

## ***Becoming philosophe: constructing academic and professional legitimacy in early 19<sup>th</sup>-Century France***

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### **RESUMO**

Os anos 1810-1820 são um ponto cego na historiografia da filosofia acadêmica francesa. No entanto, eles correspondem à formalização de padrões disciplinares e profissionais, associados ao nascimento institucional da história da filosofia. Este artigo analisa as estratégias utilizadas para justificar a institucionalização da história da filosofia. Mais especificamente, mostra que a apresentação da filosofia como ciência funciona principalmente como um dispositivo retórico, em vez de se basear em uma transformação real das práticas intelectuais.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Degérando, Laromiguière, Royer-Collard, Cousin, disciplinas acadêmicas.

### **ABSTRACT**

The years 1810-1820 are a blind spot in the historiography of academic French philosophy. However, they correspond to the formalization of disciplinary and professional standards, associated with the institutional birth of the history of philosophy. This article analyzes the strategies used to justify the institutionalization of the history of philosophy. More specifically, it shows that the presentation of philosophy as a science functions primarily as a rhetorical device rather than is grounded in an actual transformation of intellectual practices.

**KEYWORDS:** Degérando, Laromiguière, Royer-Collard, Cousin, academic disciplines.

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## Introduction

The relationship between “philosophy”, as a speculative exercise pretending to a very high level of generality, and its contexts of elaboration, is a question traditionally debated within humanities and social sciences departments. Among others, König-Pralong (2017) has articulated the issue by underscoring the tension in philosophical historiography between a conception of philosophy as a human science and one that draws it closer to the natural sciences—i.e., between a *relativist* tendency that acknowledges the historically situated nature of its practices and their outcome, and a *universalist* tendency that seeks to reach the “true”. The implications of this debate extend beyond the domain of epistemology, as they call into question the legitimacy of philosophy as a science, in a context where it is also a profession.

A retrospective analysis of the historical evolution of this debate reveals the variety of operations involved in producing the ideals of “truth”, “comprehensiveness” and “objectivity” which are constitutive of the practices of professional historians of philosophy today (Daston & Galison, 2007; Waquet, 2015). Historians of education also emphasized the processes of negotiation between social groups to have these ideals, understood in a particular way, inscribed in the institution, using a vast range of tools, including, among others, curricula, teacher inspection and recruitment competitions.

The case of France is interesting to study in this context, since after the social movements of “May 68”, such a historical (re)turn served to reshape the *philosophe* profession (Châtelet, 1970). Making the genesis of the history of philosophy as a discipline was then helpful to diagnose the challenges it was facing, and had a lasting impact on the way in which the history of philosophy as a profession has been

conducted since. In the wake of Châtelet, the specter of Victor Cousin (1792-1867), an actor held responsible for the prevailing form of professional philosophy, has been exhumed, either to ward it off or, conversely, to assume its legacy. Yet, while Cousin's role in the institutionalization of philosophy as a professional and scholarly practice cannot be denied, he was not at the origin of it in the strict sense. He certainly exerted a lasting influence, but as a philosophy teacher and reformer in a context where philosophy had already acquired an institutional existence.

This discrepancy has received scant attention from historians, who generally consider that after the formal establishment of the *classe de philosophie* (1809), it was not until twenty years later, and not until Cousin, that the first real attempts were made to establish professional standards. The result is a real blind spot in the history of the institutionalization of philosophy in 19th-Century France, despite the fact that it has been the subject of much research over the last thirty years and the seminal work by Vermeren (1995). Far from being a mere historiographical lacuna, it may be a sign of the long-term success of Cousin's strategy of appropriating the creations of others and presenting himself as the "restorer of philosophy". Consequently, examining the controversies surrounding the "birth of philosophy" as a profession in France may shed light on the polemical construction of professional norms.

In attempting to understand the obscurity in which the birth of philosophy as a discipline in France has been left, it is therefore less relevant to consider it as a *historical fact*—reducible to this or that act of State authority or of other actors—than as an *object of discourse* articulated to institutional strategies. More specifically, the point of this paper is to analyze the transformation of the rhetoric element "birth of philosophy" into a pseudo-historical reality.

