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“Rousseau and Diderot: Materialism and its Discontents”

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Talented autodidacts who had both come to Paris, Rousseau and Diderot shared a passion for music, chess, philosophy, and politics. After their meeting in 1742 at the Café de la Régence, thanks to a common friend, Daniel Roguin, their friendship unfolded. As Rousseau testified in the *Confessions*: ‘he also talked to me about his projects for works. That soon formed between us more intimate connections which lasted fifteen years, and which probably would still endure if, unfortunately, and very much through his fault, I had not been thrown into his own profession’ (C, 241-242; see also 291-292). Rousseau and Diderot, who met Condillac once a week at the Palais Royal for a meal at the Panier Fleuri Hotel, formed the project of publishing a periodical called *Le Persifleur*, which they would write alternately. Soon, however, Diderot was launched into the immense project of preparing the *Encyclopedia*, and *Le Persifleur* never appeared (Chartier 2006).

The *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* was conceived when Rousseau went to visit Diderot, who was then imprisoned in the Donjon de Vincennes because of the scandalous *Letter on the Blind*. The *Letter* questioned the idea of intelligent design, and ended with an ironic call for mercy addressed to the God of Clarke and Newton. At that time, both men agreed on the diagnosis that ‘civilized’ societies are corrupt. Rousseau felt close to the author of the article ‘Need’ (*Besoin*), in which Diderot described the artificial needs that make men ‘perhaps more unhappy’ in society than if they had remained isolated or scattered. The idea of opposing the claim that the sciences and the arts could develop along with liberty or virtue was encouraged by Diderot, who urged his companion to compete for the prize sponsored by the Academy of Dijon, and encouraged him to defend his scandalous claim. The *First Discourse* was Rousseau’s first success in the Republic of Letters. Diderot even took it upon himself to find a publisher for the *Discourse*, and seemed really glad to see his friend raised to the skies. Despite this, Rousseau will, a few years later, consider that Diderot always tended to make him more satirical than was natural to him (Furber 1992: 82).

Yet was this truly the case? Rousseau and Diderot fell apart over the idea of natural sociability, which Diderot, against Hobbes, had not renounced. In 1745, Diderot had produced a translation of Shaftesbury’s *Inquiry concerning Virtue and Merit* (1699), which he sprinkled with fifty personal notes. Diderot gave Rousseau a copy on March 16, 1745, and according to Paolo Casini and J. Spink, this pledge of friendship points to the role that certain ideas of Shaftesbury played in their discussions and quarrels of the years 1750-1755. In the dialogue entitled *The Moralists*, Shaftesbury had rejected the idea that *homo homini lupus*, as well as the Hobbesian theory of the social pact. In the *Inquiry*, he mentioned social affections and placed the origin of the desire for society in filial love.

¹ « Rousseau and Diderot: Materialism and its Discontents », in *The Rousseauian Mind*, Christopher Kelly and Eve Grace eds., Oxon, Routledge, 2019, p. 107-118.

That in the passions and affections of particular creatures there is a relation to the interest of a Species or common Nature (as there is an affection towards the propagation of the kind, towards the nurture of the young, towards mutual support and succor) this is not deniable, neither will it be denied; therefore, that such an affection as this of a creature towards the good of that common nature, is as proper an affection, and as natural to him, as to any member of a body to work in its own way, as to a stomach to digest, as to other entrails to perform their other offices, as to any other part in an animal body to be so affected, and to operate so as is appointed to it in its system. (Shaftesbury 1984, II, I, 1: 145-7)

Diderot was sensitive to this passage, and added in a footnote: ‘One could add to this, that we are, each, within society, what a part is relative to an organized whole,’ like the cogs of a watch. To be sure, men are naturally self-interested, but working for one’s species does not mean renouncing one’s particular interest. It is absurd to believe that in every system of creatures the interest of the individual goes against the common interest. Truly, ‘the creature’s particular interest is inseparable from the general interest of the species’ (Diderot 1975: 361-362). Like Shaftesbury, who in the *Inquiry concerning Virtue and Merit*, republished in 1711 in the *Characteritiks*, used either ‘interest of a species,’ ‘social affection,’ or ‘love of mankind,’ Diderot first considered that the common interest is the bond of all societies. He continued the tradition which, from Locke to Shaftesbury, through Pufendorf, Cumberland, and Clarke, refused to reduce mankind to pure egoism. Diderot’s theory should not, however, be distorted: in the years that followed, he also relied on Hobbes to counteract a naive view of natural sociability. The article ‘Greeks (Philosophy of)’ states that men without conventions or leaders, endowed only with a few vague notions of the just and the unjust, would be restrained only by the fear of reprisals, which is by itself insufficient to prevent crimes (*Encyclopédie*, VIII, 908).

