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## Book Review

### Alexandre Koyré today

SEIDENGART, Jean. *Vérité Scientifique et Verité Philosophique dans l'Œuvre d'Alexandre Koyré*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2016. 360pp. ISBN: 9782251420677 – 35 €

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In February 2012 an academic conference was held at the Université Paris Ouest-Nanterre entitled *Vérité scientifique et verité philosophique dans l'œuvre d'Alexandre Koyré*. This book, organized by Jean Seidengart and published last year, is the fruit of that event. It consists of fourteen articles, divided in three parts – *Koyré philosophe*, *Philosophie et histoire des sciences and Koyré historien de la philosophie* – and the transcription of an original course Koyré gave in 1946 with the title *Galilée*. The collection is made up of academic articles by Paola Zambelli, Gérard Jorland, Annarita Angelini, Walter Tega, Joël Biard, Jean-Jacques Szczeciniarz, Anastasios Brenner, Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos, Massimo Ferrari, Pietro Redondi, Emmanuel Faye, Alexandre Guimarães Tadeu de Soares and Jean Seidengart.

Seidengart explains that the purpose of editing the collective work was not merely to reproduce programmatic formulas associated to the many different readings of Alexandre Koyré's work but, instead, to initiate a reflection on a "plurality of analyses" of Koyré's vast research. The book however does not manage to abstain entirely from the reductive interpretative formulae that it declaredly renounces and, in fact, the coherence and concordance of the analyses exhibited are somewhat overshadowed by the attention given to the legitimacy of the different readings in relation to Koyré's work.

The proposal is taken seriously, however, by Paola Zambelli who opens the book with a highly original work stemming from meticulous research and lavishly provided with footnotes in which the authoress proclaims the advantages of a sweeping vision and also puts that into practice. Zambelli, in her endeavor to reconstitute the stages and modalities

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of Koyré's intellectual and cultural integration, especially against the background of France and Germany between the two World Wars, rejects the temptation to present his political engagement and his intellectual trajectory as separate topics. According to her, Koyré was a person who followed two lines of thinking and action at the same time. He was keenly aware of the evolution of the German tragedy, of the theoretical developments of the phenomenological school and of the works of Dilthey, Cassirer and Max Scheler; Zambelli devotes special attention to Scheler. She narrates how Koyré accompanied the ramifications of Husserl's philosophy in Heidegger's thinking and also the latter's adherence to Nazism. She describes how Koyré dedicated himself to his academic career and to his support for General de Gaulle. He was an avid intellectual but at the same time sensitive to the anti-Semitic persecutions of his day. In Zambelli's view, Koyré lived two lives.

Gérard Jorland extends an invitation to participate in a more open interpretation of Koyré's work and presents the arguments that were part of his own thesis published in 1981 regarding the phenomenological method, or to be more precise, the historiographic method that Koyré put into practice in his studies. Jorland's article, however, is by no means a mere reproduction of old arguments. He shows how the reestablishment of the foundational ontological intuitions seen through the eyes of others was richly rewarding for the historian. He describes how that might have been when he delineates and distinguishes the "basic intuitions" of Galileo and Descartes; the famous wedding of truth and error that Koyré referred to. It was because of his persistent adherence to gravity as being the essential property of physical bodies that Galileo did not explicitly formulate the Law of inertia. However, it was also because of his refusal to not reduce the real to the geometrical that he was able to formulate the Law of falling bodies. It was precisely through his acceptance of that reduction that Descartes, based on his concept of the existence of just two substances in the world, mental substance [mind] and material substance [body], went wrong by putting space in the place of time. It was for that very same reason, however, that he elaborated the fundamental laws of modern physics. Jorland does not outline the fruits of the phenomenological method in Koyré's work alone; Jorland's main invitation is for us to perceive the fecundity of that method in spheres that go beyond any specific historical period. Accordingly, he applies them to the works of authors like Marx, Lavoisier, Hegel and Pasteur.

Annarita Angelina addresses a study Koyré made of Jan Hus in the period 1943 to 1948. The theme she has chosen is little known, but she nevertheless presents it as being in consonance with Koyré's celebrated work *Études Galiléennes*. Angelina constantly compares the way Koyré outlines his history of the sciences with the way he writes the history of the Hussite movement. Historiographic interest in error and truth is represented in that work by his interest in the history of the victor (the catholic church) and the vanquished (Hus) and again in the apparent paradox of his recognition of the importance of both in the process that culminated in the Calvinist reform. The force and the weaknesses of Giordano Bruno's thinking makes way for the very same contradiction in the person of Hus; mediocre as an individual but grandiose from the point of view of his fruits. In him Galileo's realist mathematics makes way for the Hussite realist theology. That profound alteration to the Aristotelian and medieval reference framework in regard to physics is replaced by an institutional reference framework, responsible for transformation through the destruction of the "medieval order".