In line with this approach, I will focus here on the period of cohabitation between the first generation of philosophy teachers and their cumbersome successor, Victor Cousin, i.e. between the creation of philosophy chairs at lycées and in the Facultés (1809) and Cousin's institutional advent twenty years later. During this period, Cousin took stock of the history of philosophy, which was in fact a way of purging the institutional arena of philosophical adversaries and competitors (Antoine-Mahut, 2019a).

This paper then shows that Cousin shares with his predecessors the idea that, in order to become institutionalized, philosophy must present itself as a “science” within a system of knowledge production in transition between a *humanist* and a *disciplinary* approach (Gibbons et al., 1994). However, this claim is based more on rhetorical argument than on any real community of practice with the positive sciences.

## **The establishment of the Université and the first philosophy teachers**

The status of philosophy in the French curriculum is often regarded as a distinctive feature within the European context, since, almost continuously since 1809, it has been the subject of specific teaching (Poucet, 2012). However, this status is partly contingent. Due to its close links with the revolutionary enterprise, the category of “philosophy” was initially excluded from the institutional reforms of the early 19th century, as Napoleon Bonaparte was trying to distance himself from it. In the lycées created in 1802, only lessons of “logic” were provided for, even though the lycées were presented as a return to the institutional structures of the Ancien Régime, during which the

curriculum usually ended with one or two years of “philosophy”. The rationale underlying this choice is given in the explanatory statement of the law: the aim is to reserve within the higher classes only what is “directly useful for the study of the sciences”, by getting rid of “metaphysics”<sup>1</sup>. The term *metaphysics* was used here less to refer to an area of philosophical knowledge in the strict sense of the term than as an insult to pejoratively label the philosophy practiced at the Institut national des sciences et des arts.

The recreation of a “philosophy” class seven years later (1809) is linked to the emergence of a new class of scholars who also distanced themselves from the metaphysics of the Institut, even though they were linked to it. Among them, Pierre Laromiguière (1756-1837), Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard (1763-1845) and Joseph-Marie Degérando (1772-1842) were directly involved in the creation of philosophy teaching. Although they came from different intellectual backgrounds, they had a common thread: they succeeded in winning Napoléon’s confidence, i.e. in demonstrating the moral harmlessness of their philosophy. In essence, Napoleon’s strategy entailed the establishment of an administration tasked with fostering a consolidated public sentiment that endorsed the regime (Novak, 2023) and which would be “a guarantee against theories that were pernicious and subversive of the social order”<sup>2</sup>.

Laromiguière was a well-known professor of philosophy under the Ancien Régime. He held a position in Toulouse for twenty years when he was called to Paris upon the opening of the École normale. He gained recognition with his *Projet d’éléments de métaphysique*, a short essay based on Condillac, but giving greater prominence than him to the activity of the soul (Laromiguière, 2026), which he distributed to the

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<sup>1</sup> Motifs de la loi relative à la formation d’un corps enseignant, 6 May 1806.

<sup>2</sup> Paris, Archives nationales [now AN], AF/IV/909: Note from the Emperor to the ministre de l’Intérieur, 21 March 1808.

Parisian *philosophe* elite. The general aim of this text was as an attempt to oppose the materialist readings of Condillac's philosophy in order to found a science of the analysis of ideas that is compatible with Christian Revelation. Thus, far from being reduced to the pejorative labels of 'idéologue' or 'sensualist' which he has often been associated with (Picavet, 1891), Laromiguière exemplifies a *juste milieu* stance that made him the ideal candidate to be the first holder of the chair of philosophy at the prestigious Faculté des lettres de Paris, which he assumed on 19 September 1809.

