

# Infinite Nature, infinite philosophy

## Why translate Marcel Conche's "Philosopher à l'infini" into English?

Marcel Conche, a French philosopher, occupies an important place in the French philosophical landscape today. He is recognized both by academics, for his groundbreaking and authoritative works on Greek thinkers such as Pyrrhon, Epicurius, Parmenides, Heraclites and on Montaigne, and by the wider public, for his more personal works.

"Philosopher à l'infini" is, in his own word, his most accomplished personal work. It offers an enjoyable and accessible introduction to his philosophy.

For Conche, philosophy is "the search for truth about Nature, i.e. 'All of reality', and about mankind's place in Nature". As such, his philosophy, which finds some of its roots in the pre-socratics, is a philosophy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a universal appeal. That is why his work should be translated into English and become accessible to a wider audience.

This note contains a brief presentation of Conche's life and work, a short résumé of "Philosopher à l'infini", and a few extracts translated into English by Laurent Ledoux.

### *Brief introduction to Marcel Conche's life and work*

Born on 1921 and emeritus professor at the Sorbonne, Marcel Conche has been made laureate of the French Academy and corresponding member of the Academy of Athens for his life work. André Comte-Sponville, a best-selling French philosopher, considers Conche's philosophy as « one of the rare philosophies of our time » and has dedicated a book interviewing Marcel Conche. The book, titled « Confession of a philosopher », has known a great success in French bookshops.

A specialist in Greek philosophy and probably one of the world's best academics on Montaigne, his work mixes continuously learned references to the history of philosophy and a highly personal and consequent search for "truth", all of which is expressed in a crystal-clear prose.

To this day Marcel Conche has published more than 25 books, most of them published by PUF. Many of his books have been reedited several times: While he remained long known only by academics, his books have drawn for the last decade a growing interest from the wider French public.

His books include:

- *La mort et la pensée*, 2007 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; the 1<sup>st</sup> ed. dates from 1972), ed. Cécile Defaut
- *Nietzsche et le bouddhisme*, 2007, Michalon (also ed. in 1997 at encre marine)
- *Avec des "si" Journal étrange*, 2006, ed. puf
- *Philosopher à l'infini*, 2005, ed. puf
- *Epicure (Lettres et Maximes)*, 2005 (7<sup>th</sup> ed., 2<sup>nd</sup> draft), puf

- *Lao Tseu - Tao Te King*, translation & comments, Paris, 2003 (3<sup>rd</sup> draft 2005), puf
- *Héraclite - Fragments*, translation & comments, puf, Paris, 1986 (4<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1998; 2<sup>nd</sup> draft 2005)
- *Analyse de l'amour et autres sujets*, 2005 (4<sup>rd</sup> éd.), puf
- *Parménide (Le poème: fragments)*, 2004 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. et 2<sup>nd</sup> draft), puf
- *Heidegger par gros temps*, Les Cahiers de l'Égaré, 2004
- *Confession d'un philosophe – Answers to André Comte-Sponville*, 2003, éd. Albin Michel
- *Le sens de la philosophie*, 2003 (ed. reviewed & augmented), ed. Encre Marine
- *Quelle philosophie pour demain*, 2003, ed. puf
- *Lucrece et l'Expérience*, Fides, 2003
- *Ma vie antérieure & le destin de solitude*, 2003, encre marine
- *De l'amour, pensées trouvées dans un vieux cahier de dessin*, Les Cahiers de l'Égaré, 2003
- *Le fondement de la morale*, 2003 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), puf
- *Essai sur Homère*, 1999 & 2002 for Quadrige, Puf
- *Montaigne ou la conscience heureuse*, puf, Paris, 2002
- *Temps et destin*, 1999 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), puf
- *Présence de la nature*, 2001, puf
- *L'aléatoire*, 1999, ed. puf
- *Montaigne et la philosophie*, 1999 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), puf
- *Vivre et philosopher*, 1998 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), puf
- *Orientation philosophique*, 1996 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), puf
- *Pyrrhon ou l'apparence*, 1994, puf

One of Conche's early works, "Pyrrhon ou l'apparence", was an audacious and successful essay to clearly distinguish Pyrrhon's philosophy from Sextus Empiricus' traditional skepticism.

Today, at 86 and living in a small village in the region of Lyon, Conche remains as active and original as ever. For example, while he does not speak a word of Mandarin, he has recently translated and commented, with the sole assistance of a good dictionary, the Tao Te Ching. In this book he draws an interesting parallel between the nearly contemporaries Lao Zi and Heraclitus: The river of the Greek is compared to the Dao of the Chinese.

### ***Short résumé of "Philosopher à l'infini"***

For Marcel Conche, Nature, i.e. « All of reality » is infinite, both in time and space.

In this book, he introduces us to his view of the infinite Nature, confronting it to other thinkers whom he feels both close and different: Plato, Aristotle, Chrysippe, Epicure, Montaigne, Omar Khayyâm, Nietzsche, Bergson, Pascal and Lao Zi.

