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## DIDEROT AS PHILOSOPHER\*

By Jacques Barzun

This audience has no need to be told who d'Alembert was. His name goes with Diderot's to form one of the great pairs of history — the heavenly twins of the heavenly city of 18th century philosophy. But to Diderot *what* d'Alembert was remained a puzzle. «How d'Alembert differs from a cow», he said, «I cannot quite understand. But some day science will explain it.»<sup>1</sup> This admission and this hope supplied Diderot's intellectual energy; the question itself is central to Diderot's life and writings. From the early *Philosophic Thoughts* to the last great dialogues, Diderot wanted above all to know what man and nature were and how they were related. To think on these subjects at all, he had to frame answers to his own questions and try to make them fit one another.

But that is not the common view of his effort. To this day, Diderot is quickly classified in reference works as a regular materialist, 18th century style, whose main purpose in life was to dipossess the Christian religion, reform society, and liberate mankind from conventional manners and sexual morals. Such a summary is plausible. Yet whoever turns anew to the facts of his life and a rereading of his works discovers a more complex mind and a set of deeper purposes. Diderot in his maturity held at different times different views of man and free will, nature and moral impulse; but this was not because he was a fitful, inconsistent thinker; it was on the contrary because he was (as he did not hesitate to point out) a profound inquirer, as well

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\* This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association of America in Los Angeles, December, 1982. References to Diderot's works will be given with the following abbreviations: A.-T. — Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, J. Assézat and M. Tourneux, eds. 20 vols. (Paris, 1875-1877); P.-V. — Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*, Paul Vernière, ed. (Paris, 1956 [1964]); Corr. — Diderot, *Correspondance*, G. Roth and J. Varloot, eds. 16 vols. (Paris, 1955-1970).

<sup>1</sup> Quoted as indicative of materialism in the article «Diderot» in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, 1967), vol. 2, p. 400.

as a fertile maker of hypotheses. Philosophy was his main concern. His opinions were tentative, to be sure; he knew they would not fit into a system — he distrusted, he rejected systems, though he duly valued coherence. His speculations must therefore be taken as indicative, exploratory, rather than literal and conclusive, but often far-seeing. In retrospect we see that he not only opens the way to the Romanticist outlook, as his best interpreters have told us, but that he also forshadows some of the ideas that gained acceptance only toward the end of the 19th century.

Diderot's vision, prophetic and tentative though it was, naturally had roots in the thought of his own day. It sprang from two or three convictions that he clung to. One was that the dualism of matter and spirit was false. Descartes had tried to give science a free hand by asserting what Whitehead in our century called the bifurcation of nature — matter and science on one side; the soul and morality on the other.<sup>2</sup> For Diderot, nature was one and indivisible. He saw no need and no way to bring a soul into matter at the conception of a human being and let it out again at death. All of reality consisted of but a single something which he defined as «matter that thinks» and again as «matter endowed with a sensitivity», either inert or active.<sup>3</sup> It is inert in sticks and stones, variously active in plants, animals, and men. Besides, motion, energy inhabits all things and expresses itself in many forms.

A second conviction — one he shared with the advanced thinkers of his time — was that science and experiment will not merely show the difference between d'Alembert and the cow; it will answer all questions of metaphysics and morals. And if it helps reshape the social order, it will be because knowing the laws of nature will enable us to conform our behavior and institutions to those laws. Finally — and in this he was singular — Diderot never departed from a third conviction, that in the world of men, moral action is the highest goal and chief merit. A good deed is superior to a fine page of literature.<sup>4</sup> Science itself is justified by its utility in serving moral ends.

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<sup>2</sup> «Bifurcation of nature». A.N. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge, 1920), ch. II; *Science and the Modern World* (New York, 1925), 110 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Lettre sur les aveugles*, P.-V., 94 and n.; *De l'Interprétation de la nature*, P.-V., 242-244; *Entretien entre d'Alembert et Diderot*, P.-V., 261 ff., 276.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Hume, Corr., VII, 221.

