

Diderot's Political Thought

Between Activism and Utilitarianism

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Abbreviations

<i>OP</i>	X. M. Delon (ed.), <i>Diderot, Œuvres Philosophiques</i> (Paris 2010)
<i>OPH</i>	P. Vernière (ed.), <i>Diderot, Oeuvres Philosophiques</i> (Paris 1964)
<i>OPOL</i>	P. Vernière (ed.), <i>Diderot, Oeuvres Politiques</i> (Paris 1963)

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Introduction

Diderot and the Historiography of the Enlightenment

During the past decade, the enlightenment has received an increasing amount of attention from historians, philosophers and the general public. After several decades in which the eighteenth century intellectual movement – especially due to the influence of the criticism and objections voiced by postmodernism – seemed discredited in the eyes of many, the history and ideas of the enlightenment again feature prominently in the scholarly world and intellectual arena. Partly this resurgence of interest could be attributed to the effects of globalism and the changing balance of power on the global scale. These developments have prompted Western intellectuals to research, expound and reaffirm the important moral and political concepts that were first devised by enlightenment thinkers. At the same time, politicians have followed suit and have started to increasingly invoke enlightenment ideas, either to refine their policy or to enhance their rhetoric. This resurgence of interest of the general public in the enlightenment is mirrored by a revitalised preoccupation discernable in the discipline of historical scholarship.¹

In line with these circumstances, the question that has been behind many of the scholarly efforts of the past decade has been the age old problem: what is enlightenment? This question was most famously answered in Kant's essay *Was ist Aufklärung?* However, the question has proved to be especially enigmatic and even today scholars disagree on the defining characteristics of the enlightenment.² The most recent trend in historical scholarship on the intellectual phenomenon has been the representation of the enlightenment as a multi-faceted movement in which several schools or currents of thought – each with its own set of doctrines and ultimate goals – co-existed within a larger intellectual framework. In line with this outlook, some historians have substituted the question 'what is enlightenment?' with the query: 'what kind of enlightenments make up the general phenomenon of the enlightenment?'

¹ As well as in the appearance of books on the enlightenment directed at a non-scholarly readership such as Philip Blomm's *A Wicked Company, The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (New York 2010).

² J. Schmidt (ed.), *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Questions and Twentieth Century Answers* (Berkeley 1996) contains, among many others, Kant's answer to the question. D. Edelstein, *The Enlightenment, A Genealogy* (Chicago 2010); J. Israel, 'Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (2006) 523-545; J.G.A. Pocock, 'Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of their History' *Modern Intellectual History* 5 (2008) 83-96.

Research focusing on the latter question has already yielded a number of studies displaying distinct currents within enlightenment thought.³

The most extensive and probably most influential study discussing distinct enlightenments has been conducted by Jonathan Israel. In two hefty tomes – soon to be supplemented by a third – Israel has posited the existence of two diverging schools of thought within the enlightenment as a whole.⁴ Separating enlightenment thinkers and ideas into the two categories of ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ thought, Israel has effectively split the enlightenment in two. In short, Israel has described the ‘radical’ enlightenment as based on an ontology of monist materialist inspired ultimately by Spinoza.⁵ Emanating from these first principles, the radical tradition endorses a number of distinct political and social ideas which include human rights, freedom of speech, complete religious toleration and what Israel has called ‘democratic republicanism.’⁶ Similarly, moderate enlightenment thought is ultimately based on a deist perspective invoking Lockean physico-theology.⁷ The political consequences of this ontological standpoint are among others an endorsement of limited religious toleration combined with a choice for either enlightenment absolutism or limited monarchy based on the English model.⁸

Israel thus associates the ‘radical’ enlightenment with the progressive political ideals that would gain widespread acceptance during the nineteenth and twentieth century, while connecting the ‘moderate’ school of thought with a conservative politics largely striving to preserve eighteenth century status quo. This notion is repeated explicitly by Israel when he maintains that the intellectual origins of what he refers to as ‘modern democratic republicanism’ lie exclusively in the ideas propagated by the ‘radical’ enlightenment.⁹ Because Israel fails to explain the exact meaning of the term of ‘modern democratic

³ M. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment, Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (Lafayette 1981); J.D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of the Theological Enlightenment, Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth Century France* (Notre Dame 2010); D. Edelstein (ed.), *The Super-Enlightenment, Daring to know too Much* (Oxford 2010); D.J. Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment, Protestants, Jews and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton 2008). D. Van Kley, ‘Introduction’ in: Burson, *Theological Enlightenment 1-32* provides an excellent introduction in recent historiography of the enlightenment.

⁴ J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment, Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford 2001); Idem, *Enlightenment Contested, Philosophy Modernity and the Emancipation of Man* (Oxford 2006); Idem, *Democratic Enlightenment, Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford forthcoming October 2011).

⁵ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 249-250; 257.

⁶ Ibid. 240-263; 866.

⁷ Ibid. 201-214; 772-780.

⁸ Ibid. 295-325; 344-371.

⁹ Ibid. 240-263; Idem, ‘The Intellectual Origins of Modern Democratic Republicanism (1660-1720)’ *European Journal of Political Theory* 3 (2004) 7-36; Idem, *A Revolution of the Mind, Radical Enlightenment and the Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton 2010).

republicanism,' the concept is particularly vague. Although it cannot be denied that in histories of the development of modern political theory and culture the contribution of the group of thinkers referred to by Israel as 'radical' is often neglected, Israel's claim is so strong that a detailed re-assessment of the issue seems warranted.

