

Correspondence*

Trần Đức Thảo and Alexandre Kojève

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Hayden Kee[†]

Introduction

Trần Đức Thảo was one of the most remarkable and enigmatic protagonists in the history of 20th century European philosophy. Born on September 26, 1917, near Hanoi in modern-day Vietnam (then the capital of colonial French Indochina), Trần moved to Paris, France in 1936 to study philosophy, attending the prestigious École Normale Supérieure and Sorbonne. He joined there that much celebrated cohort of post-war French intellectuals, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Along with Merleau-Ponty, he was one of the first visitors to the newly founded Husserl Archives in Leuven, Belgium during the war, and played a central role in the first efforts to establish a second archive in Paris. Trần and Sartre even attempted to co-author a book, though the collaboration apparently ended acrimoniously. And while Sartre and company would rise to academic and popular celebrity, a different fate was in store for Trần, in large part due to

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his political activism and commitment to Vietnamese independence. That fate was foreshadowed on October 29, 1945, just weeks after the end of World War II, when Sartre delivered his famous 'Existentialism is a Humanism' to a full house of intellectuals and socialites. Meanwhile, Trần sat in a Paris prison cell, detained on charges of threatening French national security because he had been agitating for the independence of Vietnam.

During the war, what remained of French colonial rule in Indochina under Vichy France was undermined by the invasion of the Japanese military. With the capitulation of Japan at the end of the war, the Vietnamese communists under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh seized power and declared Vietnamese independence. The principal victors of the global war, however, did not acknowledge the declaration, and France began planning to reclaim its colony. While in prison, Trần penned 'On Indochina'¹, which was published in early 1946 in Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's fledgling journal *Les Temps Modernes*. The essay presented an existential-phenomenological analysis of the misunderstanding between coloniser and colonised in Indochina and made a plea to the French people to leave Vietnam in peace. The plea was not heeded, however. French forces returned to Vietnam shortly thereafter, inaugurating decades of bloodshed. 'On Indochina' and Trần's other contributions as *Les Temps Modernes*' Indochina correspondent are perhaps the first instance of a decolonial application of phenomenology. These writings would influence later, better known decolonial authors such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire.

Trần's primary philosophical concern in the postwar years, as with others in his milieu, was with the relation between the two dominant philosophical movements of the era, Hegelianism-Marxism and existential phenomenology. Trần developed his ideas on this relation in a series of articles published from 1946-1950², culminating in his magnum opus, *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*³, published in 1951. Trần argued that phenomenology was essentially incomplete and that it required the kind of foundation that only Marxist dialectical materialism could provide. Trần's conviction was not only theoretical, but also practical and con-

cretely political. Following the publication of his book, Trần returned in 1951 to a Vietnam still in the midst of its Anti-French Resistance War. He voluntarily undertook ‘rectification’ training before returning to academic work, publishing in his native language on Vietnamese history and literature. In 1956 he was appointed head of the faculty of history at the national university. However, his views on political liberalisation and his critique of the regime ensnared him in a reactionary political backlash and purge of intellectuals. He was banned from teaching and effectively silenced on political matters. He later returned to philosophical work of a less political nature, resulting in a second book, on the origins of language.⁴ Trần returned to Paris in 1991, under somewhat mysterious circumstances⁵, and passed away there in 1993. Trần’s name was cleared and his legacy restored posthumously in his native Vietnam in 2001 when the party awarded him the Ho Chi Minh Prize, one of the highest prizes the nation grants to its citizens.⁶

It was in the context of those heady post-war years in Paris that Trần entered a brief correspondence with another of the most influential thinkers of the time, Alexandre Kojève. Kojève’s lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* from the 1930s at the École Pratique des Hautes Études decisively shaped the mid-century French reception of Hegel. They were published in 1947 by Gallimard⁷, and Trần published a lengthy review discussion of the work in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1948.⁸ Trần praised the originality and fecundity of Kojève’s interpretation, even hailing it as ‘a remarkable moment in the development of Absolute Spirit’ (110). But he accused Kojève of overemphasising the importance of the *Phenomenology*’s master-slave dialectic and misunderstanding the nature of Hegelian dialectic. The result, according to Trần, is that Kojève accused Hegel mistakenly of an untenable monism (while Kojève himself regressed into dualism), failed to see the enduring significance of nature in history and freedom, and left the door open for a theistic reappropriation of Hegelian thought. Trần proposed an interpretation of the *Phenomenology* meant to rectify these misunderstandings, albeit one that exhibits Trần’s own Marxist-materialist preferences. The mostly friendly discussion between Kojève and Trần was con-

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tinued in the exchange of letters from October 1948, presented here in translation (with the kind permission of the editors of *Genèses*, where it was published in French in 1990⁹). This slightly more personal medium allows us an alternative glimpse into an ardent and precocious mind whose talents sadly never came fully to fruition due to the vagaries of a cruel and arbitrary century.

