

## A Word about the French Spirit

As many Americans and other foreigners profess to be mystified by the way the French mind works, it occurs to me that it might be useful to devote a few pages to this subject. After a few weeks in France I realized, not without irritation, that my years of high school and college French did little to prepare me to comprehend the French spirit. Even though most of the words were recognizable, students and professors, I discovered, were at home with a level of abstraction that was over my head. And when I got involved in a discussion that I thought I could grasp, I was constantly being told "*mais, il y a nuance.*" If "nuance" there was, I was surely missing it. So, gradually it dawned on me that the French spirit is itself one of the fine arts. Without claiming to have mastered the subject, I would like to pass on to the reader some insights I have gleaned over the years.

Let us start by delimiting the subject. If you want to understand the mind of a French *paysan* you could profitably study a Maine farmer (assuming you can get near him). If you wanted to know what makes a French shopkeeper tick you could analyze the psychology of "Mom and Pop" who run the store down the street. Even a self-made French businessman would not strike you as far different from the "rags to riches" captain of industry in the United States. But when it comes to an intellectual, a professional or a high-level company executive in France there are probably no models from which you can draw comparisons. The reason is that the French educational system forms a particular type, which for want of a better word, we will call Cartesian. This word is of course, derived from the name of Descartes, the celebrated 17<sup>th</sup>-century mathematician and philosopher, who invented analytical geometry and is known even in America for his "*Je pense, donc je suis*" ("I think, therefore I am.").

This phrase epitomizes the good and bad in the French spirit. The good: pithy, direct, and clear expression; the bad: confusing a truism for reasoning. When a Frenchman uses the word *donc*, be careful, for he may be about to beg the question in guise of drawing a logical inference.

Descartes is the patron saint of *a priori* reasoning. His essay *Le Discours de la Méthode* is to French intellectuals what the *Sermon on the Mount* is to Christians. For a country that produced Montaigne, Pascal, Voltaire, Diderot and Montesquieu, to mention only a few, Descartes' *Discourse* has no competition as a mold of the French mind. You will rarely, if ever, hear a Frenchman say "*Je suis Montaignien*" or "*Je suis Voltairien*," but virtually every day you can hear one proclaim "*Je suis Cartesien.*"

The heart (if I may use this term) of Descartes' dogma is this statement, which is the first principle of his method: "*The things that we perceive very clearly and very distinctly are all true.*" For a non-French person this appears to be a dubious assertion. An "Anglo-Saxon" would likely retort: "*A lot of things that I once thought to be very clear and very distinct have turned out to be false.*" But for better or worse, this one statement is the key to understanding the Cartesian mind. If an American says: "*that's clear*" he means only that he has understood your point. If a Frenchman says: "*c'est clair*," he means it's true. Voilà! That's what Descartes has done for the French intellectual tradition.

The Method is the 17<sup>th</sup> century version of what Dale Carnegie might have called “*How to Think Clearly and Influence People*.” Descartes, having had great success with mathematics, professes to explain how one can solve problems in the same methodical way. He makes an eminently sensible point: divide the problem up into sub-problems and then solve them one at a time. Of course, as many people have found out since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this doesn’t always work, for how can you divide the problem into parts if you don’t know where to start? Few French intellectuals like to be reminded that in the essay Descartes illustrates how his Method can be put to use, by examining the circulation of blood, and concludes that it is the circulation which makes the heart beat! He also uses the method to “prove” the existence of God, beginning with the “clear and distinct” principle and concluding, very piously, that it is thanks to God that truth is perceived clearly and distinctly.

Why, despite these unimpressive demonstrations, has Descartes’ essay enjoyed such a mind-boggling success in France (and nowhere else)? To answer that I would have to write a book, but the beginning of an explanation is that there is something very appealing in the notion that by applying a simple method one can think straight and solve all problems. Like other dogmas, this one clings to people despite the refutation that experience and science may provide.

If you comprehend the importance to the French mind of the term *clarté* (clarity) you’ll go a long way towards understanding the intellectual French person. (I use “person” so as not to appear sexist, but I defy anyone to understand a French woman!) Let me illustrate this point by a personal anecdote. I was chatting with a distinguished French lawyer one day about the differences between American and French law. The lawyer said as nicely as he could, “I know you have a great legal system but there is one criticism I must make of it: “*Ce n’est pas clair*” (It’s not clear). As I had read Descartes, I knew that this was the ultimate put down: if a system is not clear it cannot be true.

Comparison of an American contract with one drafted by a French lawyer generally shows the importance given by the latter to logical sequence of ideas. The American is pragmatic and wants only that his contract “work,” *i.e.* to have all the basic points. For the French lawyer or businessman the points have to be lined up in a “logical order.” I once was asked by an American parent company to have a license agreement executed by the President of its wholly-owned French subsidiary. The President refused to sign the American contract because it was not “logical” and “clear.” He insisted on redrafting it, but not a single change was made as to substance. You’ll have to admit that Descartes is not forgotten in the 20<sup>th</sup> century!

Another product of the method is the French attachment to form. Paul Valéry, one of the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century exemplars of the French intellectual, wrote this of his own country: “*France is perhaps the only country where considerations of pure form, a concern for form in itself, have persisted and dominated in the modern era. The sentiment and the cult of form are... accompanied, in fact, by a particular freedom with regard to content, and often coexist with a kind of sense of generalized irony.*”

Every school boy (should I have said “school person”?) in France learns to make a *plan* (an outline) of everything he writes, including examination papers. Even in college and law school, the *plan* counts as much as the contents of the paper. You could have the “right” answers and still get a bad grade because your *plan* is not logical or well presented.