If something such as a social instinct exists, however, it must be cultivated. In the Letter to Landois of June 29, 1756, in which he rejects the illusion of freedom, and with it the idea of virtue or vice, Diderot argues that the evildoer is doomed to be destroyed. Diderot thus held to a middle path: while he accepted the Hobbesian or Spinozist critique of free will, he also hoped to retain the idea of a natural germ of sociability, which he argued needed to be educated, as well as supplemented by the fear of laws. In 1765, the article ‘Hobbism,’ which was published in Volume VIII of the *Encyclopedia* and largely inspired by Brucker, sketched a third way between the assumptions of the natural wickedness and of the natural goodness of man, embodied respectively by Hobbes and Rousseau:

The philosophy of Monsieur Rousseau of Geneva is almost the inverse of that of Hobbes. The one thinks man naturally good, and the other thinks him wicked. For the philosopher of Geneva the state of nature is a state of peace; for the philosopher of Malmesbury it is a state of war. If you follow Hobbes, you are convinced that laws and the formation of society have made men better, while if you follow monsieur Rousseau, you believe instead that they have depraved him (...) Both men were extreme. (Diderot 1992: 27-28)

This criticism of Rousseau, however, was preceded by that which Rousseau had addressed to Diderot, for the *Second Discourse* demonstrated that all the versions of natural sociability were

equally ingenuous. This disagreement increased as Rousseau, over the years, moved away from the *Philosophes*.

The Discourse on Political Economy

Despite their different approach to opera during the *Querelle des Bouffons* (1752) as Rousseau argued forcefully against French music, the collaboration between Rousseau and Diderot was very close when Rousseau contributed by the article 'Economy' to Volume Five of the *Encyclopedia* (Wokler 1975, 55-111). Diderot and d'Alembert had invited their friend to write the articles on music, but Rousseau also contributed with his major article on morals and politics. Having read the article '*Natural Right*' by Diderot, Rousseau inserted into his article 'Economy,' the concept of the 'general will,' which he now used to replace that of the 'collective will' (Bernardi 2006, 309-354). Rousseau had been struck by the concept of 'general will,' which had been introduced by Diderot in the form of the 'general will of the human race' (*volonté générale du genre humain*). This led Rousseau to conceive the preamble and the first part of his article as a specification of this concept, which Montesquieu had only mentioned once in *The Spirit of the Laws* (XI, 6; Riley 1986: chap. 5).

How did Rousseau reinterpret the concept of the general will? The article '*Natural Right*' suggested—in contrast to '*Right of Nature*' by Boucher d'Argis, Burlamaqui's mouthpiece—to conceive natural law in a non-metaphysical way, and thereby to 'save' it against massive objections. Diderot thus discussed natural law in terms of the living reality of the species. Natural law is no longer a law obeyed by the will. Rather, it is a norm of reciprocity which is accessible to reason as the individual experiences his insertion within his own species. The human race is the only tribunal to which disputes concerning the nature of the just and the unjust are to be brought, for the 'good of all' is the only passion the individual feels as part of his species. Diderot then introduced the concept of the 'general will,' the source of justice, which he now substituted for the golden rule of modern natural law (*do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you*). He who follows his particular will tends to become the enemy of mankind, for the general will expresses everyone's desire to watch over the preservation and happiness of the whole species. Diderot probably relied here on Bayle and Barbeyrac, who argued that the object of sociability is 'what men are entitled to demand from each other' (Postigliola 1977; Larrère 1992: chap. 1, 51-57). For Diderot, the general will defines moral duties on a purely horizontal level, that of reciprocal rights and duties. Political obligation is of the same nature as social and moral obligation: the general will is the rule of conduct of an individual toward the society of which he is a member, and of the society of which he is a member toward other societies. From this standpoint, the general will, which 'never fails' and serves to justify justice, humanity, and virtue, is related to sociability, understood as a mutual obligation between equals.