A similar reconsideration is desirable concerning the trend in recent historiography to view the enlightenment as consisting of a limited number of intellectual currents. Underlying this notion – most notable but not exclusive to Israel's analysis – that the enlightenment can be split into a limited number of currents or schools of thought that are manifest in all realms of thought is a fundamental but debatable assumption. This supposition is that philosophical thought in the fields of ethics, psychology and politics is ultimately linked to a fundamental ontological premise. Thus Israel contends that not only do the central tenets of the 'radical' enlightenment form a coherent intellectual tradition and programme of reform, these ideas are also ultimately linked to – or even caused by – the monist materialist ontology that is endorsed by the proponents of 'radicalism' he has identified. Although Israel focuses mainly on the analysis of 'radical' opinions, this mechanism seems to apply also to 'moderate' thought, whose proponents as deists or progressive Christians have preferred a less revolutionary programme of political, social and moral reform.

It is difficult to deny that, especially in the case of enlightenment thought, wider philosophical opinions may have a defining influence on the political views of a specific thinker. However, any intellectual historian is aware of the fact that the political thought of a certain thinker is not only conditioned by his wider philosophy, but also by the events and circumstances of his political environment. This perspective, emphasised by Quentin Skinner, maintains that the political theorist is not primarily a detached philosopher who constructs his political views on the edifice of his ontology and ethics, but is mainly influenced by and engaged with the context of the society in which he lives.¹⁰ This objection is solidified in the particular case of the enlightenment by Cassirer's observation that the enlightenment as a whole was characterised by an aversion of abstract and detached philosophy – a mentality that will return in the discussion below of Diderot's particular conception of philosophy.¹¹ Although Israel claims to incorporate a contextual perspective in his controversialist methodology, this method is mainly concerned with the intellectual controversies that form

¹⁰ J. Tully, 'The Pen is a Mighty Sword, Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics' in: Idem (ed.), *Meaning and Context, Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Cambridge 1988).

¹¹ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton 2009) xii-xiv.

the immediate context of the publication of certain hotly debated ideas.¹² In Israel's analysis which to be sure is not exclusively concerned with political thought, the possible influence of the contemporary political context on the political theory of enlightenment thinkers is largely ignored.

In light of these objections, the question arises to what extent the recent historiographical trend – visible above all by the work of Israel – of representing the enlightenment as consisting of a collection of divergent schools of thought characterised by an internal philosophical coherence through which political theory follows logically from more abstract notions in the realm of ontology and psychology, actually does justice to the complex issue of the nature and intellectual origins of enlightenment political thought as well as the exceedingly complicated question of the nature of the intellectual phenomenon known as the enlightenment as a whole. To what extent is Israel correct in representing the political ideals of the 'radical' enlightenment as inextricably linked to the 'radical' world view of monist materialism? Are these 'radical' ideas indeed the source of many of the commonplace concepts of today's political culture and theory? And to what extent was the contemporary political context a defining factor in the political thought of the *philosophes*?

This thesis will attempt to engage with these questions by examining the political thought of one of the most important proponents of Israel's 'radical' enlightenment: Denis Diderot (1713-1784). Above all known for his edition of and many contributions to the monumental *Encyclopédie*, published between 1751 and 1772, Diderot was an emblematic example of the *philosophe* in the sense that his activities were not limited to one field of endeavour and typically had a polemic purpose. Besides his work as editor and translator, Diderot was an active art critic, novelist and playwright. However, his importance in the context of intellectual history is mainly due to his eclectic writings on philosophical topics which focus on epistemological issues as well as ethics, psychology and politics. It is this last topic of his thought that will be the main subject of this thesis.

There are several reasons why an inquiry into the political thought of Diderot is specifically suited to shed light on the questions posed above. First of all, Diderot was not only one of the most important *philosophes* of his day, but is also recognised by Israel as one of the primary exponents of the 'radical' enlightenment in France.¹³ Although the influence of many of Diderot's political writings – which largely remained unpublished during his life – is

¹² Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 15-25.

¹³ *Ibid.* 785-793.

contested, his importance to other fields of endeavour and to the history of the enlightenment as a whole is uncontested.¹⁴ Furthermore, through Diderot's contributions to the *Encyclopédie* and Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes* – two of the most popular books in pre-revolutionary France – the political views that remained contained in clandestine works gained a podium on which Diderot skilfully presented them concisely but comprehensibly to the general public.¹⁵ Secondly, as Diderot was an especially versatile thinker who wrote extensively on ontology, ethics, psychology and politics – the main topics which this research will touch upon – his oeuvre is especially suited to the inquiry attempted in this thesis. However, Diderot – like many of his contemporary *philosophes* – was also an author who was deeply concerned with the problems and current issues of the society in which he lived. Because of this exoteric attitude, the political and ethical writings of Diderot constitute an especially good example of the way in which the concrete social and political context is incorporated into the writings of a political theorist. Finally, Diderot's political thought has attracted relatively little scholarly attention in the past. For this reason, a critical discussion of Diderot's political theory seems warranted even in itself.

Research Questions and Methodology

In essence, the central question at the basis of this research is: why did Diderot hold the opinions he held? On what particular arguments was his political theory based? Of course, this question is at the root of almost all works of intellectual history. The particular three questions that this thesis will focus on are: what is the influence or role of Diderot's ontological beliefs of materialist monism in the formulation of his political theory? And: what part do contemporary political issues play in this political theory as well as in Diderot's political texts as a whole? Finally, having considered the ontological and contextual perspective: what other arguments are advanced by Diderot in order to support his opinions on politics? In practice, these research questions require a comprehensive reconstruction of the argumentation behind Diderot's social and political thought. At the end of this discussion, the results of this enquiry will again be connected to the issues concerning the historiography of the enlightenment discussed in the introductory paragraph above.

