



PRINCIPLES OF
NON-PHILOSOPHY

FRANÇOIS LARUELLE

TRANSLATED BY NICOLA RUBCZAK AND ANTHONY PAUL SMITH

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François Laruelle

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CLONING THE UNTRANSLATABLE: TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

There is an absolute untranslatable—the Real—before every translation, condemned moreover by the Real to its foreclosure.

FRANÇOIS LARUELLE

Something happens after one first falls in love with philosophy. One's love for a lived experience, an experimental way of moving through an alienating world, gets confused with a faith in some reified object, a discipline, and from there a duty to uphold that faith comes. And what used to be a love becomes redoubled, a love for the love of wisdom takes on an economy, a law of a household one is trapped in. It is not just in politics that human beings are in chains, but also in their heads, and responding to our yearning to be free, François Laruelle tells us: you always have been. Responding to our alienation from ourselves and to the love and joy found in thinking at first, Laruelle fashions tools and weapons to dis-alienate ourselves, to see that in the very force of thinking, the very moment it is lived, we never were alienated and that our love for theory, for its practice taking place in our bodies, can be reclaimed and refashioned. That we know, as Human-in-person, an inalienable Real that we are, to which philosophy is foreclosed.

The above may seem a strange claim for a book of abstract philosophy, rooted very profoundly in the history of Continental philosophy. But, the reality is that whatever text or conversation first made you fall in love with thinking in the first place seduced you, not with the words of a pedant, comforting your common sense or reassuring you of

whatever notions you already held. But there was something else. Call it wonder, or even annoyance, but at bottom it was the experience of something stranger, a Stranger, that spoke so that you could understand, but always with something hidden, something alluring. This character is present in Laruelle's writing, and perhaps no more so than in *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, where Laruelle speaks to us in language that feels so familiar, but so strange at the same time. And with an utter respect for his reader, attempting to practice theory, not through metaphor or the empirical example, but trusting that his reader will see that here Laruelle says what he does and does what he says. And that is, quite simply, to think and create theory for human beings, to practice a love that has been lost. It does this not by destroying philosophy, but by recasting the relationship completely, of thinking its practice under different axioms (hence the analogy made in the name non-philosophy, as is now well-known, is non-Euclidean geometry, which of course did not destroy Euclidean geometry).

Principles of Non-Philosophy has a special place in the development of Laruelle's non-philosophy. It fits securely in the phase he calls Philosophy III. Smith has explained at length the periodization of works that Laruelle has given to the development of non-philosophy elsewhere, but in short what it represents are phases, or what Laruelle also calls waves, that represent changes in axioms and in the regional materials (philosophical and extra-philosophical) he engages with, but with the same general form and guiding problems.¹ In this regard, *Principles* represents the first truly mature phase of non-philosophy and the most rigorous explication of the underlying method used in future works. Laruelle is perhaps best known for his global critique of the form of philosophical practice, represented in English by the 2010

translation of his 1987 book *Philosophies of Difference*. But this work, one of the most important of Philosophy II, acted in a polemical and antagonistic manner towards standard philosophy. In short, what marks this work and the others of Philosophy II is a subjection of philosophy to science as practices in the scientific posture or stance. Laruelle came to see this as a simple inversion of philosophy's own sense of self-importance, its sufficiency, and a repetition of philosophy's tendency to overdetermine everything it claims to give an account of through whatever Philosophy of X, and came to think that rejecting this simple inversion in favor of a "democracy (of) thought" or "unified theory of philosophy and science" (or art, or religion, or ethics, etc.) was necessary in order to truly achieve a non-philosophy.

And that is the goal in *Principles*, mainly through an engagement with science. However, this is not science as represented by a particular empirical form, or what Laruelle would call "regional", but science in the large sense as a represented, albeit in an overdetermined way, by epistemology. So the task in *Principles* is to deal with some of the foundational questions that abide for philosophers of science and scientists in the field, like the relation between subject and object, the question of the ability of thought to represent what we might call "complex objects", causality, and the relationship between a part of reality, reason, and reality itself (or what Laruelle calls the Real, to differentiate it from a reality made all-too mundane and worldly). And through this engagement, Laruelle is able to rethink some of the underlying aspects of non-philosophy, most notably perhaps we see his theory of Philosophical Decision, begun in earnest in *Philosophies of Difference*, find its mature and complete form here.

