
(such, for example, as an electronic eye that would immediately and
automatically register all transgressions), who would in a sense be
the rules in themselves as they give form to the whole set of actions
constituting a 'match' by closing them off in a system of play. The
referee can and must be no more than the rules as pure form; other-
wise he would cease to be a referee. No doubt 'subjectively' he may
have his own feelings and emotions, his desires that one side should
prevail rather than the other; but in this he is no referee. This he can
be only if the representation of the rules of which he is the signifier
and his own 'subjectivity' are effectively kept apart from each other.
If not, he would *qua* referee be homologous to the cheat *qua*
player.
If the sides with either $x$ or $y$, he ceases to represent this set of rules to
become the representative of another. The representative of the
rules as pure form, the pure signifier of these rules, such is the posi-
tion of the referee who is 'neutre'.

In this way the referee is both in and out of the game. In the game
he is the figure of its limits and its norms, i.e. the personal presence,
or figure, of an impersonal set of rules which 'has no regard for per-
sons'. At the same time, however, he is the power of intervention to
which either side may have recourse; he is the force of the rules in so
far as they are recognised by the players by simple virtue of the fact
that they are the players. As the figure of a limit the referee also
occupies a position of force, a force which exists only through the
previous recognition of the rules by the players. Hence the space
which has been enclosed and mapped out by the rules is organised
around their representative, the referee. It is in this sense that he is
both in and out of the game as the figure of its limit, for the limit
belongs neither to the figure nor to the ground, but rather to the mark
of the pure difference between figure and ground, 'le neutre'. In
phenomenological terms, the *limit-force* is not of the same order as
the forces brought into play by the competition. It is a force whose
'origin' is elsewhere, but whose point of application is indeed the
space of the game. The force of the rules, of which the referee is the
depository and the instrument, stems from the fact that the oppos-
ing sides both 'recognise' the rules which 'structure' their actions; it
appears as the resultant of the mutual repression that the players
impose upon their actions in order to play the game. It is reactive in
the sense that it is born from a subordination of the polemical forces
in play to the rules of the game. Thus, the structure and limits of the
playing space are simply that which has been traced out in advance
by the force of the rules, which, because it regulates the game and
defines it as such, precedes both structure and limits. At the same
time, however, this force of the rules exists only by virtue of the
polemical action of the forces of the players, that is, only because
those forces confront one another within the framework and ac-

According to the schema outlined by the rules and, ultimately, only
because the *game is played*. If there were no actual game, if it existed
only as the possibility of play, there would be no need for a referee.

Thus the 'neutralité' of the referee can be characterised as a
potential reactive force of zero value. It constitutes the third term
between one team and the other, while favouring neither; by its
presence within and yet outside the game it signifies to both teams
the rules which they have previously recognised in order to be able
to play. At the same time (and in a negative fashion since the referee
does not himself play) it gives order to the game and hierarchy to its
space by intervening as a limit force not to be transgressed, a force
which exists only through the laying down of prohibitions and the
possibility of their transgression.
The judge. The paradigm of the judge is presented to us in the apparently naïve text of La Fontaine’s fable about the cat, the weasel and the little rabbit. The plot of this miniature drama is familiar enough. The weasel has taken over the rabbit’s dwelling place and justifies his actions by the principle according to which the land belongs to the first comer. The rabbit demands that the weasel leave, justifying his right to the property on the basis of custom and tradition. The resulting situation of conflict is insoluble, for although the weasel has superior force on its side (weasels kill rabbits), the rabbit can offset this superiority by appealing to ‘all the rats in the land’. The consequent equilibrium is reflected in the weasel’s suggestion and the rabbit’s agreement that the two sides have recourse to the judge, the cat. The end of the fable is well known. Raminagrobis [Grimalkin], the judge, brings the opponents to agreement and resolves the situation of conflict by devouring both of them. Perfectly ‘neutral’, since he has favoured neither the one side nor the other, the judge brings the situation to a ‘definitive solution’.

In this story the weasel and the rabbit exemplify the clash of two forces in an equilibrium of sustained tension. The weasel, of course, appeals to the law of nature, while the rabbit turns to civil law. The civil law, however, carries with it the potential force of the rats, which counterbalances the natural and immediate power that the weasel possesses over the rabbit. This conflict between Nature and Culture, that is, between primitive force and the force of law, presents us with homologous yet inverse regressions on the part of both protagonists. In referring to a judge the weasel subordinates natural violence to the law by its decision to accept its authority. In its appeal to a superior law, that of the judge, it abandons the law of nature, which is the law of force. Yet this law it abandons only because it does not believe itself capable of holding Janot the rabbit’s burrow by force alone, since all the rats in the land are on Janot’s side. For its part the rabbit asserts the force of civil law, but, as a result of a similar evaluation of the relative force possessed by the two sides, agrees to submit the social law to a court of higher appeal, that of the judge. La Fontaine here points out with disturbing precision that the state of nature and civil society between them define a situation of conflict of forces. It is not force that is opposed to law or nature to justice; if that were the case the conflict would ipso facto be resolved by the triumph of the weasel. But we know very well: ‘Right without might is helpless... Right without might is challenged because there are always evil men about... Right is open to dispute, might is easily recognised and beyond dispute...’

The conflict is assessed by the real zero of opposition only because

the right of the rabbit is ‘fortified’ by the rats.

‘Well’, she rejoined, ‘a truce to talking.
Let’s lay the case before Grimalkin.*

The basis for this assessment is expressed in the reciprocal recognition on the part of both the weasel and rabbit of a superior law, whose only force lies in the continuing absence of any outcome to the conflict. The conflict thus enters the phase of recourse to ‘le neutre’, which has literally been brought about and created by the real zero of opposition, but which is also justified by moral and intellectual guarantees. Such recourse brings ‘le neutre’ into the conflict as a term which both transcends the opposition and is created in its transcendence by it; herein lies its original strength or force, which is indeed simply that of the forces of the weasel and the rabbit as they are opposed to and reflected in each other. It is this force which will be justified, according to Pascal, by the morality and the adroitness of the cat.