In order to answer the first of the three particular questions posed above, the main section of the thesis will commence with a short discussion of Diderot's views on ontology

¹⁴ Cf. P. Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth 1965) 403-416.

¹⁵ M. Duchet, *Diderot et l'Histoire des Deux Indes ou l'Écriture Fragmentaire* (Paris 1978) 13-19 ; R. Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment, A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie 1775-1800* (Cambridge Mass 1979).

and epistemology. Due to constraints of space, this section will necessarily be concise, skipping over the sizeable scholarly debate on Diderot's more abstract philosophical views. The paragraph will thus only attempt to display the most defining of Diderot's materialism necessary to answer the research question posed here. The subsequent chapters on Diderot's political thought will attempt to relate the political, ethical and social theories expounded to underlying abstract philosophical notions. At the end of each chapter, the question will be posed what the exact role and influence of Diderot's materialist ontology has been in the formulation of the political theory discussed.

The second question on the role of contemporary political issues in Diderot's political writings requires the adoption of part of Skinner's method of investigating political theory. Although contextual interpretation is a ubiquitous tool in the field of intellectual history, Skinner's approach goes beyond usual contextual interpretations by asking specifically what the author of a text intended to accomplish with the utterance of a particular statement. Convinced that political theory is primarily oriented towards a particular intellectual and practical political context, Skinner assumes that the author of a text not just wishes to convey interesting observations to the reader, but also has a certain polemical purpose. In other words, the author of a text containing political thought usually intends to convince the reader of a certain point, and by doing so either manipulates the contents of an ideology or convention, or advocates changes in the practical political situation. By comparing a text to its political and intellectual context while asking the question in what way the author wishes to manipulate this context, the historian is able to discover the function and importance of a text as well as the intentions of its author.¹⁶ The three major chapters in which Diderot's political thought will be discussed below will each pay attention to the discussion of the contemporary context in the texts under consideration. However, in order to highlight the specific way in which Diderot's political thought was conceived as a reflection on contemporary issues and intended as commentary on eighteenth century developments and problems, Skinner's question will return at the end of each of these chapters.

The last of the three questions posed above is probably the most difficult to answer. As shall briefly become clear, Diderot's political thought was to a large extent based on arguments that had no direct connection to either ontology or context. Answering the question why Diderot held his political opinions except for their basis in his ontology and reflections

¹⁶ Q. Skinner, 'Social Meaning and the Explanation of Social Action' in: J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context* 83-85. Cf. J. Tully, 'The Pen is a Mighty Sword, Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics' in: Idem (ed.), *Meaning and Context, Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Cambridge 1988).

on the contemporary context requires no other specific methodology than meticulous textual interpretation. Although some general trends may be discernable, the arguments besides those grounded in ontology and context are diverse and differ among specific subjects. However, with the guidance of secondary literature – especially indispensable in relation to this third research question – these diverse arguments will be reconstructed, even though this thesis will often disagree with the findings of previous commentators.

Finally, the enquiry sketched above is complicated by several factors. The first is the diverse nature of the source material. Diderot never wrote a systematic treatise of political theory in which his views and ideas were combined and summarised and actually opposed such an approach in principle.¹⁷ Instead, his political thought is to be found in a collection of a dozen or so shorter works which differ widely in subject and purpose. Some of these were directed at the general public, others were never destined for wider publication as they contained subjects or expressed opinions that Diderot regarded as unwise to expose to the outside world. The second complication results from the fact that the political writings of Diderot were written in different stages of the life and intellectual development of the author. As an eclectic and sceptic thinker, Diderot did not take a principled stand on issues but had the habit of continually changing his mind in the face of new theories or empiric evidence. The result of these two complicating aspects of Diderot's writings is that this thesis faces the challenge of distilling from these the most important and defining ideas and opinions without losing sight of the context of publication and intellectual development inherent in Diderot's thought.

The Historiography of Diderot's Political Thought

Besides being relatively neglected by intellectual historians attempting to reconstruct the wider narratives of the development of modern political culture and theory, the political thought of Diderot also lacks a sizeable dedicated historiography. There are several reasons to explain the unwillingness or inability on the part of historians to provide in-depth examinations of Diderot's political writings. First of all, the nature of the textual evidence is complicated due to both its dispersion and its history. Unlike most contemporary political theorists, Diderot did not write a *magnum opus* in which all his political ideas were

¹⁷ P. Lom, *Scepticism, Eclecticism and the Enlightenment: An Inquiry into the Political Philosophy of Denis Diderot* (Florence 1998) 29.

concentrated. Thus while the political ideas of Rousseau and Montesquieu are conveniently contained in the *Contrat Social* and the *l'Esprit des Lois* respectively, Diderot's political thought is spread out in a dozen or so minor texts, each focusing on particular issues.