Out of this method came a number of other important works dealing with art, religion, and ethics (many which have or are set to be released in English translation in the coming years). And so *Principles* stands as an operating manual, relatively unchanged, that outlines the most important concepts and method of non-philosophy. Its only rivals for this status would be the earlier *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, though this work is tainted by its simple inversion of the standard philosophical overdetermination of science, and the more recent 2010 *Philosophie non-standard. Générique, quantique, philo-fiction*, which claims to have completed non-philosophy in bringing this more abstract development of method together with the concrete though no less abstract practices provided by quantum mechanics. Yet, *Philosophie non-standard* is a clear development from *Principles* in so far as this work completes Laruelle's science of philosophy, making philosophy truly a simple material for the use of new theories combined with a regional knowing (the *gerund* is intentional) like quantum mechanics. Here the democracy-(of)-thought remains, but given a Marxist turn analogous to the Marxist understanding of the relationship between forces of production and the means of production, whereby thinking the relationship of science and philosophy as "underdetermined" by science, meaning that philosophy "goes under" the scientific posture in the same way that one may "go under" anesthesia, where the relative autonomy of philosophy continues but changed in a vital way.

A word on the French context of the book will help bear out the general relationship of non-philosophy to standard philosophy. *Principles of Non-Philosophy* was published in France in 1996 by Presses Universitaires de France (PUF) in the *Épiméthée* series. *Épiméthée*, originally edited by Jean Hyppolite (who took the secret behind the name of the series,

French for Epimetheus, the foolish brother of fellow titan Prometheus, to his grave) and since the early 1980s by Jean-Luc Marion, had been home to a number of important twentieth century philosophical texts, including the majority of French translations of Edmund Husserl and some of Martin Heidegger's most influential texts, as well as major works by Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Henry, while also publishing reprints of important works from the history of philosophy prior to the twentieth century. As a series it has quite simply been the standard-bearer of an important tradition in philosophy, and as such exhibits some of philosophy's dual nature. While the series is ostensibly concerned with phenomenology, it publishes both works that might be considered establishment-style philosophy, a kind of history of philosophy confusing itself with philosophy in flesh and blood, and books that had and perhaps continue to have the possibility of breaking apart and constructing anew the very practice of philosophy.

And so it is somewhat strange to find here one of Laruelle's most important texts in the construction of his non-philosophy since he is self-proclaimed non-philosopher, once accused by Jacques Derrida of being a terrorist within philosophy. And for the Anglophone philosophical establishment if someone is a terrorist to Jacques Derrida, then they must be the devil incarnate for "proper philosophy" of the English sitting-rooms of Oxbridge and depopulated American university towns. What the reader will find here is a work of a contemporary thinker, one who perhaps rightly passes for a philosopher, that draws from those established schools before him, both from when they were themselves young and radical, and from their nadir as custodians of what became an establishment. He does not take their lives from

them, like a terrorist, but instead Laruelle practices a form of thought more akin to dumpster diving or gaming the system. While, as he says in the pages that follow, every new philosophy has tried to succeed another one only to become precisely a repetition of *Philosophy* or philosophy qua philosophy, Laruelle aims to experience life outside of this repetition using the means provided to him by human theories and practices. The great deconstructive rebels of what had become a moribund phenomenology ended up in their later years trying to protect the dignity of philosophy, taking on the tradition (in the sense of a fight) only to end up taking on the tradition (in the sense of carrying it and bearing the burden of homage to it). Laruelle instead picks at philosophy or cons it, not for mere survival, but in order to carve out a life and a defense against the system of philosophy itself. Non-philosophy truly does exist outside the system of philosophy and the appearance of this text in such a prestigious series speaks only to Laruelle's status as a kind of Marrano, one who practices their true faith in secret, using the tools of those who would oppress them.

For this is a common claim of Laruelle, that non-philosophy is a weapon, a tool that is lived out in the defense of human beings. While some of the early Anglophone reception of Laruelle has misunderstood him as a scientific thinker or one who has nothing but contempt for human beings in the name of some impersonal Real, the truth is that non-philosophy is "non-humanist" theory. The meaning is, of course, that what we find here is not typical philosophical humanism, represented in everyday culture as a privileging of some claimed universal human being that is in reality taken as a heteronormative, white, healthy male. But instead the question of the human is open in non-philosophy, even as the human or what he comes to call Human-in-person

is also the name of the Real. It is not the Real that is impersonal, but rather the Real is foreclosed to philosophy, represented not in some anti-humanist hatred or indifference towards human beings, but in the maxim that, “Philosophy was made for man, not man for philosophy.” While throughout the history of philosophy there is no lack of definitions for human beings, they always *represent* or overdetermine the human in or under some other phenomenon under or beyond it, whether it be “rational animal”, “thinking subject”, “overman”, “Dasein”, “desiring machine”, to say nothing of the more insidious “common sense” notions like “free individual”. Non-philosophy is in part the attempt to think what philosophy and science, theory and practice generally, can do for human beings without attempting to dominate them or accept the common, nearly unconscious, everyday notions of what exactly a human is, does, or means, and *Principles* is the handbook for that practice.

