

*Tran Duc Thao: Consciousness &
Language. Report of the Centenary
Conference*

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If one asks to what extent Thao's philosophical project has been effectively discussed in the past fifty years, at least three points must be kept in mind. Firstly, it is clear from the very start that the problem of Thao's Vietnamese period (1952–1991) is essential to determining the meaning of his works and especially of those he wrote between the 1960s and 1980s (see for instance Melançon 2016a). We shall also take note of the fact that an important part of the recent literature on Thao is eminently biographical and historical (see for instance Thao 1993, 2004 and 2013, Hémery 2013, Papin 2013 and Feron 2014). Secondly, over the course of the period in question, most of the interest in Thao's works was extensively devoted to his writings on Husserlian phenomenology (Neri 1966, Rovatti 1970, see also Tomassini's Italian translation of *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* in 1970, Picone 1972, Tomassini 1972, Brouillet 1975, Nardi 1994, Herman 1997, Benoist 2013, Feron 2013, Giovannangeli 2013, Melegari 2014, Melançon 2016b) and the role played by Thao among French students in phenomenology (see Brouillet 1970, Invitto 1985, Jarczyk & Labarrière 1990, van Breda 1962, de Warren 2009, Moati 2013, Feron 2017). Symptomatically, this literature is eminently introductory. Thirdly, several works have been devoted to Thao's reflection on politics and especially on Marxism and colonialism (see Federici 1970, McHale 2002, Majkut 2003, Espagne 2013, Melançon 2013, Simon-Nahum 2013). Now that we have outlined the main trends of secondary literature devoted to Thao's life and work, let us mention a book of collected

papers edited by Benoist and Espagne in 2013 which summarises the three main trends of secondary literature on Thao. It must be regarded as the first attempt to offer a comprehensive survey on Thao's intellectual activity. What emerges from all that has been said is the small role assigned to Thao's philosophy of language. Needless to say, most papers devoted to Thao's philosophy of language took the shape of reviews and brief articles (Drévilion 1973, Caveing 1974, François 1974, Haudricourt 1974, Trognon 1975, Schmitz 1978, Baribeau 1986, Tochahi 2013; D'Alonzo 2016, 2017a and 2017b). This fact is not surprising because the study of Thao's writings is far from being highly selective and is still focused on some general issues.

On the occasion of the centenary of Thao's birth, it seems important to go beyond both the evocation of his biography and a general introduction to his intellectual activity. Research should also pay special attention to Thao's varied and multi-faceted interests in several scientific fields. A wide perspective on Thao's works must not only consider Thao's writings against the background of the phenomenological tradition. As it is well known, Thao's reading of Husserl's philosophy had interfaced in multiple ways with current findings in empirical sciences such as psychology and biology. In addition, we cannot forget Thao's long-standing interests in the field of linguistics and anthropology. The international conference "Tran Duc Thao philosophe: Conscience et langage" brought together scholars who usually work in several different fields to share their understanding of the inner logic of Thao's philosophical insight. The conference held in Paris from November 24 until November 25, 2017 was organized by Alexandre Feron and Jacopo D'Alonzo thanks to the financial support of the Ecole Doctorale 268 Language et langue (Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3), the Research Commission of the Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3, the Laboratoire d'histoire des théories linguistiques (UMR 7597), the Fondation Gabriel Péri, and the Editions Sociales¹. Keeping in mind the general framework of the two-day conference, let us now look at the speeches in detail. The goal of the following paper is to introduce the reader to the most relevant questions that arose during the conference.