Secondly, many of Diderot's most original and important political texts were published anonymously, buried in the work of another author, or simply not released to the wider public during his lifetime. For instance, Diderot's contributions to Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes*, which contain many of his most relevant and practical political recommendations, were anonymous, unaccredited and only identified definitively in the twentieth century to be of Diderot's hand.¹⁸ The *Observations sur le Nakaz*, another text containing practical recommendations for political reform, was also never published but after Diderot's death was transferred to Catherine II who had acquired Diderot's personal library. Catherine was unsatisfied with Diderot's observations on her outline for the political reform of Russia and probably had the manuscript destroyed, as it is no longer present in Diderot's collection still in St. Petersburg today.¹⁹ Only in the beginning of the twentieth century manuscripts containing the *Observations* resurfaced in France. Another crucial text, the *Supplément de Voyage de Bougainville*, was only published in 1798, fourteen years after Diderot's death.²⁰

These and other texts were probably not published because of their controversial nature or because they were not intended for publication in the first place. Although during the latter half of the eighteenth century censorship in France had been relaxed, the open and large scale publication of the controversial notions contained in the *Supplément* – a work advocating not only gender equality, but also sexual libertinism – was probably considered either too risky or damaging to his reputation by Diderot. The running commentary of the *Observations* was probably not deemed fit for publication as it focuses on very specific issues and does not read as a coherent treatise. However, although many of Diderot's texts were not published during his lifetime, most of these – including the *Supplément* – did circulate among subscribers of Grimm's *Correspondance Littéraire*, a clandestine manuscript journal.²¹ Through this limited publication, at least a limited number of contemporary thinkers and observers could take note of Diderot's political views.

¹⁸ Duchet, *Diderot et l'Histoire des Deux Indes* contains an extensive overview of all the identified passages.

¹⁹ P. Vernière (ed.), *Diderot, Oeuvres Politiques* (Paris 1963) 333-334. This particular edition will henceforth be abbreviated as *OPOL*.

²⁰ P. Vernière (ed.), *Diderot, Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Paris 1964) 450-451. This edition will henceforth be abbreviated as *OPH*

²¹ *Ibid.* 448-450.

The complicated nature of the source material has not made scholarly work on the topic much easier. For instance, Lester Crocker has raised the question if the political writings of Diderot actually contain anything like a consistent system of political thought. Crocker points to several inconsistencies and contradictions as well as gaps in Diderot's writings.²² However, Crocker does not take into account the contextual circumstances of individual texts. It may be true that Diderot did not construct a definitive and all-encompassing political theory in either one of his writings, but this does not entail that therefore his political thought does not contain certain general characteristics as well as specific original and important theories worthy of scholarly attention. In an article that does not seem to be a direct reply to Ellen Strenski has made a similar point, explaining some of the difficulties of studying Diderot's political views and includes the important observation that Diderot's opinions were not rigid and that he often adapted his statements to the intended reading public but also during his life legitimately changed his mind on many issues.²³

Because the political texts of Diderot are not especially well known due to their peculiar history, the historiography dedicated specifically to the corpus of Diderot's political texts is very limited. The past century has produced exactly one monograph completely dedicated exclusively to Diderot's political thought. Written by Anthony Strugnell and Published in 1973, this is the only work of scholarship that provides a comprehensive overview of Diderot's politics, and will thus be an important work of reference to this thesis.²⁴ Besides this monograph, there are a few books that discuss certain important aspects and topics of Diderot's political thought, such as Bernard Papin's *Sens et Fonction de l'Utopie Tahitienne dans l'Oeuvre de Diderot* and Yves Benot's *Diderot, de l'Atheisme à l'Anticolonialisme*.²⁵ Furthermore, there exist a dozen or so articles and chapters in books that either discuss Diderot's political thought in very general terms, or focus one very particular aspect.

Because of the limited scholarly attention for the political thought of Diderot – possibly also due to the fact that most of the commentators of the work of the *philosophe* come from the background of literary studies and thus are less inclined to focus on the

²² L. Crocker, 'Diderot as a Political Philosopher' *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 148 (1984) 120-139, 137.

²³ E.M. Strenski, 'The Problem of Inconsistency, Illustrated in Diderot's Social and Political Thought' *Diderot Studies* 14 (1971) 197-216.

²⁴ A. Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics, A Study of the Evolution of Diderot's Political Thought after the Encyclopédie* (The Hague 1973).

²⁵ B. Papin, *Sens et Fonction de l'Utopie Tahitienne dans l'œuvre de Diderot* (Oxford 1988); Y. Benot, *Diderot, De l'Atheisme à l'Anticolonialisme* (Paris 1981).

political writings – the scholarly discussion on the topic is rather limited. The most important issue concerning Diderot’s political thought as a whole is the general question whether his political writings are influenced by views in other areas of his philosophy, most importantly his psychology and ethics, but also his epistemology and aesthetics, or whether his political writings are primarily polemic in nature and are inspired and directed at contemporary political issues and developments. On the one extreme end of this spectrum stands Merle Perkins, who has not only argued that the politics of Diderot are intimately linked to his philosophy of science and aesthetics, but also maintains that in all these areas Diderot utilises the same kind of ‘thought processes.’ For instance, Perkins maintains that Diderot’s conception of the individual in society is influenced and displays the same ‘thought processes as the *philosophe*’s materialism and his view on the role of the atom in the formation of matter.²⁶ While an original approach, the analysis of Perkins is far-fetched – especially concerning Diderot’s political thought – and Strugnell has criticised it with good reason.²⁷

On the other side of the spectrum Dena Goodman has proposed that Diderot’s way of discussing political issues is a prime example of a way of expressing political thought with the express intention to convince the reader and create support for political reforms. Goodman, who bases her conclusions mainly on the analysis of the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, thus considers Diderot to be a political writer who is informed first and foremost by contemporary political issues. Petr Lom has further supported Goodman’s contention by pointing to the eclecticism that is exhibited in Diderot’s writings but which is also repeatedly and explicitly advocated by the *philosophe* himself. Lom maintains that, far from being a systematic thinker, Diderot favoured constructing his views and arguments in conjunction with his surroundings, meaning that his political views were first and foremost inspired by the issues and events of his day.²⁸ However, Goodman also maintains that Diderot not only looked to the political issues of his day as an inspiration for his own theories, but also had the express purpose to convince and influence political opinion in favour of his views.²⁹ In light of the fact that many of Diderot’s most important political texts, including the *Supplément*, were not widely published in his lifetime, this last contention can be debated.