This was a sanctimonious Cat
Who dwelt reclus in pious meditation.
Well-liking, rich in fur and fat,
And famed for skill in arbitration.10

It is this superior law, which derives its strength or force from the opposing, inferior forces, that in a single gesture is to resolve the conflict and bring the opposing powers into the integrated unity of a synthesis. ‘He makes their peace’ is a formal judgement which realises the aims of the weasel and the rabbit in their joint recourse, but does so only by ‘crunching one and ‘t’other’. The ‘neutralité’ of the judge, the fact that he belongs to neither party, is completed and fulfilled — or, to put it more precisely, turns back into a synthesis of both. By annihilating both sides, by his transitive negation of them both, he discovers and reveals the roots and foundation of his own ‘neutralité’ through a reflection of the opposing sides. At one stroke, the cat has simply become both sides; he has absorbed them both. This is the stage of the positive and real resolution by ‘le neutre’ of the double negation of opposites by its discovery, in the institution itself, of the violence of judicial synthesis. This violence is the hidden face of judicial ‘neutralité’; it is, however, posited at least potentially in the very position of ‘le neutre’. If ‘le neutre’ was thus posited, it is because it (or he) was in a sense required by the opposing forces of the weasel and the rabbit, enslaved as they were to the higher law.

10Ibid., p. 162.
game will provide a perfect illustration of the displacement of ‘le neutre’ and of its essential instability. There is a child’s game played in France called the ‘jeu du furet’ or ‘ferret’. One of the players is placed in the centre of a circle formed by all the others, who are linked by a piece of string which they each hold behind their backs. Attached to this string in such a way that it can run along its length is a metal link called the ferret. The player in the middle has to guess which of the players in the circle has the ferret and to stop it before it can be passed on; if he succeeds, he exchanges positions with the player whom he has caught. The point of the game, therefore, is not to have the ferret, that is, to be ‘neutre’. Each player in the circle becomes ‘neutre’ in his turn as he gets rid of the object which would mark him out as different from the others. Thus, thanks to this circulatory movement of exchange, all the players in the circle are ‘neutres’ and yet none of them is, since each has the object for only an instant. They are neutralisers-neutralised (‘neutralisantsneutralisés’). The player in the centre is another and more definitive ‘neutre’, since he never has the object, never receives it and never passes it on. In other words, it is he who openly bears the mark of absence. Hence his position in the centre. It is thanks to and around him that the object is exchanged in a continual movement of gift and counter-gift. He is the motionless ‘axle’ of the exchange, the presence and the fixed point within which the game finds both its origin and its limit. His is the only position in the game at which nothing takes place, because nothing goes by. Within the limits of the game the player in the centre finds himself placed differently from the other players; he finds himself placed as if out of the game.

At the same time, however, the player in the centre occupies a commanding position and serves as the game’s point of reference, since he is the one who can put a stop to the movement of substitution and circulation. He has the discretionary power of marking a player by the presence of the object, not by giving him the ferret, of course, but by indicating the moment during which the ferret marks the player. At that moment he stops the exchange and suspends the game. The player in the centre himself is never marked; he is, rather, the marking power, which simultaneously produces the difference, exhibits it on one of the players and definitively condemns all the others to a state of being ‘neutre’.

Because one of the players possesses the object, however, and finds himself designated as its possessor, he is marked out as different and hence punished. He has lost the game. This means that he must lose the object which he possessed and submit to ‘castration’. He has received the mark (the object) only to lose it immediately, but very differently than by way of exchange. Indeed, he has to change places with the player in the centre; he becomes the centre himself. Thus marked out and neutralised (‘neutralisé’) in accord with the rules of the game, he becomes the centre of ‘neutralisation’. He is exiled to the centre as a neutralised neutraliser (‘neutralisé neutralisant’). In this exchange, however, the player who was in the centre takes the place of the player in the circle who has been caught and now finds himself in the centre in his turn. He receives the object. He is indeed the one who neutralises (castrates) his opponent, but only to return into immediate play the object of which he had despoiled him, thus setting off the exchange once again. The game of ferret is the game of ‘le neutre’. That which is desired is forbidden and that which is forbidden is desired. Everyone desires the ferret, but no one may possess it and as soon as anyone does possess it he is immediately punished by being deprived of it. Thus a process of infinite substitution is established within the closure of a system of determinate positions. Is this not, however, a possible definition of games as such? Is ‘le neutre’ itself the game — that game in any case which is introduced into a system by presence, absence and default?

‘Le neutre’ and philosophical discourse

We must now turn once again to discourse itself and to the possibility of its ‘neutralité’ and more specifically to that particular project which can be pursued only through discourse, philosophical research. What does our analysis of the problem of ‘neutralité’ imply for philosophical discourse? What is the status and position of ‘le neutre’ in such discourse? The guiding thread of our enquiry can be found in a passage from the First Book of Plato’s Republic which alludes directly to the paradigms of ‘le neutre’ that we have just been discussing. This text provides the starting point for a type of philosophical research whose development centres around the area where we initiated our own enquiry, namely, the area of overlapping relationships between politics and philosophy, between force and knowledge. In this passage Thrasymachus has just argued that ‘The fate of the unjust is happier than that of the just.’ Socrates counters this claim with the opposite assertion that the fate of the just is happier than that of the unjust and asks Glaucon, ‘And you, Glaucon? Which side do you take? Which statement do you consider the truer?’

‘I think that the life of the just man is more profitable.’

‘Have you heard’, writes Socrates-Plato, ‘the list of blessings which Thrasymachus has just assigned to the life of the unjust man?’

‘I have’, he said, ‘but I am not convinced.’
The judge is indeed the representative of the law in its ‘neutralité’ just as the referee was the representative of the rules of the game. The law may transcend the conflict; it nevertheless possesses the force to intervene in this situation. Such a force remains, however, secondary. It is the reflection of the primary opposing forces in their mutual equilibrium—the reflected force=0, which constitutes its judicial transcendence in relation to the conflict. Thus the ‘neutralité’ of the judge as the representative of the law is the reproduction of the real ‘neutralisation’ of the opposing forces in a situation of conflict. It is the symbolic reproduction of that tension itself and rises up with unparalleled violence to suppress or subdue it and so institute the order of law.