Objecting to Diderot's view, Rousseau in his article 'Economy' traces the origin of political obligation to the social contract. Unlike his former friend, who conceived of the general will as 'deposited' in the principles of the prescribed laws of all civilized nations, or in the social practices of 'savage and barbarous peoples,' as well as in the tacit conventions of the 'enemies

of the human race,' Rousseau conceived of the general will only at the level of the state. The reciprocal duties of equals are not associated to what we owe to the 'human race' but rather to what we owe to the political body under the aegis of the 'general will.' Although Rousseau draws upon the article '*Natural Right*' by quoting the classical reference to thieves who, enemies of virtue in the great society, adore its simulacrum in their caves (the fragment seems to have been added to the first draft and the reference to the article '*Rightt*' did not appear in the first version of the manuscript), he rejects Diderot's claims: to him, the 'great and luminous principle' of the general will borrowed from the article '*Right*' is ill-conceived. For, in his view, the feeling of humanity evaporates and weakens as it extends over all the earth, such that it is necessary to bind and compress mutual interest and compassion to make them active. On the scale of political bodies, the people is the only sovereign and the only legitimate source of justice. The rules of justice can only be valid for fellow citizens, and not for humanity as a whole. In Rousseau's account, the general will is not universal; it must be grounded on the constitution of a true 'common self' (*moi commun*).

The Geneva Manuscript

In the following three years (1755-1758), the former best friends gradually became enemies for major ethical and political reasons (Citton 2004). On a personal level, Rousseau had already irritated Diderot by refusing the royal pension awarded him after the courtly success of the *Devin du Village* in 1753. Rousseau had forcefully asserted his taste for independence, which would only increase after his reform. Determined to live what he preached, he gave up his whig and left Parisian society (*Confessions* VIII, CW 5, 303-4). Rousseau's retreat at Montmorency could only appear to Diderot as a desertion. On his account, the new Diogenes had betrayed the intellectual role he was intended to play in the Enlightenment republic of letters and backstabbed the *Philosophes* (Shea 2010, 102). On May 10, 1757, he wrote him '*Adieu le citoyen. Yet a hermit is a very bizarre citizen.*' When Rousseau received the play *Le Fils naturel*, he felt that he was the target of Diderot's words: '*il n'y a que le méchant qui soit seul*' (only the wicked man lives alone) and found the remark highly offensive. In Book IX of the *Confessions*, Rousseau writes that his infatuation for Sophie d'Houdetot, Louise d'Epinau's sister-in-law and the mistress of their common friend Saint Lambert, further envenomed their relations. Rousseau confided to Diderot the secret of his passion, but Diderot, falsely believing that Rousseau had confessed to Saint Lambert as he had advised him, openly spoke about Rousseau's feelings to his friend. Rousseau thought himself betrayed. The quarrel became even worse when Madame d'Epinau, who was ill, planned a journey to Geneva, and Rousseau refused to accompany her in spite of Diderot's request that he do so. Finally, the rupture was consummated, as evidenced in the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater* 'I had an Aristarchus, severe and judicious. I have him no longer, I no longer wish to have him; but I shall regret him always, and he is missing much more from my heart than from my writings' (March 20, 1758, CW 10, 255). On March 2, Rousseau had written his last letter to his former friend, which would remain unanswered. In the same year Diderot set down on paper the list of his grievances against Rousseau and the events causing the break, which would be published in the *Correspondance littéraire* of 1795. In June 1759, Diderot wrote to his mistress Sophie Volland

about the *Letter to d'Alembert*: 'This, my tender and solid friend, is the work of the great sophist' (Furbank 1992: 148-164; Cammagre 2006).