1 See the conference website for more details:
<https://colloquetranducthao.wordpress.com/>

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Thao's *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* (1951, henceforth PMD) is his most famous work. Contrary to the criticism of phenomenology that Thao developed in the 1970s, he proposed there to transcend phenomenology by way of a detailed analysis of Husserlian texts. For this reason, PMD has long been regarded as an introduction to phenomenology. However, it was rather a manifesto against phenomenology. In this regard, it could be useful to notice that Thao criticised Husserl for detaching conscious experience from real life. Thao argued that the phenomenological analysis of the lived-experience must be integrated into the analysis of actual experience. As Guilherme Costa Riscali described in his talk, Thao's re-evaluation of genetic phenomenology allowed him to show to what extent phenomenology could actually deal with concrete psychological states. The psychological standpoint is the real meaning of phenomenology. Laurent Perreau's talk explored to what extent phenomenology was truly overcome by Thao's analysis. According to Perreau, the main point of divergence between Husserl and Thao can be seen in Thao's misunderstanding of the peculiarities of the phenomenological approach. What Perreau put in question was Thao's naturalism and, therefore, the fact that he did not understand the way Husserl's transcendental account and his notion of "genesis" were the only available ways to justify every kind of naturalism. The task of phenomenology is to describe the processes and operations which are the preconditions for having scientific concepts. Instead, Thao's approach took it for granted that the results of empirical sciences are the best starting point to speculate on the origins of consciousness.

This kind of remarks against Thao's approach are widely discussed. Suffice it to recall that Ricœur (2004, 174) and Derrida (1990, 32) distanced themselves from Thao's theory and regarded his approach as a return to the naïve attitude which took for granted the results of natural sciences. Against those interpretations, Lyotard (1954, 111) suggests that Thao's point of view was a development of phenomenological analysis which had already described how scientific notions arose from operations of consciousness. Thus, Thao legitimately rehabilitated the standpoint of science. Interestingly, according to Costa Riscali, Thao's psychologizing understanding of phenomenology risks falling back into a reductionist point of view. Thao developed his own notion of "materiality" against the background of his criticism towards

Husserl's "transcendental phenomenology". But materiality was reduced to the "natural thing" rather than being regarded as something which is always in relation to the human-specific activity. In other words, Costa Riscali argued that Thao's naturalism thought of the materiality as an abstract origin of everything that exists, neglecting the different kinds of being.

If we want to consider Thao's philosophy of nature in greater detail, a reference to the debate between Thao and Alexandre Kojève (1902–1968) seems to be necessary. It could be useful to remember that in 1948 Thao wrote a review of Kojève's *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (1947). The debate between the two philosophers continued in their private correspondence (see Jarczyk & Labarrière 1990). Thao's main contention regarded Kojève's existentialist reading of Hegel. Thao remarked that Kojève was influenced by a dualistic insight which led Kojève to support the ontological difference between nature and spirit, animals and humans (cf. Thao 1948, 495). As Ovidiu Stanciu's speech stressed, the core of the debate had focused on the question of what "negativity" is: Should it concern the anthropological dimension alone, as Kojève wanted? Or is it legitimate to attribute to it a universal extension, as Thao argued? If the Hegelian dialectics and the notion of "negativity" do not lay at the heart of natural reality, the universal value of dialectical materialism is thereby weakened.

According to Stanciu, Kojève's "theory of desire" broke the unity of nature and failed to clarify the scientific value of natural sciences. As Thao noted, Kojève's assumption made it impossible to suggest a dialectics of nature which assumes the ontological unity of nature and history. Against Kojève's dualism or "double monism", Thao's monistic project aimed at describing the way the human dimension cannot be separated from the natural world, although it has its own properties and cannot be reduced to a mere physical dimension. In PDM, Thao argued that we can observe a primordial form of consciousness already in simpler organisms. According to him, inhibition is the negative principle that allows the dialectical development of consciousness from behaviour. He argued that consciousness is nothing but the result of the inhibition of a given behaviour through a more sophisticated one.