²⁶ M.L. Perkins, *Diderot and the Time-Space Continuum: His Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics* (Oxford 1982) 150-155.

²⁷ A. Strugnell, ‘Diderot and the Time-Space Continuum’ *Modern Language Review* 80 (1985) 168-169.

²⁸ Lom, *Scepticism* 7-17.

²⁹ D. Goodman, *Criticism in Action, Enlightenment Experiments in Political Writing* (Ithaca 1989) 205-224.

In his monograph, Anthony Strugnell occupies something of a middle position. His book is split into two main sections, the first focusing on the philosophical and moral foundations of Diderot's political thought, while the second section discusses the evolution of Diderot's politics by treating texts individually in a chronological ordered survey. The first section discusses such topics as the influence of Diderot's materialism on his idea of the formation of morals and Diderot's conception of the workings of the human mind in relation to his notion of citizenship and the social nature of man. This synthesizing discussion provides the necessary outline of Diderot's most fundamental principles while the second section focuses on the elaboration of individual works in their immediate context. Strugnell's approach is highly successful and even though this thesis will deviate from some of its specific conclusions, his overall interpretation of Diderot's political thought as grounded in both ontology and context is followed here.³⁰

³⁰ Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 1-14.

Diderot's Ontology and Epistemology

Epistemology and Philosophy of Science

As is the case with his political writings, Diderot never wrote a comprehensive systematic treatise summarising his epistemological and ontological views. Instead, his ideas on these topics can be found in a collection of shorter texts written in different periods of Diderot's life and employing various literary devices, such as dialogue and letter forms, to animate the reader. The collection of Diderot's philosophical texts is also similar to his political oeuvre in the fact that the most interesting and original writings were only published after Diderot's death. In fact, the publication of the *Lettre sur les Aveugles*, a short treatise investigating the epistemological and moral consequences of blindness but which in passing also displayed a materialist and atheist tendency, was the main reason Diderot spent several months imprisoned at Vincennes by the authorities in the latter half of 1749.³¹ To be sure, the main treatise outlining Diderot's epistemology and philosophy of science, the *Pensées sur l'Interpretation de la Nature* was published in 1753. However, the *Rêve D'Alembert*, decisive in the reconstruction of Diderot's materialist physiology, as well as the iconoclastic *Neve de Rameau* remained unpublished until the beginning of the nineteenth century.³²

Diderot's thinking in all fields is characterised by a deep rooted scepticism that can be traced back to his cautious and reserved epistemology. Diderot's fundamental principle, voiced most eloquently in the *L'Interpretation de la Nature*, is that if reliable knowledge is unavailable, suspension of judgment is the only feasible option:

Ne vaut-il pas mieux se concilier la confiance des autres par la sincérité d'un *je n'en sais rien*, que de balbutier des mots et se faire pitié à soi-même, en s'efforçant de tout expliquer?³³

For Diderot, all scientific as well as philosophical enquiry starts with a Socratic admittance of ignorance, after which the enquirer may venture to gain knowledge on a subject by way of the study of the real world. The statement of this principle, as well as the rather hostile characterisation of those who disregard it, is mainly directed at Diderot's contemporaries

³¹ A.M. Wilson, *Diderot* (Oxford 1972) 103-116.

³² OPH 252.

³³ *Pensées sur l'interpretation de la Nature* X. M. Delon (ed.), *Diderot, Œuvres Philosophiques* (Paris 2010) 290. Henceforth references to the *Œuvres Philosophiques* edition shall be abbreviated to *OP*.

which engaged in metaphysical speculation and system-building, and above all at proponents of Cartesianism. However, this does not entail that therefore knowledge is impossible. In the *Rêve*, Diderot and doctor Bordeu revisit the issue:

Diderot: Tenez, mon ami, si vous y pensez bien, vous trouverez qu'en tout, notre véritable sentiment n'est pas celui dans lequel nous n'avons jamais vacillé, mais celui auquel nous sommes le plus habituellement revenus.

Bordeu: Je crois que vous avez raison.³⁴

Taking a position on a certain issue is thus inevitable in the end, although it is emphasised that this contention is never absolute or certain and always the object of criticism and doubt. All knowledge is by definition conjectural and probabilistic, but above eclectic.³⁵

This specific quote points to a second important general characteristic of Diderot's epistemology: his dismissal of metaphysical thought as a way to arrive at useful and accurate knowledge of the world. Diderot likened ideas and concepts devised by metaphysicians to 'ces forêts du Nord dont les arbres n'ont point des racines'³⁶ Throughout the *L'Interpretation de la Nature* Diderot derides metaphysical speculation as both false and irrelevant.³⁷ A similar judgement is reserved for the kind of abstract mathematics that intends to solve problems that have no direct bearing on the real world, while the practical sciences that study the actual natural world, such as physics, chemistry and biology, are regarded as of primary importance.³⁸ Doctor Bordeu in the *Rêve* is highly critical of all abstract thought:

D'Alembert: Et les abstractions?

Bordeu: Il n'y en a point; il n'y a que des réticences habituelles, des ellipses qui rendent les propositions plus générales et le langage plus rapide et plus commode. [...] On n'a nulle idée d'un mot abstrait. On a remarqué dans tous les corps trois dimensions, la longueur, la largeur, la profondeur; on s'est occupé de chacune de ces dimensions, et de là toutes les sciences mathématiques. Toute abstraction n'est qu'un signe vide d'idée. Toute science abstraite n'est qu'une combinaison de signes. On a exclu l'idée en séparant le signe de l'objet physique, et ce n'est qu'en rattachant le signe à l'objet physique que la science redevient une science d'idées.³⁹

³⁴ *Rêve* OP 357.