The father. The third paradigm, that of the father, is presented to us by one of Alan Montefiore’s examples earlier in this volume. He defines neutrality in terms of an agent whose aim is to help or to hinder to an equal degree two parties in a situation of conflict. In the course of discussing this suggested definition Montefiore takes an example to illustrate the case in which the parties to the conflict are very unevenly matched, namely that of a dispute between two children, one much stronger than the other. They appeal to their father. Would the father not decide in such a case to give greater help to the weaker child in order to re-establish the balance of equality? Can he then be qualified as neutral? It would seem that there must be cases in which neutrality would consist in acting in favour of one party to the detriment of the other; or, alternatively, where strict neutrality is impossible.

I do not believe that Montefiore’s example was constructed for the sake of illustrating his ‘case’. I take it, rather, to have a special place in the study of ‘le neutre’ and, to a certain extent, to govern the paradigms of the referee and the judge which we have discussed above. It is noteworthy that in the example chosen the conflict between the two children is defined in terms of force and that they have recourse to their father in a situation where their conflict is, as it were, asymmetrical. This implies (in the sense that it is presupposed by the analysis) that on the one hand the father’s status as referee in the children’s games is given before this particular conflict breaks out and that it is natural for them to choose him as judge; and on the other hand that his presence in the conflict appears as a source of complementary force aiming to balance the conflict rather than to resolve it. In this sense the position of the father in the structure of the conflict differs from that of the judge analysed above, even though his function is homologous. In this example the father does in fact appear as a power of ‘neutralisation’. As a result of his intervention in order to complement the force of the weaker child, the conflict will tend towards an equilibrium of opposing forces. His aim is to create the real zero of opposition in which our analysis has discovered ‘le neutre’. But this he can do only because he already occupies a distinctive place in the children’s eyes before the conflict breaks out, namely that of judge and referee. It is as if the recourse had already taken place potentially before the outbreak of the conflict which serves as its actual occasion. That is to say, the father occupies this particular position at the moment of our example only because he is naturally caught up in the position of the third (contentless) term in a more fundamental situation. Hence his intervention (in the example) consists indeed in the paradox of working in favour of one of the conflicting parties to the detriment of the other in order to arrive at the state of ‘neutralisation’ (in the situation ‘neutre’) in which recourse to a judge is logically justified. This is the reason for his preliminary activity of practical intervention undertaken for the sake of a ‘neutre’ that is to come and justifiable only by reference to it. In other words, ‘le neutre’ is here defined as a power of ‘neutralisation’, whose aim is to neutralise (‘neutriser’) the opposing parties, a ‘neutre’ which receives its force from an ‘originary’ position in a situation of dual conflict.

To pursue the analysis we must turn once again to the ‘grammatical’ ‘neutre’. Neither masculine nor feminine, ‘le neutre’ designates that which cannot be classified with respect to sex. If there is any classification, therefore, which should leave neither remainder nor residue, this is it. Any such remainder would be ab-normal, a monster. There are, then, two kinds of monster, the one complex, the monster which is both masculine and feminine, the androgynne, and the other ‘neutre’, that which is neither masculine nor feminine, the castrato. ‘Le neutre’ is thus the neutralised difference between the sexes: it is the ‘neutralisation’ which suppresses their difference, but only by suppressing the very reality and mark of this difference. The role of such a ‘neutralisation’ in the constitution of the law and in its internalisation as the third term, the superego, is well known. In this case ‘neutralisation’ is castration and appears in the relation which establishes the law. When we ordinarily speak of ‘neutralisation’, however, we mean a process involving something active and something passive, a subject and an object, a neutraliser and a neutralised (‘un neutralisant et un neutralisé’). ‘Le neutre’ possesses the remarkable power of displacement all along the relation of castration and occupying either successively or simultaneously both active and passive positions in this relation.

When situations of conflict arise in the dual relationship of mother and child, the power of ‘neutralisation’ appears at first as
the negative pole, the pole of absence. The third term is recognisable in this pole, the pole that is 'neutre', but it remains a negativity in which are concentrated all the elements that are lacking in the dual relationship. It is an empty zone which the third term will eventually occupy in its positive form. It is from this standpoint that we may define the Oedipal triangle, characterised by the ambivalence of the child's feelings towards his father. As an object of both love and hate in the eyes of the little boy involved in the full Oedipal situation, the father constitutes for him an admired being, the source of power, authority and law with which he seeks to identify himself. At the same time, however, and for the same reasons, he sees the father as a source of prohibition and punishment, and - in so far as the father forbids the child's incest with his mother - the threat of castration as well. The little boy admires - and identifies with - the power of 'neutralisation' and yet he fears it. He is ready to become this power even at the price of submitting to a partial 'neutralisation' himself; to become a neutraliser ('neutralisant') he must agree to be neutralised ('neutralisé'). In order to become a father he must accept the prohibition against possessing his mother. He can fulfill his genitality only at the price of relative castration.

Freud describes this dialectic by means of a myth: the murder of the father by his sons. This murder is the 'neutralisation' by castration of the father in order that the sons may gain possession of the father's wealth and yet the effects of this crime rebound on the murderers themselves with the institution of the prohibition of incest, which is nothing else than their own partial 'neutralisation' resulting from the 'neutralisation' of the father. It is in this way that the law is established in the ego, by the return of the dead father who, by neutralising me ('en me neutralisant'), assures me of my neutralising power ('ma puissance neutralisante').

With the anguish of being 'neutre' ('neutralisé') the child enters the period of latency. The superego is formed, whose outward manifestations will appear as the imperatives of the moral and religious consciousness. Why is there such an anguish of 'neutralisation'? Both its effect and its cause are to be found in the prohibition of the maternal object. Only because the maternal object is forbidden, however, can the little boy become a father in his turn, i.e. that neutralising power ('cette puissance neutralisante') to which he himself has had to submit in the anguish of 'neutralisation'.

Thus the paradigm of the father, as described in this rapid, psychoanalytically oriented sketch of the myth of castration, brings to light the fact that 'le neutre' or 'neutralisation' is to be defined along a 'semantic' axis of 'neutralisation' conceived as a process whose semes can be labelled neutralising/neutralised ('neutralisant/neutralisé') or active/passive and seen as the poles which the axis holds together. The position of 'le neutre' occupied by a succession of actors (successively or simultaneously both active and passive) is displaced along the length of this axis.

