Bernard Mabille chose to put an end to his life on September 1, 2014. In messages to his family and friends, he explained his action by the recurrence of a brain cancer which had already affected him twice, and by his desire to save those close to him from seeing his health degenerate. Burdened by grief, we have all thought back to those confidences he shared with us, to those jokes of his, and even to those philosophical analyses of his which in some sense announced what he was going to do. We could not understand them at the time. But perhaps he did not see how deeply we all cared about him.

Bernard Mabille was born in 1959. He received the agrégation in philosophy in 1983. He taught secondary school in Bordeaux, before becoming a maître de conférences (Assistant Professor) at Paris-Sorbonne University from 1993 to 2003. Following that, he held full professorships at the University of Rouen and, from 2005, at the University of Poitiers.

Readers were first impressed by his Hegel, l'épreuve de la contingence (Aubier 1999), which brought new life to the study of Hegel. His first innovation was his method, in which he drew up the work's internal problems and the author's strategies for dealing with these. But he changed the way we read Hegel most dramatically by bringing contingency to the fore – a theme which no one up to that point had taken seriously, but which is at the centre of Hegel's ontology. Setting himself against the received image of Hegel as the champion of a sort of unfailing necessity, Mabille showed that, for Hegel, contingency is never defeated by the classical schemes of the foundation, and that the absolute only comes about at risk of schism and the loss of one's self.

In his second major work, Hegel, Heidegger et la métaphysique (Vrin 2004), Mabille examined the question of metaphysics, starting from Heidegger's dispute with Hegel in his 1957 lecture, 'The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics'. Beyond setting out the stakes of this discussion (“for the Hegelian, the liberation of logos through logic; for the Heideggerian, the liberation of logos from logic”), he offered an original understanding of metaphysics. For Mabille, metaphysics is not 'onto-theo-logy' or 'onto-theo-logy', but rather 'katholou-proto-logy' – that is, the reduction of the totality of being to a first principle. We then have, he explained, two major sorts of principle: either a being-principle, which gives rise to an ‘ontological’ metaphysics, or a nothing-principle, which gives rise to a ‘me-ontological’ one.

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The inspiration for this second work can be found in articles by Mabille, now collected in a volume to be published by Peeters in 2015, demonstrating the conditions of enunciation of the 'principiality' of principles, and the relationship of this to being. As well as analyses of texts by Hegel and Heidegger, the collection includes treatments of Plotinus and others. His fundamental thesis is that the principle should be thought of, not as a term, but as a process – one whose rhythm includes (or integrates) both the indetermination implied by the gap between the principle and other things, and the determination which the relationship between the two demands.

Bernard Mabille was able to show that the question of the unforeseeable and unmasterable plays a role of the first importance in Hegel's philosophical thought. Beyond Hegel, he meditated deeply on the limits of rationality. Contingency had it that a brain tumour ate away at this great mind; eventually, he gave himself up to the gravity of it. Many of us today are too saddened now to be able to see this withdrawal as anything other than senseless. Yet we will perhaps be able one day to recognize what was courageous and noble about his decision.

Prof. Gilles Marmasse (University of Poitiers)