³⁵ Lom, *Scepticism, Eclecticism* 6-8.

³⁶ *Pensées sur L'Interpretation* VIII, OP 290.

³⁷ *Ibid.* III, OP 286-287; VIII OP 289-290; X OP 290; XVII OP 294; XXI OP 295; XXIII OP 296.

³⁸ *Ibid.* III OP 286; XVIII OP 294.

³⁹ *Rêve* OP 401.

This rejection of abstract thought was not only a consequence of Diderot's scepticism, but also of his principled eclecticism. In Diderot's mind, his eclecticism prevents him from both metaphysical system building and adherence to a particular school of thought. Instead, the philosopher or scientist is to judge all propositions on their own merit.⁴⁰ Finally, another important principle of Diderot's views on scientific and philosophical enquiry: his insistence on the importance of the usefulness of knowledge and discovery.⁴¹ In Diderot's view, the role of philosophy and science is the pragmatic improvement of the lives of men by way of understanding and manipulating nature.

Complementing this sceptic view on the role and capabilities of human enquiry is a sensationalist epistemology inspired by the work of John Locke. The main principle of Diderot's theory is that the use of the senses is the only reliable way to acquire knowledge about nature.⁴² Secondly, Diderot agrees with Locke (and Aristotle) that the content of the human mind is derived solely from sensory experience, thus dismissing the possibility of Cartesian innate ideas.⁴³ Following the exploration of blindness in the *Lettre sur les Aveugles* Diderot admits that the immediate sensory perception of the world differs among persons.⁴⁴ Besides illustrating the importance of sensory experience to the formation of ideas by discussing the blind man's peculiar and deviating notions of morality, Diderot emphasises the fact that in the end persons with deviating sensory capabilities – such as the blind – have the ability to construct the same representation of the world as fully competent observers by the enhanced use of their other senses.⁴⁵ In this epistemology, Diderot rejects transcendentalism and implicitly postulates the actual existence of the world as well as the capacities of the senses to construct an accurate representation of it.

Finally, the practical corollary of Diderot's Lockean sensationalism is his philosophy of science based on Baconian empiricism. Diderot already displayed his admiration for Francis Bacon in the prospectus of the *Encyclopédie*, while the work itself contains a long article on the Englishman.⁴⁶ Even though Diderot did not share Bacon's enthusiasm for ecclesiastical history or his rejection of criticism on churches and religion in general, the principles of empirical enquiry laid down in the *Novum Organum* served as an important

⁴⁰ Lom, *Scepticism, Eclecticism* 7-9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* VI *OP* 287; XIX *OP* 294.

⁴² *Pensées sur L'Interpretation* IX *OP* 290; XV *OP* 292; XXIII *OP* 296; *Lettre sur les Aveugles* *OP* 139-140.

⁴³ *Rêve D'Alembert* *OP* 401.

⁴⁴ *Lettre* *OP* 132-134.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* *OP* 136-138.

⁴⁶ *Baconisme* in: Diderot et d'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers* (Stuttgart 1966) II 8-10.

source of inspiration. Diderot himself thought that successful scientific or philosophical enquiry required the three stages of observation, reflection and experimentation to yield reliable and useful data, emphasising that the absence or neglect of either one of these stages is the common cause of the development of spurious knowledge.⁴⁷ It is important to emphasise that this empiricism did not confine itself to scientific method, but for Diderot also applied to philosophy. As shall also become clear in the discussions below, Diderot emphasised that philosophy as a discipline should not be concerned with the construction of abstract theories grounded solely in rationality, but instead should concern itself with the world as it is and immerse itself in the empirical reality of the facts of nature.

Ontology and Theology

Diderot's views on the existence and role of a deity are especially hard to pin down. Because the discussion of the issue was most controversial and even potentially dangerous, Diderot probably attempted to evade the topic as much as possible, especially later in his life when his materialist opinions had been consolidated and his caution increased by the imprisonment of 1749. In one of his early works, the *Pensées Philosophiques* Diderot displays a marked hostility to revealed religion and Christianity in particular, while in the end reluctantly endorsing the deist position as the most feasible.⁴⁸ In his later works however, Diderot refuses to take an affirmative position on the issue. The reason for this lies in the fact that Diderot was unable to either refute or affirm the existence of a deity by way of his empiricism, while his scepticism and abhorrence of metaphysical speculation precluded the possibility of establishing any definitive knowledge of god. Diderot's position could thus be described as a form of very sceptic agnosticism similar to the Epicurean conception of the divine – god probably does not exist, but if he does, he has no interest in life on earth and neither has he the capacity to intervene in it. Although Diderot refuses to take a definitive position on the existence of god, he is quite sure of the fact that no supernatural agency interferes with nature.⁴⁹ Diderot's universe is thus decidedly monist – so much so that in the *Rêve D'Alembert* Diderot speculates that if a god existed, he would also consist of atoms and would therefore be subject to the same tendencies of decay that affect other living creatures, and would thus also grow old and die.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Pensées sur L'Interpretation* XVOP 293.

⁴⁸ *Pensées Philosophiques* LXII OP 31

⁴⁹ Cf. W. Anderson, *Diderot's Dream* (Baltimore and London 1990) 42-44.

⁵⁰ *Rêve* OP 373.