We must now ask what the something was that Diderot termed matter that thinks and has sensitivity. In one place, he frankly says that he does not know what matter is.<sup>5</sup> For him it cannot be the bare thing that occupies space without possessing the «secondary qualities» of color and taste, hardness or softness that some philosophers had come to attribute solely to human perception. For Diderot, the kind of matter that thinks and is sensitive forms the sum total of *all* that we perceive. Diderot's great example in the conversation with d'Alembert, of grinding up marble and mixing it with humus to produce a plant, which is then made flesh by a man's eating it, shows that Diderot's «matter» was neither Descartes' purely abstract, geometrical matter nor the mechanical component posited by the scientific materialist. Diderot's matter was, so to speak, an all-purpose matter, fit to contain and explain all phenomena.

That is the point where Diderot's vision came in conflict with his political ideology. For a leader in the 18th-century struggle against the established religion and the traditional society — both of which Diderot saw as hypocritical and oppressive — the best battering ram to use against the bastions of power was science, for it had proved itself true beyond refutation, and every day it undermined another old and sanctified belief. So science must be accepted as it was, uncriticized, and science assumed that nothing existed but dead matter in purposeless motion.

Accordingly, as a promoter of science, Diderot had to say that reality was ruled by an endless chain of mechanical causes — strict determinism, no free-will, no additional cause or force. This nonsense creed took care of the so-called truths of religion about God, the Soul, and immortality. Yet when Helvetius applied these same conclusions to the doings of man, in his treatise *De l'Homme*, Diderot cried out: «I am not a machine! I am a man and want causes adequate to man.»<sup>6</sup> A machine would hardly shine as an agency of moral behavior, and Diderot was moral man first of all. The contradiction between the material causation of every event and the noble manifestation of a good deed on the part of man was troublesome. In the dialogues Diderot tried to escape by drawing a distinction

<sup>5</sup> *Lettre sur les aveugles*, P.-V., 146.

<sup>6</sup> *Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé L'Homme*, P.-V., 564. See also: *Interprétation*, P.-V., 175, 221, 235; *Entretien*, P.-V., 275-276, 288.

between the human *will*, which is fully determined, and human *freedom*, which is expressed in our choice when two courses of action appear before us.<sup>7</sup> Choice must find a place in Diderot's scheme in order to satisfy his passion for moralizing every aspect of life. Whether or not it was his perpetual anxiety to deserve the love and respect of his worthy father and curmudgeony brother that led to his extreme — indeed sentimental — moralism, it remains a fact that Diderot prized the «beautiful soul» even above beautiful art. Indeed, for him beauty in art was primarily the beautiful soul made into a striking object that radiated moral teachings.<sup>8</sup>

In that region of Diderot's thought, in his plays, autobiographical statements, and art criticism about the Salons, science seems to be left behind to shift for itself. The real world seems rather to consist of the intangibles of emotion, appreciation of worth, and benevolence. He himself rather gloried in the fact that he gave endless help to many people for goodness' sake alone and knowing, often, how undeserving they were or how ungrateful they would be. It seems, then, that the movements of mere matter are subject to choice, spirit, and will.

At other times, it is true, Diderot as a practiced observer of mankind inclines to the view that villains and heroes cannot help themselves. The portrait of the heartless, unscrupulous Palissot in *Rameau's Nephew* inspires the reflection that he is abominable by nature and that one would be a fool to expect anything but knavery from such a knave. Contrariwise, in *Jacques le fataliste*, the principle of fatalism is denied first and last. Jacques himself admits that he forgets his principle and finds himself laughing or crying at the turn of events, while in the novel as a whole everything happens because someone wants it to; the stronger will or subtler mind chooses to do something and his choice affects the outcome. Thus the Marquis des Arcis works his own mind around to loving the wife whom he has been tricked into marrying.

Diderot apparently acts and thinks on two incompatible principles. We who live now are in a poor position to pass a scornful judgment upon him, for it is the very same contradiction that we tolerate

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<sup>7</sup> *Le Rêve de D'Alembert*, P.-V., 362ff. On choice, see e.g. *Entretien d'un Père avec ses enfants*, P.-V., *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Sophie Volland, Corr. II, 146.

in our own lives from day to day. We are all worshippers of science and we automatically apply to things at large a materialist, mechanical determinism. At the same time, we praise or denounce individuals and societies as if free choice and what we call «values» were not illusion but fact.