This paradigm points to the foundation and 'origin' of that force which is one of the essential elements in the pure definition of 'le neutre', that force which turns back upon itself in a kind of self-reflection. Its origin lies in human desire itself as inseparable from its own prohibitions and repressions, a desire which can be fulfilled only if a prohibition is laid down, only if there is a sort of partial 'neutralisation'. It seems to be this displacement of 'le neutre' from position to position along the semantic axis of 'neutralisation' that allows us, even in Montefiore's example, to understand that paradoxical 'neutralité' whereby the father intervenes in favour of one side against the other. When this example is deciphered (and it is surely not a wholly innocent one), the neutral-neuter father appears as neutralising ('neutralisant') his sons; he renders them 'neutre' in balancing their conflicting forces through his intervention. Hence the position of 'neutre' is occupied first by the father who neutralises and then by the elder son, the stronger child, who is neutralised. In other words, the positions are reversed; 'le neutre' is marked by the absence of separation from an object, which is given to or taken by the other who, in turn, gives the object back. This is the law of exchange of 'le neutre' whereby something which belongs to one, something with which one identifies oneself and which is yet detachable from oneself is lost in exchange for something which is foreign, but by which one's self is formed. 'Le neutre' as neutralising/neutralised ('neutralisant/neutralisé') is this exchange itself, this empty zone, this in-between in which 'le neutre' is accomplished; it is here that that which is mine is taken from me or disappears to return as something quite different, something by which I myself fulfill myself. Hence 'le neutre' allows us to lay bare the link between desire and law which our analysis has shown to be essential. Only that which becomes an object of desire is forbidden; and it is the strength or force of the desire that measures the force of the prohibition. The two forces are the same, the one being simply the reflection of the other. 'Le neutre' is, then, the zone of this reflection; it is the space of the process by which such reflection is fulfilled and turns back upon itself. 'Fate', as Hegel observed, 'is consciousness of oneself, but as of an enemy.'

To conclude this stage of our analysis, the description of a simple

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Then shall we convince him, if we can possibly find a way of proving that his statements are untrue?"

We have here two perfectly opposed theses; the question is, which of them is true. The answer is of more than merely passing interest: for it would appear that morality, politics, the destiny of the individual and that of the state are all involved. Hence the obligation to persuade the other that he is in error and to bring him into the realm of truth and justice in individual and social conduct.

What means of persuasion are employed, however? In the following key text, put into the mouth of Socrates, Plato embarks, ideally at least, upon philosophical discourse:

"Now if we match ourselves against him and give speech for speech, enumerating the advantages of justice, and he speaks a second time, and we speak yet again, then we must add up and measure the advantages enumerated by each party in each speech, and we shall need a jury to decide between us. But if we follow our previous form of enquiry, arguill till we come to an agreement, then we shall be at the same time jury and advocates." In this passage Plato contrasts two methods just as previously he had contrasted two theses. It is no longer a question of content, but rather of the form of discourse; more precisely, it is plausible to suppose that, by proposing a method of approach to such problems which makes explicit reference to tribunals, judges and referees, Plato already enters into the very content of the theses under examination (such as the relative utility, advantage, force or power of action of the just as against the unjust). This means that the positions of utterance in philosophical discourse implicitly determine the positions of problems and the content of such substantive assertions as may be made in this same discourse. Hence the attention that the philosopher gives to these positions: for in questions of the nature of justice and force, of power and of truth is involved the force of justice and the power of truth possessed by philosophical discourse itself.

Is there a means (a dunamis) of persuading Thrasymachus that he is in error? Will we find a force of truth and justice in philosophical discourse that may triumph over the argument that justice lies in the interests of the stronger? In Pascal's terminology, the problem is to 'fortify justice' by finding a mode of discourse on justice that will carry weight. Thus two themes are interwoven from the very beginning of Book I of the Republic. The first is that of 'content' (What can we conclude about justice and force?) and the second that of 'form' (How much force is possessed by true discourse, i.e. the discourse which is to describe the proper relationship of justice and force?). We have therefore to realise that the interventions in the dialogue of one speaker or another, their standpoints in the discourse which constitutes this opening presentation of the Platonic theory of 'politics', are themselves positions of political force. Furthermore, does not Plato's entire philosophic-political techne consist in dissociating the force of discourse from discourse on force and in the skillful transformation within language of Thrasymachus' discourse on force (which confines itself to naming as 'justice' what are no more than naked relationships of force) into a force belonging to discourse, i.e. a conclusive demonstration of truth. The entire problem is to be found in this beginning or 'overture' which at bottom turns on the notion of a force of judicious language—that is, in all essentials, a force of speculative (theoretical) and practical truth. We can thus see how it is that he who gives verbal expression to force, but does so incompetently because he is himself in fact a pure force, finds himself bound as a slave to a secondary force, namely that of a rigorous discourse that expresses the truth. Thrasymachus (the etymological meaning of his name is 'Brave Warrior') will be reduced to silence, a silence from which he should never have emerged, and Glauccon—the brilliant, the luminous—will be the one to reduce Thrasymachus' thesis to ruin by means of discourse, thus offering Socrates the picture of an adversary henceforward subjugated by a force which he had not sufficiently appreciated, the reflective (reactive) force of philosophical discourse.

The discourse of knowledge

Thrasymachus' subjugation is presented in the Republic in two stages of which the text quoted above is the second. The first stage comes when Socrates condemns himself and thus Thrasymachus to the discourse of knowledge by stating boldly that he does not know what to conclude about justice and force. Not only does he not know, but he says that he does not know and that he is in any case unable to say what he does know, because he is confronted by a person of authority who does not allow him to speak. By the same token, it is for Thrasymachus to speak of force, because he does possess the knowledge of force and such knowledge is itself a form of authority or force. Socrates' artifice of disqualifying himself, whether in good or in bad faith, forces Thrasymachus to displace his position of utterance from one of a discourse of force to one of a discourse of the force of knowledge. The trade-mark, as it were, of his ruse in the discourse of the dialogue is his constant posing of questions. Thrasymachus is well aware of this and yet falls confidently into the trap set by the Socratic method and the tactics of ignorance.
If you have a genuine desire to know what justice is,' he says, 'don't confine yourself to asking questions, and making a show by refuting any answer that is given. You know that it is much easier to ask questions than to answer them...'