This last hypothesis points to another aspect of Diderot's ontology: his materialist atomism. Probably again inspired by Epicurus and the ancient atomist philosophers, Diderot holds that matter is composed of indivisible particles called atoms. Consequently, all objects, organisms and occurrences in nature are nothing more than atoms arranged in a particular order. Like Epicurus and Heraclitus, Diderot emphasises the fact that atoms are always in movement, even within objects and organisms. This movement explains the fact that seemingly unified items, including living organisms as well as inanimate objects, are always subject to change over time. In fact, in Diderot's atomist ontology, there cease to be clear distinctions between objects. What remains is a chaotic and shifting collection of atoms that is arranged in temporary clusters that appear to the human perspective as distinct objects and organisms.⁵¹

As a consequence of this strict atomism, Diderot does not distinguish between mind and body. In his view, the mind of man as well as animal is formed by the arrangement of atoms in the brain, thereby eliminating the mind-body dualism of Cartesian philosophy. The fact that living organisms have the capacity to feel – while some can even think – is confronted with the hypothesis of the inherent sensibility of matter. This tedious idea, that never seems to become more than mere hypothetical speculation, holds that all matter has potential sensory capabilities. It is not altogether clear whether matter only acquires these sensory qualities when it has become part of a living being, or whether sensibility is inherent in all matter at all times and only becomes apparent to human observation when alive.⁵²

Finally, this materialist ontology leads Diderot to some interesting physiological and biological speculations. First of all, the notion that living organisms are nothing more than fluctuating collections of atoms leads him to conclude that there are no fixed distinctions as between individual animal and plant species. Diderot sees the existence of anomalous living beings as evidence that the appearance of animals and plants is not permanent and continually subject to change. These 'monsters' are nothing more as living clusters of atoms in which the elementary particles have been arranged in a slightly different manner. As a consequence of this notion of a fluctuating physiology, Diderot arrives at a provisional theory of evolution. Although he is unable to explain the precise mechanisms behind the evolution of organisms, Diderot holds that the animals and plants of the past had a different physiology than those

⁵¹ Ibid. *OP* 370-371.

⁵² Ibid. *OP* 360-361.

living today, and that in the future they will change even further.⁵³ That these tentative ideas on biology also apply to human beings is illustrated further by the speculation that one day scientist will be able to understand the mechanism responsible for the construction of living organisms, and will have the capacity to generate specific human bodies at will.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid. *OP* 366-367 ; 370-371.

⁵⁴ Ibid. *OP* 408.

Diderot's Naturalism

As is describes extensively by Peter Gay among others, the men of the enlightenment admired the successes of the revolutionised natural sciences, championing the new empirical methodology while revering its most distinguished proponents – among them Bacon, Galileo, but most of all Newton.⁵⁵ At the same time, the *philosophes* – who were often themselves amateur naturalists or mathematicians – strove to transplant the methods and principles that had transformed the natural sciences in to the realm of the science of man and society. Traditionally, topics such as ethics, psychology, law and politics had ultimately been the province of ecclesiastical dogma utilising scholastic philosophy as its handmaiden, only supplemented in the renaissance by the revival of classical thought. During the seventeenth century, rationalist philosophers had started to discredit many of these ideas ultimately based on revelation, replacing them with the products of their own reasoning. However, eighteenth century thinkers were generally unimpressed, rightly objecting that the rationalist's constructions were based on assumptions that rivalled the hypotheses of the scholastics in arbitrariness and obscurity. As an alternative, they proposed to adopt in the humanities the methodology that had brought such spectacular successes in the natural sciences: the empirical observation of nature. After the traditional certainties grounded in revealed religion had been discredited, the *philosophes* turned towards nature in order to find new points of reference.⁵⁶

As has been discussed in the chapter above, Diderot was an enthusiastic proponent of empiricism in the natural sciences and in several ways followed the contemporary trend of adopting elements of this new methodology in the investigations of ethics, psychology, law and society. Yet, as ever, Diderot's eclecticism and scepticism prevent him from the dogmatic naturalism that characterised the thought of some of his contemporaries. For instance, Peter Gay has identified expressions of uneasiness with the uncompromising and abstract application of the turn to nature that, Diderot feared, would obscure the human factor in the humanities.⁵⁷ Still, this caution and reservation does not rule out the fact that Diderot too turned to nature in order to find grounds upon which it was possible to base a new philosophy of man and society. In fact, it is this natural turn that forms an important foundation of the

⁵⁵ P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York 1969) 126-187.

⁵⁶ Gay, *The Science of Freedom* 126-187; Cassirer, *Philosophy of Enlightenment* 18-21; L.G. Crocker, *Nature and Culture, Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* (Baltimore 1963) 3-74.

⁵⁷ Gay, *The Science of Freedom* 157-159.

politics and ethics that Diderot constructs in the place of the theologically grounded system that he had renounced on the basis of his monist materialism. As Diderot's natural turn is in many crucial respects specific from the contemporary tendency as described by Gay and Hazard, it is necessary to further examine Diderot's discussion of the issue.

Typically, Diderot never wrote a systematic treatise in which his application of naturalism in the social sciences is discussed in principle. The only way in which it is possible to arrive at an estimation of his ideas is by studying them at work. In this case, it means that the highly original *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* shall be discussed at length. The *Supplément* itself is not directly concerned with politics but with the related topic of ethics and the regulation of morality through law. This diversion into ethics is thus not only necessitated by the investigation of Diderot's natural turn, but also because the topics of morality and its application in society are ultimately also a political concern. Anthony Strugnell, has even maintained that 'the thread leading from philosophy, through ethics, to politics is an unbroken one', and that therefore the study of Diderot's political thought is not possible without at least briefly discussing his ethics.⁵⁸ Strugnell's statement and – as shall become clear below – his analysis, conceive Diderot's political philosophy as inextricably linked to his ideas on morality in a manner that is similar to the way Aristotle's or Plato's politics are a corollary of their ethics. Although this particular estimation is inaccurate, it cannot be denied that connections and significant amount of overlap exist between the related fields of politics and ethics in Diderot's thought.