Similarly, Royer-Collard lived through the political regimes of the late 18th century. He refused to compromise either with the Revolution and the restoration of an Ancien Régime monarchy, and called for a moderate monarchy based on law and above all associated with a "spiritual restoration" (Jacouty, 2008, p.82). During the Empire, he published violent attacks against the "philosophical doctrine" and its "disastrous influence" on morals and politics, in the very official *Journal de l'Empire* (30 August 1806), which brought him to the attention of the political authorities. However, it would be wrong to regard Royer-Collard as an *antiphilosophe*. On the one hand, because such rhetoric was widespread in the columns of the *Journal*; on the other, because those very articles from Royer-Collard concluded with a symmetrical denunciation of "the detractors of philosophy who accuse it of leading to destruction only" (*Journal de l'Empire*, 19 March 1807). It is therefore clear that this was less a mere denunciation of philosophy than a way of promoting a form of philosophy grounded in different values. This explains why, in October 1810, Royer-Collard was appointed to the chair of history of philosophy at the Faculté des lettres de Paris, replacing Emmanuel de Pastoret, who had held it only on an honorary basis.

Dégérando also held teaching posts, but on a lesser scale: in an X and an XI, he was in charge of the "moral philosophy" course at the

*Lycée républicain*, where many ‘Idéologues’ taught as well. During the Empire, he played a prominent role in the administration of public education. First of all, he was General Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior (1804), from where he closely monitored the execution of the 1802 *décret* creating lycées. Napoleon also put him in charge of reorganising the Universities of Turin (1805) and Florence (1808) (Chappey et al., 2014). Ultimately, in France this time, Napoleon invited him to attend meetings to discuss the new public education plan in January 1808<sup>3</sup>. At that precise juncture, Degérando wrote a long letter defending the creation of a philosophy class in the lycées (to which we will return later in this article<sup>4</sup>). Degérando owed his position as an intimate of Napoleon to the fact that he embodied an ideal of political and philosophical conciliation, which made him the ideal executor of the Emperor’s ‘fusion’ project: while practicing the analysis of ideas that was the hallmark of the ‘new philosophy’ despised by Napoleon, he maintained that the truths discovered in this way served above all as “confirmation” of the maxims of the Christian religion (Yuva, 2014).

All three thus have in common that they were men of trust for Napoleon’s authoritarian regime and that they were conciliatory, even actively involved, in his Empire-wide cultural propaganda policy. This common disposition enabled them to gain access to privileged positions in order to establish standards for professional activity, which at the time was largely unregulated (Ribard, 2000). In addition to their joint, albeit differentiated, importance in the administrative process of creating philosophy teaching at the lycée, the chairs held by Laromiguière and Royer-Collard had a major influence in France during the First Empire as their classes were attended primarily by students from the École

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<sup>3</sup> AN, AF/IV/1050: Letter from Degérando to the Emperor, 6 February 1808.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Degérando to the Emperor, 7 January 1808.

normale, the future lycée teachers of the Empire—including Victor Cousin.

Secondly, they share an active use of scientific rhetoric to defend the usefulness of philosophy in the face of a political power reluctant to give such a category any visibility. In 1810, at a time when philosophy classes were being opened in every lycée, the Grand-Maître de l'Université, Louis de Fontanes, stated in a circular to the *recteurs d'académie* that “in no religious instruction, in no academic discourse [...] should the word *philosopher* or *antiphilosopher* ever be uttered”<sup>5</sup>, for fear of reviving old quarrels. The issue at stake in the discussions to be held, on the philosophers’ side, can thus be understood as a redefinition and revaluation of the label. Although Laromiguière, Degérando and Royer-Collard all took the floor to defend this project, they did so in institutional spaces that gave their words a different weight and led them to adopt slightly different rhetorical strategies.

## Degérando and philosophy as natural history

Degérando is the first to defend ‘philosophy’, in the long letter to the Emperor dated 7 January 1808 aforementioned. The institutional context in which it was written is crucial to understanding the status of its arguments. Its primary purpose was to present, in anticipation, the conclusions of the *Rapport historique sur les progrès de la philosophie depuis 1789* that Degérando had just completed. He had been commissioned to do so on 29 May 1807 by the History and Ancient Literature class of the Institut National, following a decree issued by

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy, Archives départementales de Meurthe-et-Moselle, 1 T 2027: Circular to the *recteurs*, 21 January 1810. This was sent to every académie.