Further reading

There are two excellent, short introductions in English to Trần Đức Thảo's life and work, one by Nicolas de Warren¹⁰ and one by Russell Ford.¹¹ Readers of French will find further details in the collection of essays prepended to the 2013 re-edition of *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique*¹² and in Alexandre Feron's recent study.¹³

Kojève to Trần

Paris, 7 October 1948

Dear Sir,

I just read your article in *Les Temps Modernes* on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, which interested me very much. I would first like to thank you for the kind words you saw fit to write about me. I appreciate them all the more, since I continue to feel remorse for letting my book be published in its chaotic state, with which you are familiar.

As to the essentials of the question, I am, on the whole, in agreement with the interpretation of the *Phenomenology* that you give. I would like to point out, however, that my work did not have the character of a historical study. It mattered relatively little to me what Hegel himself wanted to say in his book. I offered a course in phenomenological anthropology, making use of Hegelian texts but saying only what I considered to be the truth and dropping whatever in Hegel seemed to me to be an error. Thus, for example, by renouncing Hegelian monism, I consciously distanced myself from this great philosopher. Furthermore, my course was essentially a work of propaganda intended to shake people's minds. That is why I consciously enhanced the role of the dialectic of Master and Slave and, in a general way, schematised the content of the *Phenomenology*.

This is why I personally believe that it would be highly desirable for you to develop, in the form of a complete

commentary, the main lines of interpretation that you have outlined in the article to which I refer.

Just one brief remark: The terms ‘sense of self’ and ‘self-consciousness’ are from Hegel himself, who expressly says that, in contrast to man, the animal never goes beyond the stage of ‘sense of self.’ The term ‘struggle of pure prestige’ is indeed not found in Hegel, but I believe that this is only a matter of a difference in terminology, for everything I say about this struggle applies perfectly to what Hegel calls the ‘struggle for recognition.’ Finally, as far as my theory of the ‘desire for desire’ is concerned, it is not in Hegel either and I am not sure that he saw the matter clearly. I introduced this notion because I intended to make not a commentary on the *Phenomenology*, but an interpretation. In other words, I tried to find the deep premises of the Hegelian doctrine and to construct it by deducing it logically from these premises. The ‘desire for desire’ seems to me to be one of the fundamental premises in question, and if Hegel himself did not clearly identify it, I believe that, by formulating it explicitly, I have made a certain philosophical progress. This is perhaps the only philosophical progress that I have made, the rest being more or less only philology, which is to say, precisely an explication of texts or a commentary (my ‘attack’ on ‘monism’ being nothing but a program).

The most important point is the question of dualism and atheism which you mention in the last section of your article (pp. 517-519). I must say that I do not agree

with what you say there, but I believe that the divergence is only based on a misunderstanding.

Your reasoning would certainly be correct if it referred to a dualism properly so called, that is to say, an abstract dualism and not a dialectical one. I would say like you that all dualism is necessarily deist, since, if there are two types of Being (Nature and Man), there is necessarily the unity of the two which is, in some way, 'superior' to them, and this unity cannot be conceived other than as a divine entity. But the dualism I have in view is dialectical. Indeed, I used the image of a gold ring, which would not exist as a ring if there were no hole. One cannot say, however, that the hole exists in the same way as gold and that there are here two modes of being, of which the ring is the unity. In our case, the gold is Nature, the hole is Man, and the ring—Spirit. This means that if Nature can exist without Man, and has, in the past, existed without Man, Man has never existed and cannot exist without Nature and outside of it, just as gold can exist without the hole, while the hole simply does not exist if there is no metal around it. Given that Man created himself only in and by, or, more exactly still, as the negation of Nature, it follows that he presupposes Nature. This essentially distinguishes him from all that is divine. Given that he is the negation of nature, he is something other than the divine pagan that is Nature itself; and given that he is the negation of Nature, which, like all negation, presupposes what is negated, he presupposes (ontologically and dialectically) this Nature and is thus different from the Christian God who, on the con-

trary, is prior to Nature and creates it by a positive act of his will.