'. . . The task, I fancy, is beyond our powers (dunaméis),' replies Socrates; 'and, therefore, you clever people' (clever or terrible ones = deinói) 'should rather pity than scold us.' 14

Socrates' refusal to respond and his taking refuge in asking questions (a subtle indication, an artful avowal of ignorance) forces Thrasymachus to hold forth with the authoritative discourse of someone who knows what he is talking about. This discourse, furthermore, fails to persuade Socrates and so reveals itself to be a discourse without force:

'I am not convinced', says Socrates; 'give us satisfactory proof . . .' Thrasymachus is astonished. 'Well', he said, 'how am I to persuade you? If you are not convinced by what I have just said, what more can I do for you? Am I to take the doctrine and feed you with it [by force]?' 15 Too late Thrasymachus discovers the ruse and the displacement it has provoked. He believed that his was a discourse of force and all he could present was a discourse of the knowledge of force, a discourse which, he discovers, is itself without force. As Pascal writes, 'Right is open to dispute, might is easily recognised and beyond dispute.' 16 Socrates' guile consists in making Thrasymachus present a discourse of knowledge rather than a discourse of force. Hence, in Pascalian terms, Thrasymachus is simultaneously contradicted and accused.

Henceforth Thrasymachus is prepared to submit to philosophical discourse, a sort of discourse, however, which is to be not so much discourse as a series of questions, or, rather, an interrogation. It is the method which will enable Socrates to persuade his opponent. But how? In its discursivity discourse is the presentation of knowledge. One begins to speak because one has knowledge to impart; and one does not finish until one has said what one knows. Hence the attitude of the listener—receiver of a discourse of knowledge; he is the one who learns something as yet unknown to him from someone who knows; 'I am condemned to learn', as Socrates says. In the sort of discourse in which knowledge is displayed and demonstrated it acts as a punishment and a repression. It is a neutralising power ('une puissance neutralisante'), it makes display of a means of imposing obedience, that is the authority that knowledge gives to him who possesses it over whoever does not.

Hence power and knowledge are mutually implied in discourse and are the source of its force.

As far as Socrates was concerned, however, we have seen that such discourse lacked force, because a different thesis, a contrary opinion, was presented against him in a sort of discursive conflict. How is he to escape from this conflict of discursive forces and from their polemical opposition? This is the question which Socrates puts to Glaucon; it allows of two solutions, of which Socrates adopts one while setting the other aside. But something is presupposed by the question itself, namely, that it is possible and even necessary to overcome the situation of discursive conflict and, going beyond the clash of opposing opinions and claims to knowledge, to attain the unity of a knowledge which is firm, convincing and accepted. It is both possible and necessary to arrive at an agreement; it is both possible and necessary to resolve the tension of opposites. War must give way to friendship—discors to concordia. The dialectic is already implied in this presupposition. Thus Plato defines a situation of discursive conflict as a contest that takes place on the level of language and this contest he assesses in terms of force and quantity. The rival discourses are set against one another as opposing forces to be weighed up and assessed for what they may respectively contain of what is just and good. Finally, this reckoning up, this measuring of opposing arguments, this double-columned balance sheet of conflicting considerations must be drawn up by a referee or a judge who will settle and debate and, in separating the two opponents, award to each one his due.

Thus we return to the situation analysed above in quite general and abstract terms, but this time on the level of philosophical discourse. The opposing forces of discourse submit themselves to the evaluation of an external power which they recognise and which they invest with the energy of their own reflected force. This external power, born of the tension between the discourses in opposition and which then subjects them to itself, is none other than the third term, 'le neutre' ('neutre' and impartial), that is, the pure and empty possibility of synthesis. It is easy to see what is implied in this sort of approach, which Plato suggests only to set aside. The judge or referee is the grand calculator; it is he who draws up the final balance sheet of the discourses in opposition. He assesses, geometrically and arithmetically, the difference between the positions. But if he is capable of so doing, it is only because he has first of all rendered homogeneous the elements involved in the two series, in the two opposing discourses. He has neutralised them. The referee and the judge, to whom Plato refers, neutralise the elements of the discourses that conflict with each other; it is the power of 'le neutre' that makes it

14 ibid., 336c-e.
15 ibid., 345a-b.
16 Pascal, op. cit., no. 103 (no. 298).
possible to judge between the two adversaries. This reduction to a state of homogeneity brings identity into the confrontation and the indifference of sameness into the original difference. There is no longer an opposition of same and other; the problem is no longer posed as a choice between alternatives. ‘Le neutre’ is precisely neither the one nor the other in the sense that it is a reduction of both to a sameness, of which the token is in its turn the reduction of the difference to a simple quantitative gap.

The objection will be made, however, that Plato explicitly sets aside any reference to some third man or impartial ‘neutre’ who would submit the discourses to his adjudication. Is not the third man – the human figure of ‘le neutre’ as third term – characteristic of sophistical discourse, which is by definition competitive and seeks a good, that is to say a favourable, decision from the judge before whom the opponents present their arguments? No doubt, and we shall have to turn in the pages that follow to that other figure of ‘le neutre’ proposed by Plato – interrogation. If we read 358d and 367b, however, we shall see that, at Socrates’ instigation, Glaucon returns to the solution of the conflict which Plato had set aside on 348ab, and ‘apes’ Thrasymachus to the best of his ability in order that Socrates should defend the opposing argument. The two discourses are opposed to one another in a struggle to the death – but only on the level of representation (in a mimesis of a struggle to the death), since it is one and the same person who maintains the one discourse while believing in or being persuaded by the other.

Questioning

The problem remains, nevertheless, of how to overcome the force of discourse, of how to escape from the power of the discourse of knowledge. The first solution lay in having recourse to a judge on the basis of antilogies which had been carefully neutralised by the judge himself. The second solution will be to turn to the method of questioning in search of an agreement or homo-logy. This solution lies in the recourse to ‘le neutre’ in search of ‘neutralisation’. In both solutions, however, two henceforth abiding ideals are written into the origin of philosophical and educational discourse. These are the ideals of knowledge and of questioning, of science and interrogation; and it is through them that the implicit power of ‘le neutre’ will become manifest.