Here are some actual examination questions that were used in the June 1980 Baccalaureat examination in philosophy for high-school seniors. Answering just one of these questions constitutes an entire four-hour examination: “Is appearance a falsehood?”, “Can one speak of legitimate violence?”, “Is respect for law a guaranty or an obstacle for liberty?”, “To what extent does man make history?”

Not only do these questions illustrate the French penchant for abstraction, but also they require considerable skill in organizing one’s thoughts. During the first hour the student is expected to work out his *plan* on scrap paper; then he spends three hours writing his best prose. A consequence of this system is, of course, that once the *plan* is established his creative thinking ceases, for he is now merely carrying out a pre-established outline. That is the blueprint of an *a priori* thinker; you do your thinking up front, so to speak.

The importance of the *plan* to the educated Frenchman was impressed on me once when I gave a talk to an audience of French lawyers on the practice of law in New York. As is my wont, I did not have a prepared speech but I had made a list of points that I wanted to cover and the connections between the points were more or less chronological and personal. My talk was well received by the audience. Later, one of my close friends congratulated me in this manner: “*Your speech was most interesting but I was not able to perceive your ‘plan’.*” What he meant was that the right way to have made the speech would have been to announce the outline in my introductory remarks (which are themselves an indispensable part of the *plan*), subsume all the points under two or three main headings, and end with a “conclusion” which summarized the whole. The fact that my points were interesting would get me only half credit.

These habits have a profound effect on French government and business life. If you read a speech of President Giscard d’Estaing or Prime Minister Barre you’ll detect, without fail, faithful adherence to the principles learned in elementary school and perpetuated by the teaching of all the elite schools in France (known as the *Grandes Ecoles*). They explain why, for example, so many original laws and decrees rarely have any practical effect: the author feels that his job has been done by thinking up the law or regulation; making it work is a mere detail. During my first year in France a law professor told me: “*Some of our laws are the most marvelous works of the human spirit; if only we would follow them up in practice, we would not have so many problems.*” He gave as an example the *loi cadre pour l’Algérie* which was a beautiful plan on paper for giving the Moslem majority a greater voice in government. A few months later the Algerian rebellion began.

Whatever one might think of this intellectual tradition (and there is a lot to say for it when one recalls the proliferation of machine-graded multiple-choice exams in the USA) I believe it vital for anyone dealing at a high level with French professionals and business executives to know how their minds work. If you are negotiating with a man who was graduated from one of the *Grandes Ecoles* such as “X” (Ecole Polytechnique), HEC (Hautes Etudes Commerciales), ENA (Ecole Nationale d’Administration) or *Sciences Po* (Institut des Sciences Politiques), you should have no doubt that he knows how to make a *plan* and will be looking for *clarté* in your position. Understanding this can not only save you money but also endear you to your French counterpart.

As I stated at the outset, not everyone in France is a Cartesian. The majority of people – particularly in the provinces – are hardworking pragmatists who know what it takes to earn a franc. They are the silent majority, for they permit a small elite established in Paris to make the laws and regulations as well as the speeches that are an inevitable concomitant of French public life. It is this tolerance of leadership by the Cartesian “egghead” which distinguishes the French majority from the American majority. Americans expect their leaders to be “just plain folks” who have trouble with punctuation marks and dangling participles. The French expect their leaders to have done well in school and to know how to make a *plan* at the drop of a cork. Giscard d’Estaing graduated at the head of his class at not one, but two, of the *grandes écoles*, ENA and Polytechnique! This is like graduating *summa cum laude* from both Harvard School of Government and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Michel Rocard, the up-and-coming Socialist leader is also an *ENArque* (an ENA graduate), as is Jacques Chirac, the Mayor of Paris. The difference between an *ENArque* on the left, like Rocard, and an *ENArque* on the right, like Chirac, stems not so much from ideology, as from early choices based on political opportunities.

The influence of the *ENArque* is overwhelming in France. Starting out as bright young lads who know how to make a *plan*, they get into ENA through a competitive exam, upon graduation go into Ministerial Cabinets, where they have power disproportionate to their experience, then often enter politics at the local level and get elected to Parliament. (One of the remarkable things about France is that you can have a full-time job in Paris and still be elected mayor of a small town or village in the provinces as well as member of the National Assembly.) And those who eschew politics often hop into top management positions in big companies owned or controlled by the ubiquitous French state.

In W.S. Pierce’s essay, “How to Make our Ideas Clear,” he gives this famous definition of pragmatism (although he doesn’t use the term): “Consider what effects which might conceivably have practical bearing we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.”

Paradoxically enough, the concept of Cartesianism in France becomes eminently pragmatic when this definition is applied, for it is a system that leads to jobs and power.

But enough of politics. Let me conclude by noting that the antipode of Descartes' "clear and distinct" ideal is this line from Baudelaire: "*J'aime les nuages, les nuages qui passent... là-bas... Là-bas, les merveilleux nuages.*"

*"I love the clouds, the passing clouds up there  
up there, the marvelous clouds." (l'Etranger)*

Between these two extremes, the one yearning for mathematical solutions in the human sphere, the other revelling in the nebulous unknown, lies the full range of the French spirit. If one were to classify contemporary French figures in two columns, according to their relative proximity to one pole or the other, there would be some strange bedfellows; De Gaulle and Sartre might be in the Baudelaire column and Giscard d'Estaing with Michel Rocard in the Descartes column. But of course it would make more sense to have a middle column headed by my favorites, Montaigne (the first relativist of modern times), Pascal (as good a mathematician as Descartes but who knew, as Marianne Moore once said, that "there are some nuts that diligence can't crack,") and Voltaire, who demonstrated that laughter can be a potent weapon in the battle against injustice.

Ah yes, the French spirit is one of the fine arts.



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