Diderot, I think, remains superior to us, because in the face of this conflict he struggled to the end; most of us do not even perceive its existence. But he worried, and he kept studying the phenomena of «matter that thinks». He learned all he could from his physician friends, he read Buffon and other biologists and ethnologists, he composed his own *Elements of Physiology*, and most important, he wrote dialogues in order that he might argue with himself.

In these dialogues he had come a long way from *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, where human beings are virtual automatons, machines driven by erotic horsepower. In mid-career, in his *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature*, Diderot has got as far as to ask himself fifteen searching questions about the origin of life and the internal design of living beings. Perhaps the notion that kept him searching was his early belief in the legitimacy of feeling — the passions, as his century called them. The passions are of course the biological fact that separates stones from philosophers and human beings from oysters and vegetables. Among the passions, Diderot always ascribed to sexuality a large role. This belief led him to the interesting speculations about sleep and unconscious self-revelation in «d'Alembert's Dream», as well as to the general applicability of the Oedipus situation in *Rameau's Nephew*, to say nothing of his advocacy of free love and polygamy.<sup>9</sup>

Still more important, Diderot's perception that Reason and Emotion are not two elements at war, but a single emanation of the personality, anticipates the psychological truth first established by William James in 1890; and it leads to Diderot's further conclusion — also part of James's thought — that abstractions, concepts, classifications are not superior to direct sensations and perceptions; they are on the contrary less complete, being in fact purposive distortions of reality.<sup>10</sup> This reversal of the whole Platonic tradition still power-

<sup>9</sup> *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, P.-V., 466 ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Lettre sur les aveugles*, P.-V., 130, 135; *De l'Interprétation*, P.-V., 179, 184, 186, 216, 222-223; *Rêve*, P.-V., 368; *Entretien... d'Alembert*, P.-V., *passim*; *Principes philosophiques sur la matière et le mouvement*, P.-V., 395.

ful among us is but one more proof of Diderot's originality as a thinker. While rejecting the dualism of matter and spirit, he saw that he must reject the dualism of Reason and Emotion, and he was brought to the further unifying view that consciousness and the world of objects share a common nature. This view is what James called Radical Empiricism. Furthermore, by giving up Shaftsbury's principle that morality resides in intention, and asserting that it resides in a practical consequence, Diderot became an early pragmatist. Like James again, Diderot was aware that consciousness is not a passive mirror of reality, as his century believed, but is individually selective. From its experience the mind forms abstractions to serve its needs and in so doing frames its distinctive vision of the world. Diderot's last word is: «The difference between physical and moral is as solid as that between the animal capable of feeling and the animal capable of reasoning.»<sup>11</sup>

All this obviously takes us a long distance away from the simple push-pull mechanism of the ordinary scientific materialist and even from what has been called the 18th-century form of Spinoza's pantheistic equation of matter and God. Unlike these, the universe that Diderot had a vision of was not a solid block of interconnected parts; it was — to use James's terms again — pluralistic. Diderot sees clearly that nature is a process, not a machine. In modern terminology, he could be called a phenomenologist.

He did not, of course, carry his thoughts to the fullness of these later conclusions, or even bring together firmly the parts he had on hand; his mind played with the *makings* of these subsequent schemes. And it is no doubt because he left unsorted the answers to his own brilliant questions that he has puzzled classifiers. For example, Paul Vernière, who has splendidly edited for Garnier a rich selection of Diderot's philosophical works, begins by calling his author a materialist, then midway in the volume Diderot becomes a Spinozist, and finally on page 312, he is described as a vitalist materialist — a strange description, for by common usage vitalism is the precise opposite of materialism.<sup>12</sup>

For a sufficient clue to Diderot's plainly existential thought, it might be enough to leave the subject as I have sketched it here. But

<sup>11</sup> *Réfutation suivie*, P.-V., 567.

<sup>12</sup> P.-V., 312 n. See also the Introduction to Diderot's *Réfutation*, P.-V., 558.

for an understanding of the history of ideas, it is worthwhile to ask what kept Diderot's imagination from going farther along its promising path. One answer is that he lacked certain conceptions that he needed if he were to resolve his difficulties without giving up his root ideas about the rival supremacies of science and of ethics. His obstacle was in fact the lack of certain words, words not yet current in the debates of his time.