On a theoretical level, Diderot became Rousseau's main target in Chapter Two of Book One of the *Geneva Manuscript*. The distance between their views was set out in a chapter entitled 'On the general society of the human race,' after Rousseau struck out the original title ('That there is naturally no general society among men'). Whereas Diderot sought to naturalize the theory of social instinct developed by Shaftesbury, Rousseau actually returned to Hobbes. For Rousseau, the absence of a natural society of the human race condemned Diderot's theory to inconsistency, for voluntary association between men could not emerge from a spontaneous association based on sociability. Following upon the *Second Discourse*, the *Geneva Manuscript* first dismissed the classical argument of modern natural law, which invoked the natural weakness of man in his primitive state to explain the appearance of society. Rousseau rejected the idea that human beings are naturally vulnerable: only the transition to civil society broke the primitive proportion between force and needs; once that proportion was broken, artificial wants and rivalry arose, which introduced conflict.

Rousseau confronted modern natural law with its own contradictions. In the *Geneva Manuscript*, the social bond of interest does not give rise to a willingness to cooperate: our needs bring us closer as our passions divide us. For the individual to be satisfied, he must enslave and enslave others. Rousseau's refutation of the idea of a general society of the human race thus takes place in two stages: in the first, he rejects the hypothesis of a natural feeling of humanity or of universal benevolence. In the second, he objects to rational sociability, and to social cooperation naturally grounded on reciprocity. Rousseau dismissed the path of feeling (for each one always desires to profit from the benevolence of others without submitting himself to a reciprocal obligation), as much as the path of reason (for it is always rational to prefer one's own advantage and to try to fool or dominate others).

This conclusion sounds like a synthesis of the *Second Discourse*: civil society cannot emerge from a spontaneous development that reconciles justice and interest. What does justice require? That natural inequality be compensated, at least for the survival of the weak, a *sine qua non* precondition for the existence of a 'society.' But this is not the case: the society of needs gives new strength only to the one who already have too much strength, 'whereas the weak man—lost, stifled, crushed in the multitude—finds no place of refuge, no source of support for his weakness, and finally perishes as a victim of the deceptive union from which he expected happiness' (*GM*, 77). The unity of the human race does not exist. There is a real division between the poor and the rich, who can give themselves supplementary forces by using others to satisfy their needs.

Rousseau's adversary here could be the Diderot of the *Suite de l'apologie de l'Abbé de Prades* (Proust 1995: 393-396). There, the author argued that, despite men's instinct (which leads to the 'flock' called society), the origin of social relations is violent because of men's unbridled passions. From then on, the weak are the victims of the strongest, the strongest are in their turn immolated by the weak, and soon the inequality of talents destroys between men the bonds that

their own utility and their external resemblance had suggested to them for their reciprocal preservation (Diderot 1994: 538).

Diderot justified the necessity of conventions to prevent men from devouring each other like ferocious beasts: laws must compensate for the disadvantages of original anarchy and help men reach the stage of 'polite society.' Diderot thus took into account Hobbes' critique of Aristotelian sociability. Rousseau answered Diderot, however, by radicalizing Hobbes's claim: if the strong always prevail, conventions cannot be established without damage to the weak, since they are built upon already existing social relations. Primitive social life is not peaceful cooperation: without a sufficient and perennial intersection of interests, social life necessarily leads to injustice and violence. Incapable of hearing 'nature's gentle voice,' humanity will never taste again the innocence of a lost paradise.

The 'violent reasoner'

But Rousseau's refutation does not end there: he analyses, and therefore dissolves, the concept of human race that Diderot had made the true subject of natural law. The polemic is even more frontal here: for Rousseau, the human race is a 'collection' of individuals and not a substantial entity. It is not a substratum associated with the spirituality of the soul (which Diderot not only granted, but argued himself); nor is it an instance with respect to which we have duties (which Diderot denied). There is therefore no 'scientific,' non-metaphysical, ground for natural law. The *Geneva Manuscript* dismisses Diderot's arguments as mere mystification. There is no such thing as a 'general will' capable of prescribing to all men the norms of justice, that of their reciprocal duties. For what would be this 'individual' constituted by the species, which is itself only the collection of particular individuals?