It is, of course, to questioning that Socrates turns in order to confound Thrasymachus’ force and reduce it to silence throughout the first ten books of the Republic. Furthermore, the discussion of the alternative (proposed on 348ab) between antilogies and dialogue suggests the outline of a theory of questioning. For the questioning which constitutes the dynamics of the dialogue does not result from a conflict of claims to knowledge, but from a certain discursive practice which aims first at the progressive establishment of partial agreements between the interlocutors and ultimately at total agreement. This sort of process presumes that at each stage both interlocutors simultaneously generate and evaluate the quality, depth and extent of their own agreement. Within this perspective of infinite totalisation and harmony in truth, the question can be seen as the perpetual reopening of the discourse, the rupture which compels it to continue in the search for a new equilibrium. What then is the question within this framework of face to face dialogue that Socrates proposes?

The question – every question – presupposes an admission of ignorance on the part of the questioner, i.e. an expression of not-knowing something or other. It is because I do not know where X’s house is, for example, that I ask a passer-by. At the same time my question implies my implicit recognition that the person to whom I put it will have an answer; but there is always, of course, a risk; that the other will reply ‘I don’t know’. The very essence of a question lies in this ambiguity of turning to someone else recognised as the source of some knowledge which the questioner does not possess at the same time as he, this other, is characterised by the essential possibility of not-knowing. Otherwise there would be no need to pose a question; I should simply request the other to teach me something of which I was ignorant. Asking a question puts my interlocutor into a position of ‘neutre’; I do not know whether he knows the answer or whether he does not. Between the two possibilities of knowledge and ignorance, the knowledge of the other is, at the moment I put the question to him, in a state of instability – ‘neutre’. It must equally be understood, however, that the subject of my question – be it X’s house, justice, the directions I need or God – finds itself in the same ontological state – that of ‘neutralisation’. To ask the question ‘Where is X’s house?’ leaves me open to the reply ‘But X never lived here’, or ‘Who is X that he should have a house in this district?’ The question in our example merely asks for something’s location, not for its being. Yet it places its being in brackets while waiting for the other’s response, just as it takes the other for the moment simply as a source of knowledge, the origin of an answer. The circle of this dialogue will be practically closed when we note that in posing a question concerning the location of X’s house I place myself, as poser of the question, in the position of a ‘neutre’ ‘between’ knowing and not-knowing. For how would I be able to pose such a question about X’s house if I had not already
certain indications as to the possibility or probability of finding it somewhere nearby, that is, if I did not possess some ‘previous’ knowledge, which was nevertheless incomplete in respect of the essential information (or at any rate that information which is essential to me today when I have to meet X at his house) – an incompleteness as a result of which all my knowledge turns into ignorance.

The play of ‘le neutre’ between the positions of neutraliser (‘neutralisant’) and neutralised (‘neutralisé’) is already apparent in this simple example. In a sense, my question neutralises the object concerning which it is asked, just as the lack of the facts, which gave rise to the question in the first place, neutralises all my knowledge at the very moment of waiting upon the other’s reply in which my own neutralising Ego is neutralised; for now the other, hanging in the balance between an answer and a non-answer, between knowledge and non-knowledge, appears as a power that is ‘neutre’, as I myself am with respect to the object in question. Thus the circle, the sphere of ‘le neutre’ uniting questioner, questioned and question, is closed. Moreover, a precise, positive response to my question would change nothing in regard to this closure in the instability of being of ‘le neutre’. For it has already been constituted as such at the one decisive moment at which I asked someone else a question about something. From then on, all the positive discourse which may be offered in reply will do no more than cover up to consign to oblivion this zone of the closure, the zone which lies in fact at the foundation of such discourse and in which the three poles of meaning are bound together in a reciprocal, anonymous ‘neutralisation’. For this closure can always be reconstituted and reappear elsewhere; the questioner can always question anew the answer he has received from the other and neutralise in its turn the positive response that is offered to him as an object of knowledge. This philosophical dialogue, of the sort that is conceived, inaugurated and realised by Plato, will consist, therefore, in the constant conversion of ‘le neutre’ of the question into positive response, ‘le neutre’ which is nevertheless a necessary condition for the discourse ever to begin or then to progress to a point where it may receive an unquestionable reply, an unquestionable reply to a pure question: that is, the ‘neutralisation’ of ‘le neutre’ itself in the positivity of the infinite telos of philosophical discourse, the ‘neutralisation’ of ‘le neutre’ and its origins by the telos of the Good.

Henceforth the problem of philosophical discourse is posed as the problem of its point of origin, the problem of the question of principle which presides at the inauguration of philosophy as first philosophy and which may be taken to designate as ‘neutre’ the point of departure for all philosophical inquiry, that point of initial questioning in which all subsequent questions will participate. ‘I do not know, I state openly that I do not know and I do not believe that anyone knows as of yet. I do not believe that a knowledge of the answer exists previously to my question.’ And any reply that may be offered will be seen as a piece of knowledge to be displaced towards ‘le neutre’ of that which is unquestionable. As we may reread at the end of Book I of the Republic: ‘… the result of our conversation’ (of this process of questioning) ‘is that I know nothing. For when I do not know what justice is, I am hardly likely to know whether it is a virtue or not, or whether he that possesses it is happy or unhappy.’

The method of questioning, taken as posing a question ex arches, provides the negative contours of the region or space of ‘essence’, that is to say, the space in which will appear the wholly positive goal of the dialogue, whose attainment will work to its conclusion on a note of harmony and assimilation of opposites.

‘Le neutre’ as foundation

But does philosophical questioning really provide a point of departure that is ‘neutre’? Can the sort of philosophical discourse which proceeds in the interrogative mode pose an absolute, that is to say, an absolutely original question? If this were possible, philosophy would give to itself its own radical point of origin and, in making itself articulate, would include its own foundation in itself. This has, of course, been the ambition of philosophers from Plato to Descartes, from Hegel to Husserl. The problem is at the same time that of ‘le neutre’. When philosophical discourse finds its point of departure in a question of principle which is preceded by nothing, this means that the origin of its mode of speaking is to be taken as ‘neutre’. This is in general the source of that powerful striving towards ‘neutralisation’ which is to be found in the first book of the Republic, in Descartes’ first Meditation, in Husserl’s Logical Investigations, etc. . . . – the attempt to constitute by means of doubt, dialectic or eidetic reduction a space that is ‘neutre’ and empty and from which the owl of Minerva can take off and spread its wings; all such presuppositions, all such prejudices, everything that already exists as ‘implicit knowledge’ is to be brought to light by the process of questioning and put into question in order to find its originary ‘ground’, ‘le neutre’.