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For Costa Riscali, Thao's view of materiality led him to dismiss the dialectical understanding of human societies and human-specific forms of

production. In a similar way, Perreau highlighted at the end of his speech the role Husserl's notion of *Lebenswelt* could successfully play in a Marxist framework. We can simply observe that this perspective has been already suggested by Italian readers of Thao since the 1960s (see Neri 1966; Rovatti 1970; Picone 1972, Tomassini 1972). Along this line, Timothée Haug's speech pointed out some consequences of Thao's naturalistic materialism in relation to the Marxist tradition. Returning to some implicit sources of Thao's theory in some founding texts of Hegel, Marx and Engels, Haug tackled the pivotal function Thao attributed to the concept of "production" in order to solve the main conundrum of Marxist naturalism. How can we link the ontological continuity of nature and the human-specific social life? This point allowed Haug to question the problematic status of the dialectic of nature. How can we suggest an anthropology aimed at understanding human-specific sociality without denying the natural origins of humans?

As Perreau's speech already pointed out, in PDM, the role of mediation between the transcendental ego and material life was played by labour. According to Haug, the concept of production allowed Thao to genetically think the evolutionary origin of consciousness as a consciousness of productive activity. In this sense, Thao rejects a certain idealist view of production which is present in some of Marx's writings. Production is not necessarily the result of an idea that precedes labour. Consciousness is not necessarily presupposed to production. On the contrary, consciousness emerges from the productive activity itself. That means that the behaviour precedes consciousness and forms its contents. The notion of "production" was also tackled by Jérôme Melançon's speech. After having described the criticism of the "pure consciousness" in his previous works (Melançon 2016b), Melançon retraced Thao's theory of consciousness from his early writings until his last published works. Melançon's emphasized that for Thao consciousness is not a permanent state, but rather a response to practical situations. To put it another way, consciousness is always consciousness of a social practice on a production-related thing. In PDM, consciousness is nothing but the symbolic transposition of the material operations of production into a system of intentional operations. In this way, the individual ideally appropriates the object by reproducing it in their consciousness.

Andrea D'Urso suggested another way to take advantage of Thao's theory of production. In the case of Thao, as we have just seen, we can talk about the homology between the symbolic behaviour and practical and manipu-

lating skills. In a similar way, as D'Urso pointed out, the Italian semiologist Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1921–1985) suggested a theory of “the homology of linguistic production and material production”. Along the same line as Thao, Rossi-Landi focused on the importance of the role of human labour in the process of hominization. To him, production of both objects and signs (verbal and non-verbal) is what makes the difference between humans and other animals. And hominization must thus be seen as the slow process of development of such a skill.

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In Thao's *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience* (1973 henceforth RLC), the “labour” and “the language of real life” are both parts of the immediate human life. They must be seen as the most fundamental forms of both material relationships to things and working relationships among fellows. According to Etienne Bimbenet, the development of the indicative gesture during both the phylogeny and the ontogeny, such as it is described by Thao in his RLC, solved the main conundrum of PDM. According to Thao's PDM, language played a role but not a very relevant one because it was simply the mental reflex of social praxis. To him, conscious contents were nothing but the ideal and solitary reproduction of some features of the real human behaviour. His perspective changed in his RLC: language is no more a reflex of social life but rather an essential element of social practices. And the conscious contents language produces were considered intrinsically social. In 1973, Thao regarded the origin of human intentionality as the result of the gesture of the indication. In doing so, according to Bimbenet, Thao anticipated the discovery of the so-called “joint attention” in the psychology of the child and a certain primatology of the 1990s and 2000s.

For Thao ([1973] 1984, 5) “the indicative gesture marks the most elementary relation of consciousness to the object as external object”. The world is my world no more; it becomes the transcendent world which exists outside me, independently of my will, and existing for the others. On the contrary, animals perceive the object as part of their own behaviour. In this case, the object is nothing but the last physical extension of the own body. Of course, Thao admitted that primates could recognize indicative gestures as such. But the “gestural activity of apes denotes feeling and action” (id., p. 20) rather than the “meaning of the object”. Thus, apes merely employ gestures