Rousseau argues by reducing Diderot's argument to an absurdity: let us admit that the 'human race' is not a real entity, that is, not a physical person, but rather a 'moral person.' Then for this moral person to be endowed with one and the same will, it would be necessary that it really unites the particular wishes of each of its members. The human race would at least need, if not a common will resulting from a mechanism of authorization as in Hobbes, a 'common sensibility' (a *sensorium commune*). Now, if it makes sense to say that a common sensibility could exist in a collective being, it could do so only in a collective body already bound by a sense of belonging, by a 'common self' (*moi commun*). In the *Geneva Manuscript* Rousseau thereby denounces the impotent or chimeric nature of natural law. He emphasizes the paradox: either natural law is impossible to know (in the pure state of nature), or it has no motivational force to ground it. Natural law as 'law of reason' is accessible to man only when he is no longer able to apply it, because of the development of his asocial passions.

Rousseau's remaining criticism is directed against the Diderotian concept of the general will. In the article '*Natural Right*,' Diderot had put on the stage a 'violent reasoner.' This reasoner, a passionate being, was so tormented by his destructive passions that he who would not want to live if he could not satisfy them. But he was not, according to Diderot, a moral monster. He was rational and even fair, by proposing to other men his own life in exchange for theirs:

‘I realize that I bring terror and confusion to the human race; but I must either be miserable, or create misery for others, and no one is more dear to me than myself. Let no one blame me for this abominable predilection; it is not a matter of free choice. It is the voice of nature, which never speaks more forcefully within me than when it speaks in my favour’ (...)

‘Yet I am fair and honest,’ he will continue. ‘If my happiness demands that I rid myself of all persons who intrude upon my life, then anyone else may equally rid himself of my presence if it offends him.’ (Diderot 1992: 18)

As has often been noted, the violent reasoner served to encamp the Hobbesian individual in the state of nature, by proving the impossibility of an individualistic definition of natural law. For Diderot, no one would be able to convince the violent reasoner to subordinate his passions to the idea of justice. No one could convince him that he should renounce his desire to harm. The only recourse would be to stifle or strangle him for the greater good of society. Effective justice cannot be defined at the level of the individual: hence the appeal to the species and to the will of the member as part of the whole—the general will.

Now in the *Geneva Manuscript*, Rousseau again summoned the violent reasoner. Under the name of an ‘independent man’ or ‘violent reasoner,’ he offers a different discourse, a purely Hobbesian discourse which denounces the absence of any guarantees of reciprocity. Everyone wages war so long as he does not have the guarantees of peace; each pursues his narrow interest so long as he is not certain that others don’t do the same; and so on. It is Rousseau who here wants to be the most Hobbesian of the two:

‘I would try in vain,’ he might add, ‘to reconcile my interest with that of another man. Everything you tell me about the advantages of the social law would be fine if while I were scrupulously observing it towards others, I were sure that all of them would observe it toward me. But what assurance of this can you give me, and could there be a worse situation for me than to be exposed to all the ills that stronger men would want to cause me without my daring to make up for it against the weak? Either give me guarantees against all unjust undertakings or do not expect me to refrain from them in turn.’ (Rousseau 1978: 160)

As usual, Rousseau refers his opponent to his own principles. Diderot believed that the only problem raised by the ‘violent reasoner’ was his excessively passionate temperament. But Rousseau shows that even if he were more measured in his desires (simply concerned with his ‘independence’ and his own preservation), he would nonetheless resist the obligation to submit to rules of sociability. If he really wants to reason, the independent and enlightened man (*l’homme éclairé et indépendant*) will have to admit that he can only enjoy his rights if he accepts his duties, and therefore he will enjoy nothing at all in the absence of an external guarantor of moral obligation. Justice therefore has no chance of imposing itself spontaneously, by the sole force of reasoning. The relevance of this point is illustrated by the logic that governs international relations—an argument already mentioned by Hobbes to establish an analogy

between the state of nature and the state of society in the absence of political sovereignty. Nature does not rationally command justice.