Both Joël Biard and Walter Tega distinguish themselves by not calling attention to any particular merit of Koyré's work but instead to a problem in his most well-known interpretation regarding the scientific revolution of the 17th century. In Biard's view, Koyré is in solidarity with Duhem in his perspective of Aristotelianism which he views as an epistemological obstacle. According to Biard, the key to understanding the transformations suffered by the domain of physics can be found inside the discussions of nothingness. Koyré

failed to see that because he could not get beyond Duhem's interpretation or the texts that the latter cites and that made him embrace a meaning for nothingness only in the extra-cosmic sense of the concept, leaving aside the preeminent discussions of other aspects that took place in the heart of Aristotelian natural philosophy.

Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, Fruteau de Laclos and Brenner take up, once more, the questions associated to the debate on belonging and the relation of Koyré's work to French epistemology. In Brenner's view, Koyré took his theses on the closeness of Aristotelian physics to simple common sense, on Galileo's theoretical position and on the importance of Archimedes, from Tannery. It was from Brunschvicg that he took his positive attitude to Platonism. Koyré was integrated to a current of thinking that had existed since 1900, one that argues in favor of the fecundity of Platonic thinking. That same concept is also accentuated in Bachelard, Cavaillès and Lautman. Brenner presents a Koyré who, far from breaking with the French epistemological tradition, intervenes in that field, contributing to the construction of the profile that endowed it with its singular nature.

Fruteau de Laclos and Bensaude-Vincent take a very different stance declaring that Koyré is a Meyersonian and Meyerson does not belong to that tradition at all and, accordingly, Koyré has a moral intellectual and material debt to him. Bensaude-Vincent underscores the communion of those two authors in regard to the fragility of the modern distinctions among science and religion, the philosophical meaning of the principle of inertia, the presuppositions of the "mathematization" of physics, the interest in Hegel, the attention to errors and the rejection of precursors. In turn Fruteau de Laclos underscores how Koyré "*ne confond jamais différence des états du savoir et disqualification de la science du passé*" (Fruteau de Laclos 2016, 206), and Bachelard agrees. In the construction of his conception of thought, Koyré takes inspiration from the works of Meyerson and of Husserl who are imbued with the same spirit as himself because, to Koyré, the philosophy of the intellect is a phenomenological approximation of reasoning. In Koyré, phenomenology is re-thought as a kind of anthropology of knowledge. In the light of his ideas on thought, there is indeed an affirmation of a continuity of historical transitions. These authors therefore consider that Koyré breaks with the French epistemological tradition of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Far removed from that recurrent debate, Pietro Redondi elaborates an innovative analysis of Koyré's most outstanding methodological legacy. Redondi historicizes, in Koyré, his "notion of the interdependence between the philosophical-theological concepts and those of a physical-mathematical order" (Redondi 2016, 248); his conception of the "unity of thinking". He endeavors to argue that such a conception was not present in his analyses from the beginning and that in fact Koyré only admitted its worth at the end of his investigation of the process that links Copernicus to Newton. In 1939, when he published his work *Études Galiléennes*, Koyré considered Galileo's narrative of the creation of the universe [according to which God produces the planets by letting them fall and, according to the law of falling bodies, when they reach the right velocity their uniform straight line acceleration is transformed into a uniform circular movement, thereby creating the astronomical system] as being the way Galileo found to announce his epistemology and reinforce the front of his battle against Aristotelian natural philosophy. In 1950 Koyré's analysis is different. After the works of Metzger, Febvre and Lenoble appeared, Koyré acknowledged the importance of the Plato-inspired Galilean narrative and he transformed Galileo's cosmology into "a possible, if not true, story" (Koyré 1960, 259). Only then does he attribute any weight to those philosophical-religious considerations in the formation of Galilean science.