as imperative means to satisfy immediate needs (this view is substantiated by recent studies: cf. Vauclair & Bertrand 2002: 309, 323-324; Vauclair 1992: 125, 134, 175; Lestel 2001: 143; cf. also Bimbenet 2011: 291). The consciousness of the object as mind-independent thing marks the most relevant difference between humans and animals. In fact, according to Bimbenet, human language is simultaneously directed toward the reference as well as toward the others. The pointing, in other words, shows the thing as the external target of common attention. As such, the thing becomes the object of several different perspectives, that is, the shared ground of human discourses (cf. Bimbenet 2011: 308-310; cf. also recent studies concerning the development of language in the child: Schaffer 1984: 79; Camaioni 1993: 84; Tomasello 1995: 106; Eilan et al. 2005: 5; Morgenstern et al. 2008).

The formation of a “semiotic consciousness” was at the heart of Antonino Bondi’s talk. According to Bondi, Thao’s theory highlighted the link between the origin of consciousness and semiosis, between perception and the intrinsic sociality of both signs and forms of consciousness. In his RLC, Thao described the different stages of signs formation – and therefore of the formation of consciousness – as a slow process (appearance, stabilization, use, and deformation). Bondi argued that for Thao sociality exists before every semiosis. Specifically, signs are part of a social-based network of actions. Semiosis is therefore a field of forces in which signs are taken up and ceaselessly transformed. And consciousness is something that emerges from that kind of interactions. Within this original scene, as a matter of fact, the indicative gesture plays a strategic role. The indicative gesture has a triadic structure, as Bimbenet had already pointed out, and thus concerns an external object, the subject and a still anonymous collectivity. Bondi added that the indicative gesture is the device that Thao used to describe the perceptive nature of semiosis and the social nature of perception.

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At the launch of the conference, Dan Savatovsky drew attention to the way in which Thao increasingly linked linguistics and auxiliary fields (philosophy of language, linguistics, psychology, and anthropology) during his whole career. In this vein, Savatovsky made special points to the extent that Thao’s hypothesis on language origins transcends the narrow limits of

structuralist linguistics. In this regard, we must mention Thao's articles written for the *Nouvelle Critique* between 1974 and 1975. Jean-Jacques Lecercle's talk tackled those articles and analysed them in great detail. Thao's theory of the formation of language had to contend with the most influential available semiotic model. That was Saussure's semiotics. So Thao's criticisms towards Saussure must be regarded against the structuralist understanding of certain hypotheses of the *Cours de linguistique général*. Thao disagreed with the primacy of arbitrariness and condemned the extension of the properties of linguistic signs to all kinds of signs. In this respect, Thao's semiotic project reevaluated symbols and partially motivated signs. He admitted the existence of some fundamental signs that were the precursors of developed linguistic signs. Therefore, he suggested to transcend the representation of linguistic systems and analyse the bond between signs and the body, the link between symbols and reality, and the social origins of semiosis.

As Lecercle pointed out, Thao regarded Saussurean arbitrariness more in terms of the conventional relationship between signifier and meaning than in terms of non-motivation. But conventionalism must necessarily assume a pre-existing communicational, cognitive and social layer. Such a remark may seem trivial, given that much has been written about the vicious circle implicit in conventionalist positions since Plato's *Cratylus* at least. As indicated in the RLC, Thao was aware of this debate and what interested him is rather to take a position against the tautologies and pleonasms typical of a semiology that takes a system of signs that refer to each other as its subject matter. Lecercle took seriously into account the need to evaluate the contribution that Thao's approach can make to the project of a Marxist philosophy of language. This kind of philosophy of language must study the role played by labour, body, and social relations in the formation of both communication skills and consciousness. At the same time, this perspective indicates the need for a research which describes Thao's approach against the background of other Marxist semiologists. Along this line, D'Urso compared Thao's insight with Valentin Vološinov's (1895–1936) semiology. For both Vološinov and Thao, individual consciousness is a socio-ideological fact. Language is the semiotic material of the inner life of consciousness. Consciousness is indeed the language that individuals address to themselves, usually in the sketched form of inner language.