Rousseau pushes Diderot up against the wall: if one follows his project, which is to dissociate morality and religion, it is still necessary to find a genuine basis for moral and political obligation. To be sure, Rousseau's irony and sarcasm were first directed at Burlamaqui and Boucher d'Argis, who, unlike Pufendorf, gave a religious foundation to sociability and obligation. Yet the criticism also reaches the 'philosopher,' who is not as realistic as one might have thought. Cosmopolitanism is meaningless in the natural state of mankind:

But the philosopher will send me back to the human race itself, which alone ought to decide because the greatest good of all is the only passion it has. He will tell me that the individual should address himself to the general will in order to find out to what extent he should be man, Citizen, Subject, father, child, and when it is suitable for him to live and to die. 'I admit that I see in this the rule than I can consult, but I do not yet see,' our independent man will say, 'the reason for subjecting myself to this rule. It is not a matter of teaching me what justice is, but of showing me what interest I have in being just.' Indeed, no one will deny that the general will is a pure act of the understanding, which reasons in the silence of the passions about what man can demand of his fellow man and what his fellow man has the right to demand of him. But where is the man who can be so objective about himself; and if concern for his self-preservation is nature's first precept, can he be forced to look in this manner at the species in general in order to impose on himself duties whose connection with his particular constitution is not evident to him? Don't the preceding objections still exist and doesn't it still remain to be seen how his personal interest requires his submission to the general will? (*GM*, 80)

Rousseau ironically refers Diderot to his own principle, the one the latter opposed to the modern advocates of natural law, in particular to Boucher d'Argis and Burlamaqui: natural law is not divine law, even if it were accessible to reason alone. It is not a law whose binding force comes from the submission of man to his Creator. If we follow Diderot, natural law must then be its own motivation. But then, what would actually motivate us in such a law, and how would this law inhibit desire, since we know that the human race, as an abstract idea, has no effect on the agent? For mankind is a moral person, which naturally cannot oblige us. The argument that there exists a social instinct is therefore deconstructed. For Rousseau, Diderot is fully part of the tradition of natural law. He has not really broken with it (Radica 2008: 129-149; Spector 2012).

Is this a genuine refutation or a mere polemic stance? If Rousseau had been able to read the article 'Greeks (Philosophy of the),' published later in 1765 in Volume VIII of the *Encyclopedia*, he could not have accused Diderot of having ignored the importance of laws in stabilizing the social order. Sticking to the article '*Natural Right*' allowed Rousseau to take on the beautiful role: he undoubtedly simplifies Diderot's thought in order better to challenge it. Yet Rousseau succeeded in extracting from Diderot's unstable thought a founding principle,

that of the general will, an infallible source of the norms of justice—a principle which he fully made his own in the *Social Contract*.

Materialism as a fraud

Finally, Rousseau takes Diderot as his main target in the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar, where materialist philosophy is considered as blind and deaf—probably an ironic reference to Diderot’s own letters: ‘The more I reflect on thought and on the nature of the human mind, the more I find that the reasoning of materialists resembles that of this deaf man. They are indeed deaf to the inner voice crying out to them in a tone difficult not to recognize. A machine does not think; there is neither motion nor figure which produces reflection’ (Rousseau 1979: 280). In Book Four of *Emile*, the Vicar first infers from experience that movement is not essential to matter, calling for a foreign cause. His mind refuses to approve the idea of self-moving matter: he is forcefully persuaded that the natural state of matter is to be at rest, for unorganised matter cannot move itself or produce any action. Against Diderot and the other ‘philosophers,’ the Vicar also stresses that the world cannot be conceived as a ‘large animal.’ Hence the necessity of a first engine, and the ‘first dogma or article of faith,’ which establishes a will that moves the universe and animates nature (Rousseau 1979: 576).

In his *Pensées philosophiques*, his first original book published in 1745, Diderot was still a deist and provided some arguments against atheism—which did not prevent the Parliament of Paris from condemning the book to be burned in public (Duflo 2003). In particular, he shared the difficulties encountered by materialism in accounting for the order of nature attested by the invention of the microscope:

It is not from the metaphysician that atheism has received its most vital attack. The sublime meditations of Malebranche and Descartes were less calculated to shake materialism than a single observation of Malpighi’s. If this dangerous hypothesis is tottering at the present day, it is to experimental physics that the result is due. It is in the works of Newton, of Musschebroek, of Hartsoeker, and of Nieuwentyt, that satisfactory proofs have been found of the existence of a reign of sovereign intelligence. (Diderot 1916, §18: 34-35)

Diderot thus distinguished the sceptical or atheist approach from the deist approach. In the *Pensées philosophiques* Diderot staged a dialogue with an atheist on the existence of God, the reality of good and evil, and the immortality of the soul. Now, the atheist disagrees with the idea that the human mind is unable to understand the emergence of life and intelligence. To him, this argument does not convincingly demonstrate the existence of God:

I open the pages of a celebrated professor, and I read: ‘Atheist, I concede to you that movement is essential to matter; what conclusion do you draw from that? That the world is the result of a fortuitous concourse of atoms? You might as well tell me that Homer’s *Illiad* or Voltaire’s *Henriad* is the result of a fortuitous concourse of written characters.’