In the wake of Redondi's originality, Faye presents us with an extremely interesting analysis that sheds light on Koyré's interpretations of Descartes, especially those he presented in 1922 and in 1937. It is possible to highlight both a notable change and a notable permanence in Koyré's analyses. In 1922, Koyré saw Descartes as being, above all, the inheritor of Duns Scot and Bonaventure of the conception of positivity and the idea of the

infinite. By 1937, however, he had become, at one and the same time, a follower and a critic of Montaigne. On the other hand, Koyré's main element of interpretation persisted. While, in 1922, Koyré's Descartes was the inheritor of Duns Scot and Bonaventure, he was also a mathematician who knew how to recognize the continuity of number and by using mathematics, remove the philosophical consequences stemming from the positive idea of a real infinite. In 1937, the Descartes envisaged by Koyré continued to insist on the importance of that concept, a thesis that had by then become not only about God but about thought as such. What could explain that shift of Koyré's attention away from the mediaeval authors to embrace Montaigne? According to Faye, Koyré used the figure of Montaigne to criticize the idea of the essential finitude of being, a concept that he recognized in Heidegger's description of *Dasein*. In 1937, Koyré used Descartes to voice his own criticism of one of the fundamental pillars of Heidegger's philosophy within which Nazism acquired legitimacy. Faye's text, together with that of Zambelli, which is perhaps the most provocative and innovative interpretation published in this collection, presents a somewhat furtive criticism of Jorland's classic interpretation of a supposed maladjustment between Koyré's philosophy and his time.

Although it contains articles quite distinct from one another, not only in terms of the contents of Koyré's work that they address but also in their ways of analyzing it, the book begins and ends with the considerations of its organizer who takes the opportunity to sketch a general interpretation Koyré's work. In his preface Seidengart gives a ready answer to the provocative question suggested by the collection's title *Vérité scientifique et vérité philosophique dans l'oeuvre d'Alexandre Koyré*, which takes us back to the 1965 debate that Canguilhem began with his disturbing statement that "There is no truth other than scientific truth". In regard to the heated discussion conducted by Hyppolite, Foucault, Canguilhem, Dreyfus, Ricoeur and Badiou, Seidengart assures us that Koyré would have been in total disagreement with Canguilhem insofar as he considered it impossible to separate philosophy and science because both replace sensory experiences with their own version of the real. The organizer of the book considers that Koyré was most certainly an idealist, but one with the merit of having formulated a historical method whose greatest advantage was that it made it possible to "*dégager les enjeux philosophiques que comportent les controverses scientifiques à propos des crises, des fondements, des mutations et des justifications des énoncés scientifiques*" (Seidengart 2016, 319). Nevertheless, according to Seidengart, who apparently forgives him for this, Koyré is an idealist. He let himself be guided by a "philosophical elan", or "Platonism", or "mathematical realism". To Seidengart, that was the philosophical and scientific truth Koyré affirmed and which persecuted him in his history of the sciences where his option to study the "cosmological revolution", through the historical processes of the passage "from the closed world to the infinite universe" (a passage that he does not explain satisfactorily) and the failure of his interpretation of Einstein's Theory of Relativity (albeit Seidengart does not tell us where the gaps in the interpretation lie or in what that failure consisted).<sup>3</sup> It can be seen that in spite of criticizing the programmatic formulations of certain interpretations of Koyré, Seidengart does not manage to do without them in his own analysis. In that aspect the book's title is misleading because it does not achieve the objective announced at the beginning. Misleading again, because not one of the authors listed on the Contents page concerns himself or herself with the problem announced on the cover. If it failed to achieve its objective, it is because the problem was one that only the organizer of the book was eager to address.

<sup>3</sup> Seidengart seems unaware of the fact that Koyré's studies on Copernicus, Galileo and Descartes in the 1930s were written concomitantly with the in-depth discussions on the philosophical and scientific consequences of the emergence of quantum physics which Koyré followed very closely by means of critical appraisals that were published on the subject.



The title, however, is also revealing in regard to the current situation of the discussions on Koyré's place in the field of 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy, especially in construing the problems associated to his affiliation to French epistemology. The fundamental difference from Canguilhem, which Seindgart would like to have explained, indicates precisely that. The title of Fruteau de Laclos's chapter (Does Koyré belong to the French epistemological tradition) is quite explicit in that regard. The same is true for the contribution ("Koyré, a disciple of Meyerson") of Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, authoress of important studies on early 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy based on the files of Émile Meyerson. According to the interpretation proffered by the historiography of the 1960s and 70s, what is at issue here is the origin or preeminence of Bachelardism. Meyerson's historiographers are right to underscore his importance in that aspect. Without doubt there is a need to expand and 'complexify' its profile and rewrite the history of the historiography of French philosophy of the sciences and question the dated interpretations. There is also a need, however, to avoid replacing one reductionism with another. Koyré would have developed a very different philosophical work on the sciences if he had not settled on French soil. The same can be said of Mayerson. It is not Koyré who cannot be reduced to "French epistemology" but instead, what needs to be questioned is the excessively narrow and often plurality-lacking way that particular historiographic tendency has been presented.