Napoleon, then First Consul, five years prior<sup>6</sup>. The plan was for this report to be delivered personally to the Emperor by the secretary of each *classe*, who would explain its ins and outs—a presentation that took place on 20 February 1808. In fact, the very content of Degérando's report meant that this presentation had to be anticipated and its conclusions justified in private: firstly, of all the reports, the one on philosophy was the most controversial—‘the most delicate part’, in Degérando's words—and, secondly, its conclusions ran counter to the reforms taken by Napoleon until then.

Indeed, the *Rapport* is very explicitly presented as a defense of philosophy and concludes with the need to “erect a few chairs of philosophy in France, particularly in establishments intended to train teachers” (Degérando, 1810, p.355), even though the plan for the lycées had explicitly been to abolish such chairs (Barancy, forthcoming). Even worse, Degérando (1810, p.346) defended the “metaphysics” practiced at the Institut and the benefits of Condillac's philosophy. In this context, the rhetorical strategy of the letter is twofold. Firstly, unlike many of his contemporaries, Degérando doesn't distinguish between *good* and *bad* philosophy but between *true* and *false* philosophy. This enables him to denounce the “abuses committed in the name of philosophy, in relation to morality, religion and political institutions”, in other words, to save the category from being misappropriated and thus to leave a space open for its institutionalization in the Napoleonic system. More precisely, his point is to call for the institutionalization of “this philosophy which calls on reason, not to proscribe, but to found religious ideas, [...] which respects established institutions”. Behind the conventional theme of the defense of philosophy against unjust attacks—from someone who “from [his] early years, [had] been committed to it”—is in reality the

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<sup>6</sup> *Bulletin des lois de la République française*, vol. 5, n. 167, 1802, p.347.

justification of its political usefulness for the imperial regime. In essence, for Degérando it was a question of presenting philosophy as a foundational knowledge for the regime, not only supporting the progress of the other sciences and the nation's economic prosperity, but also reinforcing political power in its ambition to control and stabilize society—that is to say, to lay the foundation of the Empire's 'official philosophy'.

This first line of defense implies the second, which consists in the very results of the *Rapport*: the defense of philosophy as a science. Firstly, it is worth noting that, in the introduction to his letter, Degérando refers to his writing as a “report on the state and progress of the sciences over the last twenty years”, whereas the official decree explicitly distinguished the *sciences* from the *lettres*, in line with what has been called Napoleon's “epistemological program” (Zékian, 2011). Behind this rapprochement of philosophy with the sciences lay the defense of its positiveness, in an intellectual context where it was massively accused of leading to doubt (Barancy, 2025). This assertion is articulated explicitly in both the letter and the 1808 *Rapport*:

History, considered as a moral picture [*tableau*] of opinions and morals, of the revolutions they have undergone, of the causes and effects of these revolutions, is the first school of philosophy; for philosophy is also an experimental science. (Degérando, 1810, p.329)

Here, the defense of the positivity of philosophy is conveyed by the reference to the idea of experimental science: to apply “Baconian method” (*ibid.*, p.332) to the opinions of the past, considered as factual manifestations of the human effort to appropriate what is true, i.e. to objectify them in the form of a picture (*tableau*) or a comparative model, allows one to produce authentic knowledge. On the other hand, and Degérando is quite clear on this point, to go without a method, in other words to follow the path of the “eclecticism” (*ibid.*, p.297) of the

German philosophers as well as the French encyclopedists, is to put on the same level very different doctrines that are more or less acceptable from a moral point of view. This equivalence risks leading to skepticism, i.e. a position that “confuses truths and errors in a common proscription” (Degérando, 1804, vol.3, p.360). In essence, behind the rhetorical element ‘Baconian method’, Degérando claims the possibility of writing a history structured by choices made or to be made among the past, in opposition to German historians of philosophy who pursue erudition and exhaustiveness for their own sake.