We should now highlight that Thao was eminently interested in the cognitive value of the language of real life. The language of real life conveys

unconscious as well as preconscious significations. For this reason, it supports every intellectual activity. Interestingly, as Savatovsky's opening speech pointed out, if the language of real life is the basis of systems of arbitrary signs, we can reason that it is the base of scientific metalanguages, including that of linguistics. Another way of saying this is that the scientific metalanguage of linguistics arises from linguists' real working practice, along with ambiguities, inaccuracy, unconsciousness, and so forth.

This point leads us to consider the role Thao assigned to ideology. Although not presented systematically, a sketch of a materialist theory of ideology was at work in Thao's writings. The problem of ideology is linked to that of the genesis of idealities. As Yohann Douet highlighted, Chapter 2 of Part 2 of PDM had tackled a critique of the ideologies of transcendence – which arose as a consequence of private property. In PDM, ideology arose from alienation, i.e. from the opposition between an objectivity which is perceived as extraneous by the subject and the productive and creative subjectivity. In RLC, Thao changed his perspective. The RLC described the genesis of conscious contents from the various configurations of the social division of labour. However, ideology was still at work. It was the result of the internalisation of real contradictions and produces a mystification of the genesis of conscious contents. Examples of ideology are structuralism, phenomenological idealism, and religion. In these cases, the subject is not aware of the social origin of consciousness, thought, and language. The fact that for Thao the critique of ideology shows the social origin of conscious contents – which arise from cooperation and social relations – seemed to Douet and Lecercle an important aspect that would integrate Althusser's theory of ideologies. Contrary to what Althusser claimed, for Thao ideology is not a primary fact but a distortion that can be overcome. We need to create the material conditions to enjoy the social origin of conscious contents. In the same vein, Thao's theory would make it possible to generalize and deepen Althusser's concept of "interpellation" as Thao's materialist philosophy of language highlights how interpellation is rooted in material, bodily, and aesthetic processes.

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Guillaume Dechaffour suggested a comparison between Thao's approach to language development in the child and Piaget's psychology and epistemology. Although Piaget is quoted by Thao only as a source of examples and

not as a theoretical model, Dechaffour believed that Piaget and Thao had shared methods and points of view. In particular, their two theories of knowledge share a certain idea of intelligence as the fruit of a process of development. Knowledge is a concrete, collective, cumulative process, an activity that is constantly renewed. They therefore shared the idea that truth must be seen as the result of development. For this reason, both aimed at studying the history of knowledge, the development of intelligence, the evolution of cognitive abilities, the phylogeny and ontogenesis of intelligence (in this regard, Gould 1977 was mentioned several times during the conference).

We have now to wonder if the same criticism we can apply to Piaget's approach could be also applied to Thao's theory (for instance Marion et al. 1974). According to Thao, symbolic skills are inherited structures. Thus, he admitted the innateness of at least a part of modern human symbolic abilities. Against Behaviourism, language acquisition is not totally explained as the result of learning. The child is not a passive learner who responds to environmental stimuli but rather reactivates certain skills which depend upon a genetically predetermined maturational process. The same nativist pre-determinism has been suggested also by some neo-Piagetian psychologists (Pascual-Leone 1970, Case 1985, Karmiloff-Smith 1993). Moreover, it seems that Thao was suggesting that the formation of language in the child depends upon more general cognitive skills that enable the child to organize his/her experience of the world. In the same period, this was the insight of the psychologist Sinclair de Zwart (1967), for instance. But ultimately, this was one of the main assumptions of Piaget's development psychology – for whom Sinclair de Zwart and Thao developed a great admiration.