While in *Principles* the reader will find only a single original footnote by Laruelle, and this only to signal the work of his friend Serge Valdinoci called *europanalysis*, there are still clear concepts and images freely taken and used from a plethora of establishment and radical philosophers: Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Deleuze, Badiou, and even Gödel and Lacan. Perhaps though, the two most important reference points are Marx and Husserl, alongside Fichte whose *Wissenschaftslehre* is explicitly adapted and mutated. For, to Laruelle, these are the thinkers who have taken the notion of a scientific philosophy the furthest. Both err in their own way; Marx goes too far towards empiricism and Husserl too far towards transcendentalism, but their efforts, even as philosophers, have to be respected even if through a non-philosophical

indifference, and that respect takes the form of drawing materials from both that come to form the core concepts of non-philosophy, albeit in mutated form: namely the Husserlian question of what a subject is alongside the question of phenomenology's Transcendental Ego (and the related question of the "givenness" of phenomena) and the development of the Marxist concept of determination in the last instance, alongside a development of Fichte's radicalization of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in his philosophy of a priori knowing. The development of these notions forms the bulk of *Principles* and so we will not subject the reader to a representation of what they can read for themselves directly, but we will say that these notions are surrounded by constructions native to Laruelle's corpus as well, namely cloning, First Science, Philosophical Decision, and perhaps most importantly force-(of)-thought.

Laruelle's work is not easy to translate and *Principles* is no exception. While his French is relatively simple, sometimes ambiguities do arise through his reliance on interrogative pronouns and demonstrative pronouns in the course of his long sentences. Laruelle will often playfully ape the style of some other philosopher and in some ways *Principles* does that by drawing on the German thinkers Kant, Fichte, and Husserl, whose eighteenth and nineteenth century Germanic styles are taken up into Laruelle's experimental use of French. Trying to balance these constant (and unspoken) references with Laruelle's own experimental *and* rigorous use of language has at times proven a challenge. Yet, it exposes and undermines what we might name a Principle of Sufficient Translation that itself lies at the heart of the standard philosophy of translation.

Principles is a text that is itself concerned with the issue of translation, though from the language of one particular

philosophy to another, with something untranslatable in-the-last-instance that allows the very possibility of such a translation. Consider, in addition to the epigraph opening this introduction above, these remarks from *Principles*:

It is thus in this theoretical usage, in this transcendental theory of private philosophical languages (at once general and total), from this non-linguistic identity of language, that the problem arises of a translation of philosophies “into” one another, which is to say in-Onein-the-last-instance, rather than an inter-philosophical translation under the ultimate authority of philosophy. Non-philosophy is this translation of Kant “into” Descartes, of Descartes “into” Marx, of Marx “into” Husserl”, etc. That is to say under the condition of the vision-inOne as un-translatable Real. To put it more rigorously, no more than it is im-possible or un-symbolizable, the Real is not un-translatable, but is rather that which renders the possibility of translation real-inthe-last-instance, the Real itself being foreclosed, without negation, to any translation and not becoming the untranslatable other than as force-(of)-thought or, in this instance, force-(of)-translation. It is in this manner, through a translation of philosophical decisions or through solely transcendental equivalents of their respective identity, that a democracy that is not a simple transcendental appearance can be introduced into philosophy and between philosophies in place of their conflictual and hierarchical multiplicity.

There is no contradiction here; the Real is untranslatable in the sense of its foreclosure (as the epigraph says), but this is not a negation of the fact of translatability, but instead a kind of manifestation of the superlative character of the Real. The Real cannot be captured by philosophy, but instead authorizes the equivalency of all philosophies, all knowings,

as relative before the Real. Or, in other words, the Real is not ineffable, but infinitely effable.

While Laruelle is here speaking of his own translation of, say, Husserl into Marx (or vice versa), we can see how this applies to the translation of French philosophy into English. Anyone who has ever struggled with thought in another language can see the truth here and may even see the freedom from the Principle of Sufficient Translation offered here. All too often one thinks there may be some strict equivalent word in English for whatever language one is working with. But the reality is that in each language something is always at play, something is always lived (as Laruelle will say), that simply is not captured in the movement from one language to another. In many ways, in flagrant disregard for the desire of translators, the practice of translating already manifests this in-the-last-instance as one has to make a decision for what word to use from English when dealing with (in this case) a French word that has very different resonances, multiple senses, sometimes related etymologies but with very different contemporary implications, etc. And these decisions, just like particular philosophical decisions, are not arbitrary (none of this is an apology for simple errors that can creep into the translation process), but they are also not nearly sufficient.