In fact, this *historiographical* critique itself recodes the controversies that were taking place at the same time in France over the epistemology of the life sciences, and more particularly between Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Georges Cuvier—President of the Conseil de l’Université in 1809—over the status of travel and observation. Whereas Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire “matured his ideas far from the museum” (Le Guyader, 1998, p.42), in other words in the field of distant exploration, Cuvier, on the other hand and like Degérando who refused to take part in the Baudin expedition, embodied the figure of the “sedentary scientist” (Chappey, 2002, p.772). This latter position is predicated on the idea that scientificity does not stem from collecting practices in themselves, but from the analysis of materials collected by others. As Findlen and Toledano showed (2018), the rise of comparative anatomy was linked more to the development of natural history museums and private collections than to the transformation of experimental practices. Similarly, in the foreword to his *Histoire comparée*, Degérando emphasizes that his comparative practice takes precedence over that of the “industrious scholars of Germany” (Degérando, 1804, vol.1, p.65), from whom he borrows most of his “material”, i.e. summaries of past philosophical systems. He supplements these with travel accounts such as those of David Cranz, which took the form of decontextualized local

narratives ready to be integrated into European teleology (Jensz & Petterson, 2021). The paradigm nevertheless went beyond Cuvier and Degérando, and even beyond the group of *Observateurs de l'homme*, since, for example, a naturalist like Eugène Patrin states in 1800 that the “materials” for his *Histoire naturelle des minéraux* were “various excellent collections [*recueils*] and other modern works of the greatest merit” (Patrin, 1800, vol.1, p.XXIII).

However, it is important pointing out the limits, i.e the *rhetorical* dimension, of this comparison between the history of philosophy and natural history. Indeed, Cuvier’s comparative approach is based on the discovery of structural correlations between living beings. Then, on the basis of these observed correlations, Cuvier produces a number of ‘systems’ equal to the fundamental variations in these structural homologies (contrary to Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, who, for example, continued to aim for a single system that would bring together all the observations). The result is “four principal forms, four general plans [...] according to which all animals seem to have been modelled” (Cuvier, 1817, p.57). It is true that Degérando’s aimed at producing a classification based on the reconstruction of a very small number of philosophical ‘systems’, based on observations of similarities between doctrines (Degérando, 1804, p.XXVI); and in this sense, he may well present his approach as an “imitation” of that of the naturalists (*ibid.*, p.XXV). But the aim of the work does not so much produce a *conciliation* of the data of experience as, on the basis of a sorting of doctrines according to moral and religious criteria, elements of *consensus*. This dimension, absent from the naturalists’ approach (even if Cuvier’s framework is explicitly that of creationist ‘fixism’), thus leads Degérando to exclude a priori, and without justifying it, many philosophical traditions (Park, 2016, pp.31-50).

It is clear that Degérando's did not sought to adopt the approach of a naturalist in the strict sense of the term but to borrow its paradigm from a dominant science in a field under construction, in order to assert the scientific nature of his own approach in a context in which it was very much devalued: both by a political regime which considers it at best useless, at worst dangerous, and by a scholarly public which, like Jean-Étienne Montucla, equates the "history of the opinions of philosophers" with a mere "compil[ation]" or even fantasized "tales" (Montucla, 1802, pp.655-656).

### **Philosophy class, between *sciences* and *lettres* according to Laromiguière**

Alongside Degérando advocating for the creation of philosophy chairs in 1808, Laromiguière was directly involved in the decision-making process that ultimately led to it. Although he did not himself sit on the Conseil de l'Université, Laromiguière followed its work closely, as it was chaired by Cuvier, a mutual friend of Degérando; he, also was, like them, a member of the Institut and of the *Société des observateurs de l'homme*. Moreover, Laromiguière had a friend of his attending its sessions: Martial Borye Desrenaudes. So, when the Conseil met in December 1808 to draw up new regulations for the lycées, and, in accordance with the University statutes of 1802, made no provision for teaching philosophy, Laromiguière was well kept informed. According to Janet (1848, p.261), he then would have sent Desrenaudes a series of recommendations to read to the Conseil. The Conseil's archives actually mention that "observations" forwarded by Desrenaudes were read<sup>7</sup>. But,

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<sup>7</sup> AN, F/17/\*/1751: Conseil de l'Université, 23 December 1808.

as they were made orally, we only have a record of the debates to which they gave rise—which are quite different from the context reported by Janet in the 1840s. Indeed, the aim of the discussion was to define the respective relationships between *sciences* and *lettres*:

1° Will the simultaneous study of mathematics and humanities [*lettres*] be maintained in lycées, or will the study of mathematics only begin at the time when the humanities [*lettres*] course ends?