Conche notes that, while the idea of infinity is present in many philosophical systems, time is often disregarded. So platonic thinking is focalized on an ideal and unchanging totality which does not allow grasping temporality's essential character. Equally, for Aristotle, time is ruled from within by fixed forms, which, in a way, annihilate its importance.

Conche therefore finds rather his inspiration in Montaigne for whom "everything changes", in Nietzsche, obsessed by time even when he writes about the "eternal return", or in Bergson, who considers duration as the "background of reality".

For Conche, the idealism – which has dominated philosophy since Plato – has corrupted our thinking on infinity. Infinity has essentially been thought to have a spiritual nature, perfect and achieved. It has been conceived as a well ordered totality, meaningful and closed upon itself. Therefore, Christianity has transformed reality into a “world” achieved and finite since God, who has created it, can encompass it. Conche takes a radically opposite view: What comes first is nature as the Greeks have conceived it through the notion of “physis”. “Physis” is an infinite material reality, i.e. a reality that has always been there and always will be, unachieved, constantly creating and exploring new paths “like a poet”, i.e. without following a well designed plan. Mankind is part of the “physis” and cannot extract itself from it: It is therefore destined to death but also contributes, through its acts, to “physis” ’ creative process.

Nature or “physis”, as “All of reality”, must be distinguished from the worlds or universes which it encompasses. Science helps mankind to understand better these worlds but will never be able to do more than to scratch the surface of “physis”.

But, for Conche, infinity is not only outside mankind. It is also inside of it. Conche finds here inspiration in Pascal. Humans can indefinitely inventory reality through science. Humans can also experience infinity through love. To love is, by definition, to love infinitely and to reveal the other to infinity. Hereby Conche’s naturalism (only Nature “is” and all transcendence is imaginary) doesn’t lead to radical nihilism: The infinite character of Nature doesn’t crush mankind, underlining its irreducible finite character. Indeed mankind also participates, through its experiences, in the creation of infinity. This may give some meaning to the human adventure. It may also let us think that mankind is free: It can not be made prisoner of a religious, metaphysical or cultural definition of itself. Mankind’s dependency of Nature is also what makes it the creator of itself.

One may regret that Conche does not present in “*Philosophe à l’infini*” the scientific discoveries that could support his thoughts, such as mathematical treatment of infinity or contemporary cosmology. This should not be surprising however as, for Conche, any thought on Nature as “All of reality” cannot be supported by a scientific demonstration. Philosophy is therefore condemned to remain an interpretation of Nature: No science can confirm or invalidate. Here again we find infinity: The unlimited number of metaphysical speculations, of philosophies of Nature.

## *A few sentences from Conche's work translated into English by Laurent Ledoux\**

La Nature est infinie. Cette infinité me réduit à un point dans l'espace, un moment dans le temps. Mais cependant, je m'égale à elle par la pensée, non en ce sens que j'aurais une «idée» de l'infini, comme Descartes dit que l'on a une idée de Dieu, mais en ce sens que la pensée est comme telle ouverture à l'infini – qui n'est autre que la Nature même s'offrant à la conscience et à la raison de l'homme.

De la Nature, Anaximandre, déjà, a vu l'essentiel : qu'elle est l'inachevé. Elle est l'infini : un infini en un sens clos sur lui-même et sans extérieur, puisqu'il n'y a qu'elle, mais pourtant un infini ouvert, puisqu'elle n'est rien d'autre que création continue.

La Nature ne «veut» rien. L'apparition de l'amour ardent entre personnes singulières, uniques, insubstituables, n'était ni dans le «plan» de la Nature, ni dans aucun plan. C'est quelque chose que nul – dieu ou homme – ne pouvait prévoir. C'est une sublime création du Poète immanent. La Nature n'y est pas contredite, mais transcendée.

Certes, le Temps éternel a raison de toutes choses finies. Ce qui vaut – la méditation, la prière, l'amour, l'effort – est condamné à être effacé, annulé, aussi inexorablement que ce qui ne vaut rien, mais la différence de valeur n'en existe pas moins, et la sagesse tragique consiste à vouloir accroître cette différence, malgré le néant.

La Nature sous-tend et anime le monde, mais elle «aime à se cacher» (Héraclite). La Nature se montre ou se cache, selon les saisons : c'est là une habitude, l'alternance des saisons étant indéfinie. Puissance de vie, la Nature durant la «morte» saison, se soustrait au regard. Mais après la mort, la vie ; après la vie, la mort : chacun des deux contraires est justifié. La Nature les maintient ensemble, comme devant apparaître chacun à son tour. Une loi d'harmonie gouverne le cours des choses. Mais «l'harmonie chachée l'emporte sur l'harmonie visible» (Héraclite), car l'invisible gouverne le visible et en contient la clé.