One could suggest that Thao and Piaget have something more in common. As a matter of fact, both of them stated that symbolic skills arise through stages which are the same for all children in the world. But this assumption implies the need to explain why and how all children in the world show the same development by stages. Thao's answer was that all children share the same phylogeny. The fact that the essential condition that determines the emergence of symbolic behaviour in the child should be sought in the phylogeny justified Thao's choice to analyse a limited number of examples. Methodologically, Thao mentioned observations concerning a few toddlers who are observed regularly every day for a few years. In effect, the fast development of linguistic skills of children entails the impossibility of obtaining a sufficiently large number of observations concerning a given

symbolic behaviour from the observation of a single child. For this reason, Thao analysed the symbolic behaviour of some children who were the same age. This method had been employed by a wide range of scholars (for instance: Bloch 1913, Cohen 1925, Grégoire 1937, Leopold 1939-1949, Piaget 1923, 1024, id. 1936 and 1945). But the age classification of the linguistic skills in the child is not without certain difficulties. First, Dré villon (1973, 281) remarked that Thao's hypothesis lacked a solid basis of experimental data. Second, as Cohen (1925) had already remarked, a child language that could be classified by age does not exist because one can observe a quick development and the coexistence of several skills that theoretically belong to different stages. Another conundrum of the age classification is the fact that the choice of the subject is made on the basis of the age independently from the social and cultural milieu of origin. This lack is interesting especially since, in the same period, sociolinguistics took its first steps in Western countries (see Hymes 1962, 1964, 1974, Labov 1966, 1969, Fishman 1970, Gumperz 1971, Haugen 1972) after having had a great success in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s (for more details see Brandist 2003, 2006, Simonato 2014). Lastly, Thao repeatedly told us that the linguistic function of the child must be analysed independently from the language of the adult. But we cannot deny the fact that the language of the adult is the culmination of the process of linguistic development of the child. The two poles of that antinomy – autonomy of the language of the child and adults' language-oriented description – is maybe a conundrum relating to any other investigation into the language of the child.

According to Dechaffour, Piaget shared with Thao the postulate that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. This point represents one of the most delicate aspects of Thao's theory. It is not our intention to deal with that point in the present paper. What we want to emphasize is the fact that there are two ways to address Thao's theory of recapitulation. Both were addressed during the conference. In the first case, the theory of recapitulation necessarily poses the problem of a human nature shared by all human beings. Against the alienation of capitalist societies and every cultural revolution and re-education supported by Maoist and Stalinist regimes, Thao claims the existence of a human nature resulting from the evolutionary history of the species and to which everyone participates. Alienation or the consequences of radical nurturism make human nature – which coincides with sociality – something foreign to individuals.

Along with political consequences, the recapitulation theory also poses some epistemological problems. Of course, Thao assumed the findings of anthropology and psychology as empirical foundations of his own hypothesis on the origins of consciousness. But it does not mean that he employed the methods of sciences to develop his theory. To him, in fact, dialectical materialism alone could offer the methodological tools to correctly speculate about the origins of consciousness. In other words, Thao did not apply the methods of anthropology and psychology to his philosophical research. He rather employed the findings of those sciences in order to empirically justify and check his own hypothesis. Dialectical materialism offers neither immediate results nor an empirical starting point to make detailed hypotheses on the origins of consciousness. Instead, dialectical materialism is the method that compensates the lacunae of anthropology and psychology. As Didier Samain showed very well, we must wonder to what extent unconstrained speculations about the origins of language can be considered epistemologically effective. Samain reasoned that what is missing in Thao's approach is indeed a scientific adherence to the description of observable data. To demonstrate this, Samain mentioned some results of previous interventions. Given that it is not possible to reconcile phenomenology and empiricism, transcendental genesis and empirical genesis, Thao was forced to decide and chose to eliminate phenomenology. However, Thao fails to propose an empiricist theory of language and spent his energy adding fiction to empirical data. One could affirm that Thao was a supporter of a moderate scientism – the belief that sciences alone can yield true knowledge about the natural world, humans, and society. But one must also remark that Thao took dialectical materialism more for granted than scientific findings. We must ask the question: What kind of knowledge can emerge from an approach of this kind? This is a problem that concerns the theory of Thao, of course, but which also involves recent research into the origin of language.