2° In which humanities [*humanités*] classes will lycées students begin the study of mathematics?

3° In what proportion will the study of mathematics be combined with that of rhetoric?<sup>8</sup>

In this context—prompted by Laromiguière’s observations—the Conseil decided that the rhetoric course would last two years and that pupils would study *lettres* in the first year and *sciences* in the second, following the model inherited from the colleges of the Ancien Régime. The solution was not satisfactory, however, since the following session, continuing its examination of Laromiguière’s observations, it “decided that the course of study in the lycées would be seven years and that the last year would be specially devoted to philosophy”<sup>9</sup>. These two discussions are directly linked, as the intellectual context at the time was saturated by the “war between science and literature”—an expression referring to the extreme polemical polarization of a debate about the subordination of one to the other. While the official doctrine was that the sciences were fertile ground for revolution, insofar as they “were forced to abandon their old systems every day for the new observations brought about by time or chance”, many former teachers at the Écoles centrales

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* « Humanités » was the generic name given to the last two years (out of six) of the curriculum.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 December 1808.

were campaigning to put the “science du calcul” back at the forefront of teaching (Barancy, forthcoming).

Insofar as philosophy has a hybrid status—neither science nor *lettres*—, it appears to be a way of overcoming this dichotomy and thus of resolving this intellectual war institutionally: which is how it is formally presented in these reports, but also as it is defined by Laromiguière in his opening lesson in April 1811. His discourse dealt with a theme dear to Ideologists: improving the language. Nevertheless, it went beyond Condillac’s model of the ‘language of calculations’ (*langue des calculs*). More precisely, Laromiguière defends the existence of a universal language, but one that differs from both that of mathematicians and that of the great writers, while at the same time being able to be read as underlying these two types of discourse, and which he calls the ‘language of reasoning’ (*langue du raisonnement*; Laromiguière, 1811). This was conceived as a way to reconcile Boileau and Newton, but by a different route to the reductionist one advocated by Cabanis, which subjected belles-lettres to the empire of the sciences (Zékian, 2011).

In essence, Laromiguière’s enterprise consisted in inventing a common paradigm for the *sciences* and the *lettres*, based on an analysis of the formation of our ideas, thus realizing the conciliatory ambition that characterized the whole of Napoleon’s educational project. However relevant he may have been in this respect, Laromiguière’s undertaking was yet hardly a landmark. Firstly, because by the 1810s the philosophy of the Idéologues was largely out of fashion; secondly, because he stopped teaching six months after his opening lesson, in December 1811. Although his biographers have often put forward medical reasons, it seems more plausible to see in this the sign of tensions, within the faculty, with the new school embodied by Royer-Collard and with a political power frankly hostile to Condillac’s legacy, as Laromiguière

continued all of his activities that did not involve teaching (such as his work as the librarian of the Faculté or as an examiner for the *agrégation*). In the same year 1811, Laromiguière was replaced by François Thurot, whose teaching, structured around a definition of philosophy as the *science of facts of consciousness* (Nicolas, 2007, p.136), was close to that of Royer-Collard.

### **Royer-Collard and the institutionalization of the scientific paradigm**

Royer-Collard's institutional position as a professor of the history of philosophy at the Faculté des lettres de Paris gave him the authority and publicity to establish disciplinary and professional standards. Conventionally, his opening lesson entailed a defense and illustration of the discipline. Just as Laromiguière, six months earlier, had emphasized the contributions of philosophy “to the movement of thought and the progress of science” (Laromiguière, 1811, p.1), Royer-Collard defended the capacity of the history of philosophy to produce “results” (Royer-Collard, 2013, p.70). In this context and as Degérando did before him, he emphasizes the benefits of the comparative approach over a strictly narrative history, i.e. one written according to “the order of times [*l'ordre des temps*]” (*ibid.*, p.64), identified with the German histories of philosophy (Brucker, Meiners, Tiedemann, Buhle; *ibid.*, p.71). Once again, this methodological gap is presented as the condition for “elevating the history of philosophy to the dignity of a science” (*ibid.*, p.73); it is also referred to “some excellent works” recently published—a formula referring unambiguously in 1811 to that of Degérando. Lastly, it is important to stress out with Landrin (2007) the