I thus do not say that there are simultaneously two modes of being: Nature and Man. I say that until the appearance of the first Man (who was created in a struggle of prestige), Being in its entirety was nothing but Nature. From the moment when Man exists, Being in its entirety is Spirit, since Spirit is nothing other than this very Nature that henceforth implies Man, and from the moment when the real world in fact implies Man, Nature in the strict sense of the word (*i.e.*, the real world minus Man) is nothing but an abstraction. So, until a certain moment in time, there was only Nature and from a certain moment, there is only Spirit. Now, since what is truly real in Spirit (the gold of the ring) is Nature (Man being nothing but the (real, *i.e.*, active) negation of Nature), we can say, as you do, that Spirit is the result of the evolution of Nature itself (this all the more since before the appearance of Man, Nature alone really existed). However, I do not like this way of speaking, because it can lead one to believe that the appearance of Man can be deduced *a priori*, like any other natural event. However, I believe that this is not the case and that if the whole of natural evolution can, in principle, be deduced *a priori*, the appearance of Man and his history can only be deduced *a posteriori*, that is to say, precisely, not deduced or foreseen, but only understood. This is a way of saying that the act of self-creation of Man remains an act of freedom and that the whole series of human acts which constitute history is itself a series of free acts. This is why I prefer to

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speak of a dualism between Nature and Man, but it would be more correct to speak of a dualism between Nature and Spirit, Spirit being that very Nature that implies Man. My dualism is thus not 'spatial,' but 'temporal': Nature first, then Spirit or Man. There is a dualism because Spirit or Man cannot be deduced from Nature, the break being made by the act of creative freedom of Nature, that is to say, the act of negating freedom of Nature.

I would be very grateful to you, Dear Sir, if you could tell me in a few words to what extent the explanations (admittedly very insufficient) that I provide you in this letter may reply to the objections that you have made to me.

Sincerely, Dear Sir, with all my sympathy,

A. Kojève

Trần to Kojève

Paris, 30 October 1948

Dear Sir,

I have just received your letter and thank you very much for the clarifications you have given me. They agree,

moreover, with what I myself think, since, as you may have noticed, I read your book with the greatest sympathy. I simply believe that you are not going far enough and that by refusing to draw the materialist conclusions of atheistic humanism, you are leaving room, without realising it, for a return to religious humanism. If space had not been limited, and if I had not first had to focus on the essentials of the question, I would have insisted [in my article] even more on the considerable progress you have made on the conventional interpretations of Hegel. But since you think that the domain of the spirit is essentially historical, you cannot be surprised that your doctrine, which might have seemed revolutionary ten or so years ago, is no longer so after the events that have since upset the course of the world and given it a completely new figure.

Naturally, it is not a question here of some mediocre problem of erudition, and one could not criticise a work like yours on the few divergences which may arise with Hegel's text. I have only mentioned them for the record and in passing. It was also necessary to note your originality, which the ordinary reader may have failed to recognise.

I must, however, reiterate in this connection that I never denied the existence in Hegel of the distinction between 'self-consciousness' and 'sense of self,' and I would ask you to believe that I was not ignorant of the relevant texts. I simply remarked, if you would read me carefully, that it [*i.e.*, the distinction] is not found in the passage in question (Chapter IV), where it obviously

could play no role, since at stake in this place is removing abstract oppositions and engendering the human from the animal.

As for the ‘struggle of pure prestige,’ it is presented, in the definition you give of it, as an immediate and unconditioned negation of natural existence. But a concept of this kind can find no place in Hegel, where negation is always mediated. In the case that concerns us, it can only arise as the result of that of which it is a negation, namely the nature which negates itself by affirming itself. The struggle of self-consciousnesses begins on the animal level and is completed, through the internal logic of its movement, on the human level.

On this subject, it would be very difficult for me to accept the reconciliation that you propose, where, taking up Kant's distinction between *folgen* and *erfolgen*, you consent to say that spirit is the result of the becoming of nature, specifying that it is an absolutely contingent event and not a necessary consequence. However, you know very well that in Hegel the result derives from its principle in a movement whose necessity is identical with freedom. Of course, this is a dialectical movement, which excludes any *a priori* deduction. It can only be understood historically or posited in a praxis. But comprehension and action here imply an intelligibility, which is precisely denied in your doctrine of freedom.

I have of course never attributed a crudely ‘spatial’ dualism to you. But I do not believe it's possible to transform the dialectical passage from nature to spirit into a pure, contingent succession based on a totally ar-

bitrary act of negation. For Hegel, negation is identical to affirmation and does nothing but realise it in its true being. If there is indeed duality, then this duality is identical to unity. And it is not at all a question of mind games: I have precisely tried to show how materialist Marxism makes it possible to give real content to these fundamental dialectical notions.

