

Interview with Catherine Malabou

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Dr. Malabou was interviewed by Gerardo Flores Peña. July 25th, 2017.

Catherine Malabou is a professor of philosophy at The European Graduate School / EGS and professor of modern European philosophy at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) at Kingston University, London. She is known for her work on plasticity, a concept she culled from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which has proved fertile within contemporary economic, political, and social discourses. Widely regarded as one of the most exciting figures in what has been called "The New French Philosophy," Malabou's research and writing covers a range of figures and issues, including the work of Hegel, Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida; the relationship between philosophy, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis; and concepts of essence and difference within feminism. She is the author of important books as *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (2009), *Changing differences* (2011) and most recently *Before tomorrow : epigenesis and rationality* (2017).

What attracted you to the academy and how philosophy changed your view of the world?

This is an interesting and important question to the extent that philosophy on the one hand, academia on the other, have long time been conflictual entities for me. When I first discovered philosophy, I was eighteen. Philosophy is compulsory in high school in France. Even if I didn't have any command of the philosophical problems at the time, it immediately appeared to me that philosophy was an emancipatory discipline. First of all politically, as a way of challenging

authority in general. Then intellectually as well, of course, as a discipline for the mind and a good orthopedics. Not in the Foucaultian sense, but in the pedagogic sense. Then, when I went to university in Paris two years later, I discovered that "orthopedic" had to be taken in the Foucaultian sense! The teaching, the norms for writing, the content of classes, the absence of all vitality, struck me as constituting a form of intellectual prison house. Not to speak about the hierarchy. For a long time, I have suffered from my too obvious spontaneity, the way in which I systematically forgot to say "Professor" before speaking, my lack of deference, etc. I never knew how to be a sycophant. This has affected my career for a long time. My feeling of being estranged in the academia was the same as a student and as a teacher. I then had to enter academia myself, because what else can you do when you are a philosopher? I love teaching though. Teaching has always saved me. But I don't like institutional power. I am not a woman of power. It took me years and years to find a way to harmonize my status as an academic and my essence as a free thinker. Now, at almost sixty, I am all right!!!

To answer the second part of your question, philosophy didn't change my vision of the world, it gave me one! It literally opened the world to me. Before studying philosophy, I didn't have any vision of the world at all. My life was a kind of kaleidoscopic patchwork of different interests, desires, affects, with no unity and no structure. If I am so interested in plasticity, it is because philosophy was for me the very first plastic operation, which shaped both my spirit and my world.

Who were some of your mentors during your academic formation, and what did you learn from them?

From my high school teacher, whose name was Monique Nigues, I learned how to enlarge my scope, how to transform the dull small provincial city in which I lived with my parents (Limoges, in the center of France) into imaginary geographies,

both in the literal sense (philosophy gave me the desire to travel), and in the metaphorical one (to explore intellectual geography by reading the philosophers themselves). I then went to Paris, where I had a very good professor (Pierre Jacerme) at the Lycee Henri IV, before I went to the Sorbonne. He introduced me to Hegel and Heidegger. But of course, the main encounter of my philosophical life, the most important one, was my encounter with Jacques Derrida in 1986. It would be long and complicated to tell you what I learned from him! To name a few things: audacity, understanding why I hated the institution, rigor, decentering from my "Frenchness", opening to the American intellectual life, entering the *College International de Philosophie*, nourishing my constant admiration with talks, conferences, books that I found and still find incredibly productive and singular. He became my supervisor, I wrote my thesis *The Future of Hegel* under his direction. It is one of life's most beautiful gifts! Then I think I was ready to become a professor myself! I never met anyone whom I admired that much after him and never will.

Your first works where about Hegel's thought and it's relation to contemporary philosophy especially concerning its relation to neuroscience, form this dialogue you proposed your concept of plasticity. What's the reach of this concept in contemporary ontology and politics and how can it present new paths for classical problems concerning the relation between form and matter, essence and existence, and being and entity?

Hegel was the first thinker to give plasticity the value of a philosophical concept. Before him, Goethe had coined the term plasticity, but he used it only in the aesthetic sense (sculpture) or pedagogic sense (formation of the child through education and habit). In Hegel, plasticity became first the mode of being of the subject in relation to temporality; second the mode of being of reality itself as it forms a system. If we synthesize the two, we find that plasticity means the work of time through the system, the way in which a

system can transform itself from within without dissolving. It is the immanent transformability of a closed totality.

It struck me of course to find that this was precisely also characterizing neural plasticity! Hegel had anticipated this mode of organization, which is the functioning of a system out of intercorrelated networks that constantly modify their intensity, size and volume without getting destroyed. After my PhD I started reading many books on the brain, and got more and more certain about the parallel between philosophical and neurological plasticity.