I should be very sorry to use that argument to an atheist; he would make quick work of the comparison. (Diderot 1916: 38)

In Rousseau's letter to Voltaire on Providence, Rousseau mentions this passage:

I remember that what has struck me the most forcefully in my whole life, on the fortuitous arrangement of the universe, is the twenty-first philosophical thought, where is shown by the laws of analysis of chance that when the quantity of the throws is infinite, the difficulty of the event is more than sufficiently compensated by the multiplicity of the throws, and that consequently the mind ought to be more astonished by the hypothetical continuation of chaos than by the real birth of the universe. (*LV*, 117-118)

For Rousseau, this atheistic argument is clearly made in bad faith, and nothing could make him change his mind on this fundamental issue. Against philosophers who reject the proof of the existence of God which comes from inner feeling as long as it cannot be made into a rational argument, Rousseau maintains that it would be inhumane to disturb peaceful souls.

Rousseau thus dismisses the materialist philosophers (not only Diderot, who was not a deist any more, but also Helvetius, whose provocative book *De l'esprit* Rousseau had read between the draft of the Manuscript Favre of *Emile* and the later versions of the manuscript). Certainly, the infinity of throws deployed in a supposedly infinite time compensates for the difficulty of producing the current order of the universe. But this argument speaks only to reason. It convinces without persuading. In the Profession of Faith, the Savoyard Vicar thus turns scepticism against itself: it is precisely because our mind is confused and lost in the infinity of relations which compose the harmony of the world that it is impossible to exclude an intelligent design, a first intention, or a 'unity of purpose.' Rousseau describes as absurd the refusal to recognize an organizing intelligence: 'let us listen to our inner sentiment. What healthy mind can turn aside its testimony; to which unprejudiced eyes the sensible order not proclaim a supreme intelligence; and how many sophisms must be piled up before it is impossible to recognize the harmony of the beings and the admirable concurrences of each piece in the preservation of the others? They can talk to me all they want about combination and chance. Of what use is it to you to reduce me to silence if you cannot lead me to persuasion...' (Rousseau 1979: 275). Materialism is not an error. Rather, it is a fraud.

*

Finally, Rousseau also disagreed with Diderot and his friends of the d'Holbach coterie on the existence of the soul and of free will. Surely, freedom of the will is no better known than the activity of the understanding. But again, Rousseau reverses the burden of proof: 'It is not the word *freedom* which means nothing; it is the word *necessity*.' This is the meaning of the third article of faith that combines the belief in freedom and the belief in the spirituality of the soul: 'Man is therefore free in his actions and as such is animated by an immaterial substance. This is my third article of faith' (Rousseau 1979: 280-281).

Rousseau's thought was first constructed on the ground of his debt to Diderot, from whose thought he borrowed not only his first critique of civilization, but also the concept of the 'general will.' But with his own genius, he immediately distanced himself from Diderot, since the general will can only be conceived among fellow citizens, who are bound by a feeling of belonging to the same political body. The disagreements between them grew to the point of rupture at the very moment when Diderot accused the hermit of Montmorency of gross ingratitude toward his protector, Madame d'Épinay. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau went so far as to erase all trace of debt and controversy with regard to Diderot: his desire to make his former mentor disappear is probably part of the reason which led him to abandon Chapter Two of Book One of the *Geneva Manuscript* and to construct his own system—the 'principles of political right.'