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At this point, we would like to shift attention to the most relevant results of the conference and other further perspectives. One of the main contributions to the conference was the special attention paid to Thao's unpublished writings. Archival documents refute the view that Thao was alone and isolated in Vietnam. Let us mention just three examples. At the

Department of Applied Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Psychology of the University of Padua, there is the Rossi-Landi Fund. In this fund it is possible to consult the exchange of letters between Rossi-Landi and Thao taking place from 1971 until 1973 (see D'Alonzo 2017b). The subject of the letters is the editorial project of a volume titled *L'Origine del linguaggio e della coscienza* (The Origin of Language and Consciousness) that would aim to collect the Italian translation of some of Thao's articles that had appeared in the previous decade in the French review *La Pensée*. A wider correspondence concerning theoretical as well as practical topics existed between Thao and the French philosopher Lucien Sève (born in 1926) and which took place between 1971 and 1986 at least. In the case of Rossi-Landi and in that of Sève, several books and reviews were sent to Thao (see D'Alonzo 2017b). From 8 March to 27 May 1982, Thao was in East Berlin as a visiting scholar at the German Academy of Sciences (Akademie der Wissenschaften) under the supervision of Vincent von Wroblewsky. The three examples we have mentioned show very well that Thao was not alone and isolated but rather was up-to-date on recent research. However, the conference also showed the need for a closer understanding of the material conditions in which Thao lived and worked between the 1950s and 1980s. Further research concerning this point will be warmly welcomed.

The part played by Thao in the history of Marxism emerged as one of the main concerns of the debate during the conference. It is important to expand the debate which was launched during the conference. In addition, the moment has arrived to discuss novel and innovative approaches to Thao's intellectual activity beyond the narrow limits of the history of the phenomenological movement. In this way, there is an increasingly urgent need to study the way Thao's theory interfaced in multiple ways with several different fields of research. During the conference, the need to compare Thao's theory with sciences emerged repeatedly. Likewise, D'Urso and Samain offered the first elements for a comparative study of Thao's semiology with other Marxist models. The work to be done is still significant and any contribution is welcome. At the same time, Bimbenet highlighted the fruitfulness of Thao's thinking compared to some contemporary research on the development of intelligence in the child. Thao's suggestions would allow in fact to integrate some theoretical deficiencies of current research. The fertility of Thao's thought was also recognized by Lecerle and Douet but in a very different context. According to Lecerle and Douet, Thao's thought is particularly

useful for anyone who wants to propose a materialist philosophy of language and open up a Marxist theory of ideology.

The last points afford us the opportunity to further develop the problem every naturalism must face. Simply put, we can address the question of what constitutes the explanatory power of language evolution research. We can also ask if Thao held a linear theory of both natural and social evolution or if he admitted the importance of historical contingency. In other words, the question is whether he was a determinist or believed in the possibility of diverse trajectories of historical development? How did he avoid the biological reductionism and the culture-historical relativism? Even if he admitted that being has an ontological priority over thinking, did he accept the idea that they were mutually constitutive of one another? What is the role of transhistorical attributes of the human being in Thao's theory? Is Thao's theory of the formation and the development of the self still useful for today's research in psychology? Is his theory of the way human beings distinguish themselves from the world in which they live by way of the gestural indication a good support for anthropological and philosophical research? The list could extend much further.

Lastly, we can note that, after having described the way Thao's RLC analysed the development of cognitive skills among our ancestors in great detail, Melançon's talk focused on Thao's latest writings and showed the new forms Thao's theory took over the years. Unfortunately, the attention Melançon paid to Thao's latest writings was an isolated attempt during the conference. Further research will have to deal with this point in so far as a more comprehensive view of Thao's work cannot neglect an important part of his career. And, as Melançon showed, that part of Thao's career is full of ideas, analyses and proposals which transcend the question of the origins of language and consciousness. Further research concerning this point will be warmly welcomed.

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