The relationship between plasticity and politics became obvious when I discovered that the neural model was becoming dominant in management literature. The concept of flexibility is at the center of this model. Studying the difference between flexibility and plasticity led me to elaborate a concept of resistance coming from the physics of materials. To be plastic does not mean that you can be bent in all directions and accept everything. There are thresholds of resistance. All this I elaborated in my book *What should we do with our brains?*

As far as the ontological meaning of plasticity is concerned, I developed them in three directions: the mutability of being in my book on Heidegger (*The Heidegger Change*), the ontology of the accident (how the accident can fashion a life), and the opening of a new concept of essence, a non-essentialist concept of essence (*Changing Differences*). I now envisage writing a book on anarchy and plasticity, but I am at the beginning of this new adventure...

You are also known for your contributions on feminist theory, what do you think that are the actual problems of feminist theory? And what does feminism can teach to philosophy in general?

I have only one book on feminism, I still think of it as accurate, but it would need some update. In this book, my

argument was that femininity had been denied to women by both men and radical feminists. To think that there exists something like femininity would be “essentialist”. I tried to oppose this view, showing that femininity is what appears, phenomenologically so to speak, every time that a woman gets assaulted, beaten, fired, or discriminated. I said that what Sartre says about the Jew: it is the anti-Semite who makes the Jew, is also valid for women. Violence against women makes femininity. Today, I would orient myself more towards biology and epigenetics in particular. There is a very urgent and sensitive debate in molecular biology today, to decide whether epigenetics allows for plasticity of genders, or on the contrary if it restricts the gamut. Contemporary debates on genders and transgenderism most of the time don't take biology into consideration, only cultural facts. A gender is not entirely socially constructed. I would like to explore this more in depth. Again, it would be a matter of deconstructing the overwhelming and overpowering concept of biopower, that is more blurring than clearing things.

You define yourself as a materialist, both in ontological and political sense, but now days the meaning of materialism is quiet vague or at least, polysemic, could you outline some of the features of your materialism, and how does it relate with contemporary discussions on materialism?

It is not vaguer today than before. Materialism has always had to justify itself by a surplus of definition, because its enemies have always called it fuzzy or indeterminate. This is the old quarrel between idealists and materialists. On that point, Althusser's short text *Response to John Lewis* is worth reading. Althusser affirms in a footnote that the conflict idealism/materialism defines “class struggle in theory”. Materialist is the theoretical proletarian trend. You want to know what materialism is today? Then go to hospitals, research labs, medical, cybernetic, physics ones. Go inquire about new materials, new prostheses, new devices, and new brain surgery

techniques. Then try to draw some conclusion about the future of these materialities, showing that they are both working on and revealing the very substance of things. Then you know what materialism is. Speculative realists tend to undervalue and dismiss materialism. But what is a real without matter? The world of "things"? This is absurd and irresponsible.

In many of your books and articles we can find an insistence in the question of life as a biological concept, and you accuse many contemporary philosophers (Foucault, Agamben, and Meillassoux) of excluding the biological body in philosophy, and biological life in general, like some sort of de-biologization of the concept of life and body. What are the consequences of this de-biologization? How could contemporary philosophy overcome this exclusion and how will it affect its shape?

Well, as I said earlier, the concept of biopower has been used to immediately discredit all attempt at considering biological progress as an improvement other than technological. Nobody after Foucault would have dared saying that biological research might be emancipating, and provide current philosophy with concepts able to renew critique and deconstruction themselves. It is striking to see that such contempt does not touch mathematics. Foucault is fascinated by mathematics and never involves them in biopower. Same thing goes with Meillassoux. Mathematics is the noble ontological science, innocent from all machination and domination tendency. Not only I am sure that it is not true, but I also think that this hierarchy among sciences that philosophers are so prone to establish is totally absurd and unjustified. I intend to explore this problem further. The philosophical use of mathematics today is very strange, and deserves to be deconstructed. Badiou, of course, is the great guru of this "mathematization" of the real. We know what is hidden behind this: Totalitarian thinking. And of course Badiou hates biology...

You said speculative realist tend to dismiss and undervalue materialism, but among them there are several that define themselves more like materialist than realist, for example Meillassoux, Grant, Levi Bryant and Manuel De Landa, but you pointed out a very interesting feature of materialism, that is, it's political implication. Do you define yourself as a political thinker? Do you think your work could contribute to radical politics and emancipation movements? In what sense?