Lorsque Lucrece chante la «puissance» de la Nature au printemps, il ne fait qu'exprimer ce que, Epicurien ou non, chacun ressent. Et cette force qui a nom «amour», chacun, dans la passion, a pu, un jour, la subir, comme venant d'en-deçà de lui-même et l'entraînant au delà, reléguant l'individu dans la zone infime, l'espèce seule ayant, à travers les générations d'individus éphémères, vraie et immuable réalité. Car, ce qui se manifeste alors est bien la vie elle-même, et son sens, qui est, indéfiniment, de vaincre la mort, quoi qu'il en soit des menus desseins individuels. Et il y a une disproportion étonnante entre la force de l'amour, qui peut briser les vies, les carrières, les êtres, et la modicité prudente des ambitions ordinaires. D'une part, le sens de la vie, à l'horizon de durée indéfinie, d'autre part le menu sens que l'individu, à part soi, donne à sa vie, sens dérisoire puisque sans effet sur la mort (sinon, par l'œuvre, de repousser quelque peu l'oubli).

Nature is infinite. This infinity reduces me to a point in space, a moment in time. But, I equal myself to it through thinking, not because I could have an "idea" of infinity, as Descartes said we could have an idea of God, but because my thought is like a door to infinity, which is nothing else than Nature offering herself to the conscience and the reason of mankind.

Anaximander had already understood the essence of Nature: she is not complete. She is infinite, in a way closed to herself and without background, since there is only her. An open infinity, since she is nothing else than continuous creation.

Nature does not "want" anything. The surge of ardent love between singular persons, unique, without substitute, was not part of Nature's "plan", or any other plan. It is something that nobody – god or man – could foresee. It is a sublime creation of the immanent Poet. Nature is not hereby contradicted but transcended.

Eternal Time takes over all finite things. What has worth – meditation, prayer, love, effort – is condemned to be erased, nullified, as inexorably as what has no worth at all. But the difference in value nevertheless exists, and the tragic wisdom consists in willing to increase this difference, despite nothingness.

Nature underpins and animates the world, but she "loves to hide" (Heraclites). Nature shows or hides herself according to the seasons : it is a habit, the altering of the seasons being undefined. Power of life, Nature hides herself during the "dead" season. But after death, life; after life, death; each of these two opposites is justified. Nature keeps them together, as having to appear by turns. A law of harmony governs the course of things. But "hidden harmony wins over visible harmony" (Heraclites), because the invisible governs the visible and holds its key.

When Lucretius sings the "power" of Nature in spring, he expresses what everybody, epicurean or not, feels. And this force called "love", each of us, in a moment of passion, has undergone it, as coming from within, and taking him beyond, leaving the individual behind, the race alone having, through generations of ephemeral individuals, a true and immutable reality. Because, what manifests itself then, is life itself, and its meaning, which is, forever, to crush death, whatever the silly individual goals. And there is a stunning imbalance between the force of love, which can break up lives, careers, beings, and the cautious smallness of ordinary ambitions. On one hand, the meaning of life, with a horizon of undefined duration, on the other, the meagre sense that the individual gives to his life, derisory meaning since it is without any influence on death (except for the capacity of works to delay a little the oblivion).

La Nature est, pour la pensée, un défi perpétuel. On voit la Nature se renouveler et se répéter. D'année en année, le printemps revient, et l'automne, mais pas tout à fait le même printemps, ni le même automne. Laquelle de ces deux capacités – de renouvellement, de répétition – l'emporte-t-elle ?

La Nature est comme un corps vivant qu'enveloppe un vêtement. Le *logos* scientifique saisira peut-être chaque fibre du vêtement, et comme toutes renvoient à toutes, formant un ensemble beau et harmonieux, mais le vêtement n'est pas le corps de la personne. Or, la Nature elle-même nous est donnée immédiatement en chair et en os, sous la forme du monde sensible, de sa diversité et de sa profondeur.

Il faut regarder en face ce problème sans solution qu'est l'homme. Penser n'est rien d'autre. Mais pourquoi penser la Nature ? Parce qu'il n'y a que la Nature pour mettre l'homme à sa place. L'infini, de toute part, l'écrase et l'annule.



**Marcel Conche**

Nature is, for the mind, a perpetual challenge. We see her renew and repeat herself. Year on year, spring comes back, and autumn, but not exactly the same spring, nor the same autumn. Which of these two capabilities – of renewal and repetition – take over ?

Nature is like a living body covered with a coat. The scientific *logos* might one day catch each the coat's fibre that form a beautiful and harmonious whole, each fibre interwoven with all the others. But the coat is not the body of the person. Nature offers herself to us in the flesh, under the form of the sensitive world, of its diversity and depth.

We must look straight this problem without solution that man is. To think is nothing else. But why to think about Nature? Because only Nature can put man in his place. Infinity, from everywhere, crushes and nullifies him.



**Marcel Conche & Laurent Ledoux  
in France in 2006**

*Laurent Ledoux is neither a philosopher nor a professional translator but he loves philosophy and as a great respect for Marcel Conche's original work. Ledoux is managing director of a business unit for a multinational. He is also member of the board of "Philosophy & Management", an association organizing seminars on philosophy for managers.*

*The translation of the sentences was kindly reviewed by Dan Tudor.*