very strong heteronomy of philosophical knowledge from political power: the production of a history that is a “true science” is presented here as a “duty” imposed by the Grand-Maître Fontanes, as opposed to a “frivolous” but also “dangerous” philosophy (Royer-Collard, 2013, p.73)—Royer-Collard using here the very same rhetorical elements as Napoleon in 1808.

From a rhetorical point of view, Royer-Collard reproduces all the markers bequeathed by Degérando. This is hardly surprising, given that the field of the history of philosophy had been profoundly renewed by Degérando, at least on an institutional level. In this context, his opening lesson may well be seen as an important step in the formalization of professional standards. Namely, it truly inaugurates the tradition of the history of philosophy *à la française*, i.e. a history less sensitive to the chronological development of thought than to a structural analysis of ‘philosophical systems’, a tradition to which Cousin would later give great visibility (Moreau, 2018). However, the lectures given by Royer-Collard at the Faculté des lettres in the two years that followed partly contradict this inaugural presentation.

To be precise, the lessons<sup>10</sup> undertake an important reformulation of the status of observation and the observer. While Royer-Collard, like Degérando, insists on the foundational nature of observation in the history of philosophy, it is no longer a question of relying on recorded observations made by others. As Montègre has pointed out (2024, p.285), such a *sense of observation* has an eminently collective dimension. Royer-Collard, on the other hand, promotes a solitary observation that belongs to the philosopher alone:

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<sup>10</sup> We refer here to the lessons of 1812-1813 as published in fragments by Corinne Doria from a second-hand source (Royer-Collard, 2013), as well as to Joseph Guignault’s handwritten notes on these same lessons (archives of the École normale supérieure, Ms 15/1).

The observation of human nature, like that of the physical world, consists in a review of the facts. [...] Where are the facts? They are in ourselves and in others. We therefore obtain them through our own experience and that of others; and observation must be as extensive as this dual experience. (Royer-Collard, 2013, p.113)

Where Degérando valued above all the experience of past centuries (Barancy, 2025), Royer-Collard adds another type of experience: inner experience. He thus pluralizes the “materials” of philosophy (Royer-Collard, 2013, p.113) in order to found a *psychology* behind the title “history of philosophers’ opinions”. Then, the scientificity of philosophy is no longer measured by the quality of the analysis of past philosophies, nor by the ability to establish a classification of these philosophies as do the naturalists, but by an individual’s own competence to observe himself.

This reversal was made possible by two withdrawals. Firstly, that of Pastoret, whose place Royer-Collard took at the Faculté des lettres—Pastoret was renowned (and praised as such by Degérando in the 1808 *Rapport*, p.331) for his comparative approach to philosophy and legislation. With Royer-Collard, the methodological break is clear. Secondly, that of Laromiguière, who ceased to teach from the start of the 1811 academic year, replaced by Thurot. It illustrates, more generally, the crisis of the Condillacian or post-Condillacian heritage embodied by the latter and which Napoleon despised. After receiving a report on Royer-Collard’s introductory lecture, he said he was pleased to see “a new and very serious philosophy rising up in [his] University, which will be able to rid us of Idéologues” (quoted by Merlet, 1878, pp.138-139). From a philosophical perspective, the break was even sharper than with Pastoret. As Landrin (2007) points out, the rhetoric of *inner observation*, borrowed from Reid and Dugald Stewart, to whom Royer-Collard makes a major contribution in his teaching, makes it possible to restore

the possibility that there are truths that cannot be proven by experience, i.e. that are prior to any form of sensation.

This explains the absence of a historical dimension in his lectures, unless one understands this to mean a critical review of predecessors in the exercise of studying and classifying facts of consciousness: i.e. the program that Victor Cousin followed when he replaced Royer-Collard in 1815, and which he presented as his own in 1826 (Antoine-Mahut, 2019a).