This semantic explanation will not, I trust, be found inappropriate at a meeting of a modern language association. What I have in mind is this: if Diderot, instead of having to declare for *materialism* so that he might champion science, had been able to argue for *empiricism* or for *naturalism*, he might have got past the barrier of self-contradiction which leads Vernière to the oxymoron of a «vitalist materialist». I find that *empiricism* in the neutral, descriptive sense did not come into use until the 1850s. Before then, it denoted haphazard practice, devoid of principle: it was usually applied to the quack physician. The thinkers we now know as the British empiricists did not refer to themselves by that name. In the French language, the pejorative meaning of *empirisme* was even stronger. So there was no word with which Diderot could think himself out of the impasse Matter versus Soul — except materialism.

Similarly, Diderot was limited by the descriptions of contemporary science, which ever since Newton used the machine analogy, though with imperfectly defined elements. For example, Diderot attributed individuality to the molecules.<sup>13</sup> He was thus able to account for visible differences in human character and among animal species. A more advanced physics and chemistry would have told him that molecules — like all particles that are of the same grade — are by definition identical. It is the very purpose of analysis to *reduce* differences to sameness so that measurement can apply. It follows that when differences appear, they must arise from something other than the basic material, which is homogenous.

Diderot had more than an inkling of this generality. His concern with *l'organisation* of living beings proves his perceptiveness — he sensed that pattern was relevant to his inquiry.<sup>14</sup> Again, his specula-

<sup>13</sup> *Rêve*, P.-V., 300. See also: *Interprétation*, P.-V., 239.

<sup>14</sup> *Rêve*, P.-V., 330-331; *Entretien*, P.-V., 354; *Réfutation*, P.-V., 565-566, 582.



tions about the «fibers» forming «networks» (filets), with a cluster (faisceau) as the sensory center of conscious beings, testify to the intuition he possessed of the way the sensitivity that he thought distributed throughout matter gets summed up at some point in the self, for the purpose of acting, willing, choosing, speaking — not to mention the manifestations of special power that Diderot admired in the great poet, artist, scientist, or mathematician.<sup>15</sup> To get these diverse tangible effects out of little granules of homogeneous stuff was hard to make out without some unimaginable influence from *l'organisation*, that is, from precise combination. Life itself he thought a miracle.<sup>16</sup> So he must surmise for the varieties of men a different patterning of different molecules and fibers.

He also had the wit to see how misleading it was to take conditions for causes, and he made a point of this in refuting Helvetius.<sup>17</sup> He further disagreed with his late friend about pleasure and pain being sufficient to account for our habits and motives. By introspection he knew there was more to the mind than a scheme of triggers and wires moved simply by what we call pain and pleasure.<sup>18</sup> In short, Diderot distrusted the mechanical-associationist view of our mental life, and he was within an ace of telling us that science was not synonymous with physics.

Unfortunately, he never questioned the verbal habit of personifying «nature». The habit continues unchecked today, and you may read in present-day scientists as in Diderot: «nature sees to it that... nature has destined us to act thus... nature always prefers simplicity...» and other explanations that do not explain.<sup>19</sup> Nature, of course, does none of these things, for it does nothing — it is not an entity. The «nature» that science «studies» is a set of phenomena arbitrarily singled out from all the rest. Science organizes this set by means of a conceptual scheme. This scheme defines relations and it groups random individual events into general statements by means of abstract ideas such as energy, mass, electro-magnetic force and

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Bordeu in *Rêve*, P.-V., 357.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, P.-V., 303.

<sup>17</sup> *Réfutation*, P.-V., 566-567.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, P.-V., 568.

<sup>19</sup> *Entretien*, P.-V., 360; *Suite de l'Entretien*, P.-V., 377, 380; *Supplément au Voyage*, P.-V., *passim*; *Réfutation*, P.-V., 590.

the like. The actual experience of reality, as we can all testify, is very different from all these formulations; experience is in no sense *described* by science, merely *handled* by it.

Such were the disclosures of the late 19th century in science and philosophy. Since these reconsiderations have not yet been assimilated by common thought, it would be most unjust to blame Diderot for failing to make yet one more leap of genius into the minds of his successors 100 years ahead. When we see how prescient he was in his questions we find him amazing enough; we may even be quite sure that he felt no great pang of disappointment at failing to explain the difference between d'Alembert and a cow; for he himself acknowledged that he was much more excited by searching than by discovering.

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