The philosophers I referred to in the talk I gave at the «Métaphysiques et Choses en Soi» conference (Paris, autumn 2016) explicitly reject materialism. Such is the case with Graham Harman and Ray Brassier. Meillassoux is more ambiguous, he speaks of speculative materialism and refers to Epicurus, but he rapidly adds that contingency of the atomic swerve, in ancient atomism, in fact obeys some kind of necessity. This means that materialism, for him, cannot really account for radical contingency. I don't know if I define myself as a political thinker. I found this label so pretentious and arrogant! Mostly when you see what current official political thinkers have to offer: a revised Stalinism or a naive insurrectionist model. None of them has hitherto proposed anything convincing to get out of capitalism and labor exploitation. To go back to speculative realism, I noticed that, on the other extreme there was a total absence of reflection and questioning about politics. What is the political meaning of the real? Of the decorrelated world? The motifs of the initial abandonment and poverty of the subject, of the void or *tabula rasa* that opens the political scene (Rousseau, Althusser) is never addressed. Since the beginning, I have affirmed that the new definitions of consciousness, thinking, subjectivity in general brought to light by contemporary biology are transforming our vision of responsibility and agenda. To what extent is the biological subject a revolutionary one? All my work is oriented toward this question. This, again, doesn't mean that I define myself as a « political philosopher ».

In your last book, *Before tomorrow*, we can read a very deep analysis of the implications of Kant's "epigenetic" metaphor in the paragraph 27 of the first Critic. Do you think his problem can be extended to most of philosophical tradition back to him? Is modern philosophy always thought ambiguous about the problem of biological life and physical existence? And more importantly, can we think of biological life and body and physical existence without the risk of naturalism, or scientism?

The fear of falling into naturalism or scientism has prevented contemporary philosophers to open themselves to some of the most important scientific revolutionary discoveries of the end of the 20th century and the early 21th. I think of the neurobiological revolution of course, but also the discovery of stem cells, the potentialities of cloning, and the developments of synthetic biology. Also the advancements of Artificial Intelligence, the multiple new uses of data and algorithms, etc. At the time of Descartes, then Kant, Hegel and even Marx, to object the risk of naturalism to anyone interested in science would have seemed ridiculous. How can philosophy ignore scientific progress? How can it refuse to dialogue with it on another mode than just reproach and defiance? This is something I don't understand.

What are your current projects?

It may seem contradictory to what I just said, i.e. that I don't define myself as a political philosopher, because my next project is about *anarchy*. I would like to re-explore this notion in the light of the concept of *mutual aid*, brought to light by Kropotkin in the 19th century. This concept is at the crossing point of philosophy, politics and biology. I would then keep these three perspectives, interrogating the demise of teleology in the three fields, and asking myself whether a libertarian concept of mutual aid can be promoted in each case. I wonder if mutual aid is not precisely the type of notion I am looking for: interdisciplinary, and, again, at the

frontier of the symbolic and the biological.

This would also give me the opportunity of questioning the frontier between traditional anarchism and what has been called post-anarchism, a grouping of several trends and lines of thought that seek to reconcile libertarianism with post-structuralism. Post-anarchism is very critical of thinkers like Kropotkin, whom they judge essentialist and rationalist because of his use of biology and evolutionism. Such a rejection is what I intend to challenge, thus renewing also Kropotkin's definition of mutual aid. In his work, mutual aid appears as the other trend of evolution, along with natural selection. Living beings do not only compete, they also help each other. Political mutuality keeps something of this biological memory. Mutual help is not only support and solidarity; it is self-management, cooperative economy, organic symbiosis or ecological bioregionalism. So this is what I am currently exploring, showing that mutual help, or aid, does not constitute a *telos* in the traditional sense, but an emancipatory orientation.

What advices you'll give young philosophers concerning contemporary scenario of philosophical production and debate?

I would advise them, first of all, to acquire a solid formation in classic philosophy, from the Greeks up to phenomenology. To never read contemporary philosophy without this background. I don't think that starting philosophy by reading Zizek or Badiou directly constitutes sufficient armor in order to confront with all the problems that our time is so harshly raising. Conversely, locking oneself up in the scholarly study of one traditional author is also bad. You cannot jump over your time, as Hegel says, but you have to *be* your time as best as possible. We might also reflect upon what Foucault calls the *present* or *present time*, in his wonderful text *What is Enlightenment?* It is necessary to situate oneself well in between the past and the future; otherwise, your thinking will be wobbly, if I may say.

I would also advise them to always privilege affirmative thinking over nihilism and skepticism, to favor constructive ways of thinking over dissolving ones. I hate cynicism, in the pedestrian sense of the term. Remember Derrida's beautiful last words: « Always prefer life ».

I would also tell them to fight all attempts at dismissing continental philosophy on the pretext that it would not be politically correct, being too Eurocentric and phallogocentric. Cultural studies, in all their extensions, are certainly necessary, but they won't ever be able to substitute for the rigor, the power of questioning, the conceptual discipline and demand of philosophy. Defending philosophy, that is threatened everywhere, is for me an urgent and primary ethical position and gesture.

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