The rest of the story is well known: convinced that Diderot (with Grimm) was the architect of a conspiracy that aimed to discredit him in Paris and throughout Europe, Rousseau reread the history of their intellectual friendship, arguing that Diderot insinuated into his first writings the blackness and the sarcasms to be found there in order to make him odious to public opinion. For his part, Diderot did not cease to manifest his bitterness. In a letter to Falconet dated September 6, 1768, he affirmed himself resolved never to enter into a public quarrel against his old friend. But this good intention did not last. Rousseau accused the philosophical party of hypocrisy and servility. His testimony in the *Confessions* was a slander against his friends and against the enterprise of justice and emancipation to which Diderot devoted his life. Accused of having betrayed the cause of the philosophers while they were in the height of danger, Rousseau was then ridiculed as a false censor of arts and letters who was only eager for fame and glory. After all, the portrait of Quentin de Latour exposed in the Salon of the Louvre in 1753 made him appear not like an Epictetus, but rather 'well dressed, well groomed, well powdered, ridiculously seated on a cane-backed chair' (Diderot 2009: 210). Contributing in 1770 to the *Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant* written by Madame d'Épinay, Diderot distorted the facts and darkened Rousseau's reputation—yet the text was not published at the time (Fabre 1975: 52-56).

But the worst was to come: in his *Essay on the Reign of Claude and Nero*, Diderot issued a *pro domo* plea against Rousseau: whereas the first edition took its precautions against the possible publication of the *Confessions*, the second introduced a critique of his paranoia and ingratitude. Published in 1778, the year of Rousseau's death, the recrimination was interpreted as a seizure of 'violent delirium;' and to answer this objection, Diderot in the 1782 version of the essay devoted seven subchapters to even harsher criticism, this time referring to his former friend by name (Fellows 1977: 165). According to him, the pseudo-friend of truth was a profound hypocrite; the coherent philosopher who pretended to live rigorously according to his moral standards was nothing but a coward, a moral monster, a 'deceitful villain' who wrote with the *Confessions* an 'vile libel,' full of pride, hatred, contradiction, and perfidious eloquence: 'This Jean-Jacques that you see was a pervert' (Diderot 1994: 1029-36; Citton 2004: 70-77; Salaün 2006: 9-18, 131-139).

Yet while blaming the philosopher who became in the woods an 'anti-philosopher,' Diderot also finally came closer to certain ideas of his brotherly enemy: 'and if Jean-Jacques was right?'

A few years later, he returned to his stand as a man of letters complaining of worldly solicitations, and vindicated in his own way the Cynic Diogenes (Lilti 2005: 205-207; Shea 2010: 47-56). After all, Rousseau may have been right to flee the servitudes of courtly and urban life. When Diderot quarrelled with Grimm in his *Lettre apologétique de l'abbé Raynal à M. Grimm*, he rehabilitated Rousseau: at least he was true to his principles, even though he was lying. Socrates and Diogenes rather than Aristippus? Laughs best who laughs last...

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Further reading:

- Hobson, M. (2005) Diderot et Rousseau par Rameau interposé. *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*. 39, pp. 7-18.
This article considers that Rousseau, when he still was a friend of with Diderot until around 1754 was quite close to an atheistic thought. It also wonders whether Diderot's play Le Neveu de Rameau does not implicitly give a voice to Rousseau.
- Larrère, C. (1992) *L'Invention de l'économie au XVIII^e siècle*. Paris: PUF, pp. 51-57.
In this general book about the invention of political economy, the author devotes the first chapter to the issue of natural law and includes a study of Diderot's article "Natural right" in the Encyclopédie.
- Lilti, A. (2005) *Le Monde des salons. Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*. Paris: Fayard, pp. 205-207.
While proposing a new reading of salons' sociability in eighteenth-century Paris, Antoine Lilti focuses on Rousseau's quarrel with Diderot and D'Holbach's coterie.
- Riley, P. (1986) *The General Will before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 202-209.
After a genealogy of the concept of general will in theological debates in 17th century France, P. Riley devotes the fifth Chapter to Rousseau. It shows how Rousseau was critical of Diderot's use of the general will as a universal principle applicable to humanity as a whole.
- Shea, L. (2010) *The Cynic Enlightenment. Diogenes in the Salon*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 45-105.

Louisa Shea's book provides a historical overview of the Cynic tradition and includes both Diderot and Rousseau as new incarnations of Diogenes. Shea also argues that the failure of the attempts by Diderot and Rousseau to renew Cynicism contributed to its erasure from philosophical discourse.