Are we to believe with Thrasymachus that the philosopher is an imposter, that he really knows the answer to his question while, through some crafty dialectical ruse, pretending not to know it? Is

Plato, op. cit., 354e.
the 'neutralité' of the point of departure sought by the philosopher a mere 'aping' of non-science? Is he just disguising his knowledge so that behind this mask he will be able to realise his ends, exercise his force and so persuade the other of his truth? It may be, however, that while the philosopher really believes (as Descartes believed, in Husserl's opinion) that he has attained the 'neutre' and radical zone in which philosophy has its foundations, in fact his pure question is actually over-determined by the cultural, psychological, affective or metaphysical influences which may affect the particular thinker through whom the logos finds its way, the voice that he borrows from the past, the language that he uses, his listeners, the direction in which his thought will take him and the reception of his discourse in a particular time, group or class. By means of their successive sedimentation such influences may likewise establish a philosophical tradition, and so overload the question of principle as to reduce it to the consecrated banality of didactic discourse.

The problem is then whether it is possible to pose a pure question? This question is directed not towards a questioned object, but to the very possibility of questioning itself and to what lies at its foundation, as if truly radical philosophical questioning could signify its own foundation - even though 'le neutre', which this questioning seems to reach, consists in the very absence of foundation. The philosophical swindle would consist, therefore, in presenting as foundations, first principles or archai, what is and must be - given the questioning discourse of philosophy - merely the unveiling of the absence of foundation. 'Le neutre', however, which philosophical discourse takes as its point of departure, ground and origin, is both the figure and the mask, the manifestation and the dissimulation of that other 'neutre' which is always prior to 'le neutre' of philosophical discourse, because such discourse is forbidden ever to speak it, or again, because speaking it would necessarily bring it down to the level of a figure. Seen in this light, questions appear as a roundabout form of knowledge. It is this necessary deviation that constitutes 'le neutre' of the question as a form of 'neutralisation' and which points figuratively towards that absence of foundation which is presented therein, in however hidden a manner. Such is the insidious violence of 'le neutre' in the asking of philosophical questions. Unless, indeed, the philosophical question takes itself as its own object, thus neutralising itself in its own 'neutralité' in an effort to point towards the foundation which is an absence of any foundation. It may be, however, that such an indication could no longer derive from discourse, be it by questioning or by dialogue. To have any chance of pointing at 'le neutre' instead of figuratively concealing it, philosophical discourse would have to constitute itself as a non-discursive indication, a mere silent gesture with one's finger. 'The god whose oracle is at Delphi does not speak and does not dissemble. He points.' Yet because we must speak, because the philosopher's destiny is speech (the logos), he can designate the absence which grounds his speech only by the intervals between his words, the silence which will melt into their gaps. The modes of such a speaking or 'le neutre' will therefore be the fragment, the pensée, the aphorism. Its logic will be the oblique logic of digression, its function that of a criticism which neither grounds nor enhances, but rather dismembers knowledge by chipping cracks in its edifice.

We can make the same problematic observations with respect to the aims and ends of interrogation. Plato indicates such a possibility in the text quoted above by the term anamologia, which means progress toward agreement by climbing the steps of partial agreement towards the totalling harmony of the eidos. The aim of such interrogative discourse is that of the progressive annulling of differences, the cumulative reduction and 'neutralisation' of opposites in the recognition that it is truly thus and not otherwise. Truth here appears in the discourse which takes it as its telos and produces it within itself as a process of 'neutralisation'. It is a truth of the one as a not-the-other, that is, of the one as the negation of the other as other, of the one as the negation of that difference which radically forbids the homologia, just as it had radically forbidden any sort of foundation by positing it as an absence.

It may be, then, that this progressive reduction of differences in the unity of a totality could be both the converse and the figure of the 'discourse' to which we referred above, that is, a sort of discourse which has been shattered into fragments and which presents in its very texture the affirmation and maintenance of the difference as such. Philosophical discourse in this sense would be the reductive 'non-neutralité' in which truth appears through the separation of opposites. The itinerary of questioning is here more clearly revealed: not as the 'neutralisation' of opposites (for in that case it would be the swindle of a positive doctrine seeking itself in its own dissimulation), but rather the displacement of a non-limitation through and in discourse - another way of speaking of difference within sameness, of truth in separation.

'Le neutre' as difference: the utopia of philosophical discourse

This account of 'le neutre' in philosophical discourse, by which it is defined as that which is other than 'neutralité' is thus a very difficult one. 'Le neutre' as pure possibility, as the zero state of synthesis, stands opposed to 'le neutre' as the sustained separation of
opposites as to its antitype. 'Le neutre' itself is neither the one nor the other, but rather a sort of pure difference between the two by which they are contrasted and distinguished. The problem of philosophical discourse is thus the following: how can this separation be maintained? How can philosophy maintain itself in the separation of the difference? Is it not a matter of philosophical discourse seeking to establish itself on the foundation of a centre that is 'neutre', a fixed point from which all differences may be perceived, explained and understood: that would be a position of utterance without any position. Is it not, however, the fundamental claim of philosophical discourse that it is produced from no particular place because it aims at finding the truth of differences through their systematic reduction? The very project of reduction goes with the installation of such discourse in a region located 'outside the circuit', but from which discourse concerning differences may be carried on and taught — of which dogmatism is the banalised and impoverished form. But is it possible not to establish philosophy in such a spot? Are we able in this day and age to escape such a position by means of philosophical discourse? Is it not already implied by the very fact of engaging in philosophical discourse? We have already alluded to the difficult alternative between a silent pointing of one's finger and a form of speech which can find its way only in the detour, digression and fragmentation of its own continuity. Perhaps there is no tenable position of utterance from which it might be possible to assert and maintain the separation of the difference not only at the origin of philosophical discourse, but also throughout its development. A separation at the point of origin would signify that such discourse constantly precedes its own rationale, a separation in its development that the continuous thread, the chain by which the transfer of evidence from principles to consequences is accomplished, is yet continually broken.