### **Victor Cousin: philosophical appropriation and institutional reform**

Cousin began his career as a philosophy teacher, following in the footsteps of Royer-Collard, whose deputy he became in 1815. Praised for his oratory skills and, above all, for the explicitly political tone of his lectures, which this time were directed *against* the regime, he quickly emerged as the leader of the ‘new philosophy’ in France. This position meant both distinguishing himself from his predecessors and appropriating their legacy, but without saying so. The distancing was clear from Cousin’s opening lecture in 1815. While praising the “usefulness” of the comparative approach “bequeathed to us by M. Degérando and M. Royer-Collard”, he also described it as a “false method” that violated the “historical order” and, ultimately, as a “dangerous method” (Cousin, 1855, p.3). In reality, this is mainly a rhetorical device to mask the strict adherence to their epistemological program (establishing psychology) and even the doxographic model, since Cousin does nothing more than present a decontextualized history with a very low degree of historicity (Barancy, 2025). He even borrows

Dégérando's rhetoric of 'pacification' to describe his own 'eclectic' project, which he nevertheless presents as something new (Antoine-Mahut, 2019a).

Furthermore, Cousin continued his predecessors' project of making philosophy a science. However, as illustrated by the replacement of Bacon as the guiding figure with Descartes (or rather a Descartes expurgated of his scientific texts; see Antoine-Mahut, 2026), this *philosophical science* would henceforth be considered separate from the positive sciences. This led some of his biographers, such as Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire, to write that with Cousin, "philosophy was no longer to be science, but history" (1895, p.303). But Cousin himself was clear about him founding a "subjective science", as early as 1817 (Cousin, 1826, p.229). This paradoxical formulation makes full sense in the context of the rise of physiology, made possible by a more conciliatory political regime and the development of medical institutions, accompanied by a standardization of medical practices. However, physiology claimed for itself the title of 'science of man'. In this context, Cousin had to assert at once 1) the scientific nature, 2) the specificity and 3) the autonomy of philosophy from the physical or 'material' sciences (Antoine-Mahut, 2019b).

In summary, Cousin borrows Dégérando's doxographic model and eclectic project, and Royer-Collard's idea that philosophy is above all a psychology, in order to re-establish the criterion of scientificity in philosophy in the face of competition from physiologists who are rehabilitating the legacy of Condillac and Idéologues (Lézé, 2024). However, such a project also comes with the pretension of presenting oneself as the father of the new philosophy. This time, Cousin enters into dialogue more directly with Laromiguière—no longer to criticize his sensualism (Cousin, 1829), but to retrospectively and posthumously appropriate what he identifies as his spiritualism. More precisely, this

approach, essentially carried out in the speech Cousin gave at Laromiguière's funeral (1837), consists in distinguishing the latter from the group of Idéologues, granting him the status of precursor of "the philosophy of our time" (*ibid.*, p.5), namely that which rehabilitated "intelligence in its activity, in its independence, in its dignity" (*ibid.*, p.6). Thus, Cousin reinterprets Laromiguière's work in a philosophical context that is completely different from what it was, i.e. through the prism of the distinction between the soul and the body: Laromiguière is the one who, against the domination of the physical sciences, came to re-establish a philosophy of the activity of the soul—what Cousin proposed to call 'Psychology' and was soon to include in the curriculum.

This last point helps us understand Cousin's role in formalizing professional standards for philosophical activity. He did not invent or create the 'discipline' of philosophy any more (nor any less) than Degérando, Laromiguière or Royer-Collard. However, he is responsible for administrative measures that were unparalleled in comparison with those of his predecessors. By gaining access to every possible position of power in the management of public education, he created the conditions for the long-term reproduction of standards that he rewrote in close dialogue with his predecessors. Paradoxically, this eminently strategic dimension of the idea of the 'birth' of philosophy in France, which aimed to decontextualize specific political actions, had two effects: it denied that philosophy could be a science, thereby discrediting philosophy as a discipline, and it denied the undeniably philosophical dimension of these methodological choices.

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