Hence, I don't reproach you for having separated nature and spirit, but rather for not having recognised that this separation only realises their identity. For it follows that the separation can only be explained by a divine transcendence. Naturally, you reject this consequence, since you define freedom by the exclusion of all intelligibility of whatever kind. But man can renounce understanding the reason of things. And because you refuse to find the motive of separation in unity itself, the theologian will conclude that it derives from an incarnation.

But perhaps we do not belong to the same family of spirits. For before tackling contemporary philosophy, I was a convinced Spinozist, and I know that this is a doctrine that you hardly appreciate. You define freedom by the negation of necessity. I defend the great rationalist tradition which has always identified them.

Sincerely, Dear Sir, with my best wishes,

Thao

Notes

- 1 Trần Đức Thảo, “Sur l’Indochine,” *Les Temps Modernes* vol. 1, no. 5 (February 1946): 878–900; English translation Trần Đức Thảo, “On Indochina,” ed. and trans. Hayden Kee, *Études Phénoménologiques - Phenomenological Studies* vol. 5 (2021): 1–24.
- 2 Trần Đức Thảo, “Marxisme et Phénoménologie,” *Revue Internationale*, no. 2 (1946): 168–74; English translation Trần Đức Thảo, “Marxism and Phenomenology,” trans. Nicolas de Warren, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* vol. 30, no. 2 (October 1, 2009): 327–35; Trần Đức Thảo, “La Phénoménologie de l’esprit et Son Contenu Réel,” *Les Temps Modernes* vol. 3, no. 36 (1948): 492–519; English translation Trần Đức Thảo, “The Phenomenology of Mind and Its Real Content,” *Telos*, no. 8 (1971): 91–110; Trần Đức Thảo, “Existentialisme et Matérialisme Dialectique,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* vol. 54, no. 3/4 (1949): 317–29; English translation Trần Đức Thảo, “Existentialism and Dialectical Materialism,” trans. Nicolas de Warren, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* vol. 30, no. 2 (October 1, 2009): 285–95; Trần Đức Thảo, “Les Origines de La Réduction Phénoménologique Chez Husserl,” *Deucalion* vol. 58, no. 3 (1950): 128–42; English translation Trần Đức Thảo, “The Origins of the Phenomenological Reduction in Husserl,” trans. Nicolas de Warren, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* vol. 30, no. 2 (October 1, 2009): 337–48.
- 3 Trần Đức Thảo, *Phénoménologie et Matérialisme Dialectique* (Paris: Éditions Minh Tan, 1951); English translation Trần Đức Thảo, *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*, trans. Daniel J. Herman and Donald V. Morano (Dordrecht: Springer, 1986).
- 4 Trần Đức Thảo, *Recherches Sur l’origine Du Langage et de La Conscience* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1973); English translation Trần Đức Thảo, *Investigations into the Origins of Language and Consciousness*, trans. Daniel J. Herman and Robert L. Armstrong (Dordrecht: Springer, 1984).
- 5 See Thierry Marchaisse, “Tombeau sur la mort de Tran Duc Thao,” in *L’itinéraire de Tran Duc Thao: Phénoménologie et transfert culturel*, ed. Jocelyn Benoist and Michel Espagne (Paris: Colin, 2013).
- 6 Shawn McHale, “Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946-1993,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 61, no. 1 (2002): 7–31.
- 7 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l’Esprit professées de 1933 à 1939 à l’École des Hautes Études*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980); English translation Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the “Phenomenology of Spirit,”* ed. Raymond Queneau and Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, First Edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).
- 8 Trần, “La Phénoménologie de l’esprit et Son Contenu Réel”; English translation Trần, “The Phenomenology of Mind and Its Real Content.”
- 9 Gwendoline Jarczyk and Pierre-Jean Labarrière, “Alexandre Kojève et Tran-Duc-Thao. Correspondance inédite,” *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire* vol. 2, no. 1 (1990): 131–37.
- 10 Nicolas de Warren, “Hopes of a Generation: The Life, Work, and Legacy of Tran Duc Thao,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* vol. 30, no. 2 (2009): 263–83.

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- 11 Russell Ford, “Tran Duc Thao: Politics and Truth,” *Philosophy Compass* 15 (January 1, 2020): e12650.
- 12 Jocelyn Benoist and Michel Espagne, eds., *L'itinéraire de Tran Duc Thao: Phénoménologie et transfert culturel* (Paris: Colin, 2013).
- 13 Alexandre Feron, *Le Moment marxiste de la phénoménologie française: Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Trần Đức Thảo* (Springer, 2021).