Let us, nonetheless, stake out a few marking-posts of this untenable position. The first can be found in sophistry, or rather in a certain type of sophistical discourse. This is not that type of discourse which is so totally subordinated to its concrete performances that it aims only at judicial or political success, hence forcing on the opposing discourse a confrontation that is to be submitted to the judgement of a superior authority, 'le neutre' (This is the sort of discourse that Socrates sets aside in the passage from the Republic which we used as a pre-text). We have in mind, rather, sophistical discourse in general, or, more precisely, the philosophy of such discourse in so far as this philosophy presents itself as a game, a gymnastics of the spoken word, and in so far therefore as it is eminently teachable. This is a philosophy of antilogies, in which one learns to be both sides, one after the other, in order oneself to be neither one nor the other, and thus to speak from the position of the gap between them both without ever reducing it. If value in its diacritical essence were to be defined as a difference or opposition between elements, then sophistical speech may be taken as aiming at the accomplishment of certain values rather than at establishing the truth; for such discourse detaches value from any adherence to Being. 'For the means by which we indicate is speech, and speech is not the real and existent things; therefore we do not indicate to our neighbours the existent things but speech, which is other than the existing realities. Thus, just as the visible thing will not become audible, and vice versa, so too, since the existent subsists eternally, it will not become our speech; and not being speech, it will not be made clear to another person.'18

Such philosophy presents itself not only as a discursive game, but also as the tragedy of such a game, since nothing is communicated through such discourse, which simply develops in pure difference from Being. It is true that the philosopher speaks; but he does so only to uncover the contradictions in all the statements that he utters in his efforts to explain reality. Philosophical discourse is self-defeating by very definition. But if this is so, it becomes henceforth necessary to act — taking full account of the irreconcilability of the extremes, and to act in a way which is as tragic as the discourse itself. As against a philosophy of discourse, so to act is to spring something new and unexpected upon the discourse, something illogical and irrational and taking the form of its concrete working out. So we find ourselves faced with the brutal choice (kairos) of one of two irreconcilable opposites, whose force will turn back on the neutral judge or referee to seduce, persuade and enslave him by means of apate or peitho to an irrational truth.

The other marking-post which we suggest to indicate the whereabouts of this untenable position of utterance lies in a text by Pascal, in which he writes that human grandeur consists not in the idolatry of truth, but in occupying and maintaining oneself in the in-between area of the gap between opposites. 'We show greatness, not by being at one extreme, but by touching both at once and occupying all the space in between. — But perhaps it is only a sudden flash of the soul from one extreme to the other; perhaps greatness only ever lies in a single, as in a glowing ember? — Maybe, but at least that shows how agile the soul is, even if it does not show its range.'19 This text is written in the form of a dialogue and the very position of the speaker is one which is divided between the one and the other: neither one nor

18 Gorgias, Treaty of Non-Being (Sextus Empiricus, 84-5, Loeb, Vol. II, pp. 35ff.)
19 Pascal, op. cit., no.681 (no.353).
the other, but rather an exchange between one and the other in the discourse of the dialogue. Pascal speaks from within the distance of the exchange, maintaining himself in the gap between the protagonists between whom his own thought and discourse is distributed. He likewise begins a discourse in the first person: 'I do not admire the excess of a virtue like courage unless I see at the same time an excess of the opposite virtue, as in Epaminondas...'. His position is that of an 'I' who speaks of the grandeur of man as a synthesis and totalisation of opposites, extremes and excesses. This position of discourse, however, which corresponds directly to its own content and which, on another level of analysis, is its own content, will eventually disintegrate not as the result of any external objection, but because of the widening gap within the position itself; not in the face of some thesis opposed to that maintained a few lines above ('grandeur consists in totalisation'), but rather in that of the other of this thesis ('grandeur consists indeed in the synthetic totalisation of extremes, but such a totalisation is merely the figure – the exhibition and the veiling – of a point of instantaneous movement, the rational figure of a paradox of the infinite'). The distance between the two extremes is occupied by a point displacing itself instantaneously (i.e. with infinite speed) from one position to another. But this same inassignable distance appears in Pascal's own discourse as 'the indiscernible of silence', which breaks its continuity in order to deliver it over to exchange, an indiscernible that may be marked by mere punctuation or by some brief word, and which is itself the position – a position of standing apart – from which Pascal speaks. Of what, then, does this other speak in the inassignable distance of 'le neutre'? Of a grandeur of the soul which is not to be defined in terms of magnitude, extension or of the accumulation of knowledge, of extreme and intermediary virtues, of value and benignity and of all that is in between; but which is to be defined in terms of agility – a movement so pure and so rapid that it seems to be at rest, or rather to have sketched a continuous line just as when in the darkness one pokes the embers of a fire and in so doing draws a motionless circle of light. This trace, which is empty if one tries to grasp it at any given point, but which is full when one looks at it against the background of the night, is the very figure of 'le neutre': 'le neutre' which allows itself to be seen only in the figure by which it is concealed. The displacement and fragmentation of the position of utterance which separates itself from itself in order to place itself in its own distance-from-itself is necessary if one is ever to grasp (obliquely and in the form of a hypothesis, of a mere glimpse of a suggestion) the infinite motion of the point – 'le neutre' as pure difference and as the play of the difference. For this movement is a game, a dance, in which the

gility of the soul takes the place of its own apparent magnitude.

There is indeed a need for agility, if one is to maintain oneself in the pure infinite difference of extremes – that agility of the soul which will in a single instant traverse the distance between them in a continual displacement of their middle point, the exact middle, the region which is fixed outside space, as the organising centre of that space from which philosophical discourse is uttered. 'Le neutre', which Pascal's text-fragment has enabled us to glimpse as the distance of exchange and as infinite movement, is the non-place, the absent foundation of philosophical 'discourse'.

This, in a word, is the utopia of philosophical discourse: not the nostalgia for a fixed centre, but its other in the gap of the difference.