So in the spirit of non-philosophy, we consider this translation a *clone* of the original French. A clone in the non-philosophical sense is not a simple representation, presenting again the original, nor is it a copy of the original. But it carries within it the underlying code of the original. And so in that spirit we have stuck, as earlier Smith did in *Future Christ*, to a relatively literal translation, for a few reasons. First, Laruelle's style in the French has a very particular feel, playing with syntax in a way that intentionally brings attention to it. Since syntax is the stuff of

communication, bringing such attention to bear can have the effect of making it, in everyday terms, “awkward” but such awkwardness has a specific intention here and the best way to capture that tone is to stick with it in the English—that is to say, the English is (or at least ought to be) no more awkward than the French, and vice versa. Second, Laruelle makes the claim that non-philosophy has a quality of saying what it does and doing what it says, or of carrying forth its theory through a specific practice of writing that is also theorized at the same time in the carrying out of its practice. Thus, owing to the close relationship of French and English linguistically, it seemed to us best to tend towards this literal approach. But another clone would have been possible! The important thing here is that the translation carries forth the code of non-philosophy, allows it to manifest in English in flesh and blood, real-in-the-last-instance but without any claim to being sufficient in itself to the Real as such.

Still, a few remarks on specifics related to the translation. First, the multitude of philosophical vocabularies plus the challenges posed by Laruelle’s own French, confirmed our decision to undertake this translation as two, combining our various skills to provide the best translation we could. In general, to the best of our abilities and combined knowledge, we have tried to stick with established translations of terms from the various philosophical vocabularies Laruelle works with in *Principles*, largely for the sake of familiarity so that readers conversant with the history of philosophy can recognize these instances.

Following discussions with Robin Mackay we have translated *force (de) pensée*, and other constructions that take this form, as force-(of)-thought, hyphenated to highlight the unified, or “in-One” character of the idea, with the

parenthetical suspension of the possessive as in the French. Some constructions have been rendered with a different formulation of the possessive, for example Real('s)-essence, so that they can be read in the same way as, for example, “force-thought” (still with the possessive “of ” visible but suspended), in this case “Real-essence”.

As Laruelle engages with phenomenology throughout *Principles* while also engaging with the empirical sciences, he has seen fit to use the English word *data* when he means the sense of *datum* or variables given and used in scientific discourse. The typical French word for this is *donné*, but because of its use in phenomenology and emphasis on the “givenness” of objects we have translated this consistently as “given”.

Another linguistic tussle was presented in the form of the translation of *connaissance* and *savoir*, both usually translated as “knowledge”. Here, we have translated *connaissance* as “knowledge” and *savoir* as “knowing”, the gerund form intending to imply the wider and more abstract notion.

We have also translated *la-philosophie* and similar forms by capitalizing and italicizing the word (i.e. *Philosophy*), which marks a difference from the translation of *Future Christ* where it was translated as the-philosophy. This form taken here matches how a similar formulation in Lacan’s French is translated in English.

The planned work on this translation took a very different shape than we originally planned, after Anthony was forced to leave the UK under new immigration rules upon finishing his PhD. So, aside from the usual arguments (mostly friendly) that co-translators have, we also had to navigate the antagonisms of our different software

packages which broke our hearts more than once. We were able to work together in flesh and blood as well thanks to a number of people who financially helped us. A special thank you goes to John Mullarkey, who supported this project with Continuum and organized two events in London with Laruelle which allowed us to meet and work together on the translation. Thanks also to Marjorie Gracieuse and Iain Campbell for housing us during these two trips. Anthony would like to thank the many supporters and readers of his group blog An und für sich who donated money, as well as the participants who paid to take part in his para-academic on-line seminar on Laruelle's non-philosophy. The money raised by these endeavors allowed us to spend four weeks together in Dundee, Scotland over the course of June and July of 2012 working over and finishing the translation. An extra special thank you goes to Nova Rubczak who, during this time, furnished us with coffees, teas, entertainment, and other provisions. We would also like to thank each other, however indulgent that may appear, for each supporting the other where one or the other felt deficient. Finally, our sincere thanks and admiration to Anne-Françoise Schmid and François Laruelle, for their hospitality and continued friendship. While friendship is lived and never merely a reciprocal exchange we hope that the labor undertaken here is a sign of profound gratitude for what remains unspoken.

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