However, there is another reason why Diderot's moral thought is very important to understanding his political views. His opinions in both fields were explicitly or implicitly concerned with the contemporary political and social situation. In contemporary France, the political system as well as the moral framework was derived from and justified by the theological absolutes inherent in Catholic religion. As Diderot was not as much concerned with establishing eternal truths in either politics or ethics as with influencing and commenting on contemporary developments and practices, his writings in both fields serve a common purpose as they both criticise practices inspired by religion inherited from the past. Therefore, instead of Strugnell's unbroken line connecting ethics and politics, it is probably better to envision the relationship between the two disciplines as two parallel lines directed at the same goal. The following chapter thus has two goals. On the one hand it has the intention to provide a discussion and overview of the precepts of Diderot's ethical thought relevant to his political

⁵⁸ Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 19-20.

theory. On the other hand, while this discussion will display Diderot's naturalism at work, the final part of the chapter will examine this natural turn more closely. At the end, the conclusions on these matters will again be reconnected to the three questions posed in the introduction.

The *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*

The main text in which Diderot elaborates his procedure of designing a moral framework that is applicable to all members of a society is the *Supplément de Voyage de Bougainville*. This remarkable work is a supposed addition to the book *Voyage Autour du Monde* that describes the circumnavigation of the globe by Louis Antoine de Bougainville and narrates his encounter with the aboriginal inhabitants of Tahiti.⁵⁹ Besides critical remarks on Bougainville's behaviour towards the native population which will be discussed in a separate chapter below, the work investigates the moral and social practices of Tahitian society. The text exhibits a layered dialogue form that, according to Dena Goodman, is designed to convince the reader of the merits of the remarks of one of the participants in the polemic.⁶⁰ In essence, the work is a conversation between two anonymous interlocutors denoted simply by the letters A and B. After an introductory conversation, the two proceed to read a statement ostensibly made by the chieftain of the Tahitian tribe on the occasion of the departure of Bougainville and his crew. Later, the report of a fictional conversation between the crew's chaplain and Orou, a native that had some knowledge of the Spanish language, is recounted and commented on.

The most distinguishing and – to Diderot's contemporaries – most scandalous characteristic of Tahitian society described by the speech of the chieftain and the conversation between Orou and the chaplain are its libertine sexual morals. On Tahiti, there exist few rules limiting or regulating sexual intercourse between inhabitants. All citizens above a particular age are allowed to have sexual relations with whomever they please, including family members.⁶¹ Although the institution of marriage exists, it is of a temporary nature. The result of this loose sexual morality is that all Tahitians engage in sexual intercourse without shame

⁵⁹ L.A. de Bougainville, *Voyage Autour du Monde, par la Frégate du Roi la Boudeuse, et la Flûte l'Étoile, en 1766, 1767, 1768 et 1769* (Neuchâtel 1772).

⁶⁰ Goodman, *Criticism in Action* 169-224.

⁶¹ *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, ou dialogue entre A. et B. sur l'Inconvénient d'Attacher des Idées Morales a Certaines Actions Physiques qui n'en Comportent pas*, in: OPH.

or reservations.⁶² The sexual act is seen as both pleasurable and necessary for human reproduction and the Tahitians do not see any reason why the engagement in sexual activity should be limited.⁶³ Both Orou and the chieftain defend these practices by stating that this practice is only in accordance with nature.⁶⁴

This last argument points to the main notion that the *Supplément* wishes to advance: the idea that morality should be based on nature. At some point Orou explains:

Veux-tu savoir, en tout temps et en tout lieu, ce qui est bon et mauvais? Attache-toi à la nature des choses et des actions; à tes rapports avec ton semblable; à l'influence de ta conduite sur ton utilité particulière et le bien général.⁶⁵

In line with the literary nature of the text, Diderot does not proceed to explain this principle in systematic and theoretical manner. Instead, he presents the Tahitians as savages who – as they themselves somewhat incredibly make clear – have in their morality and habits stayed close to nature. They have not adopted an elaborate moral system limiting them in fulfilling their natural sexual urges that serve the useful purpose of enlarging their people.⁶⁶

Commenting on European Society

On a first glance, the *Supplément* is clearly to be regarded as an exoteric text that has the intention of appealing to the general public while delivering a distinct political message. The first indication to support this assumption is the fact that the work is written in an elegant literary style employing dialogue form that is designed to entertain and convince the reader.⁶⁷ Secondly, the description of the 'noble savages' of Tahiti is an example of an established literary practice by enlightenment authors intended to make readers reflect on the arbitrariness of European morals and habits by presenting them with a fictional foreign or savage 'other.' This same practice is employed regularly by Rousseau as well as by Montesquieu in the *Lettres Persanes*. That Diderot never intended to provide a truthful description of the ideas and habits of the Tahitians becomes clear when the interlocutors A and B discuss the fact that the Tahitian savages are remarkably well versed in European terminology and ideas in a

⁶² Ibid. *OPH* 486-488.

⁶³ Ibid. *OPH* 476.

⁶⁴ Ibid. *OPH* 476; 480-482; 496; 502-503.

⁶⁵ Ibid. *OPH* 482.

⁶⁶ Ibid. *OPH* 462-463; 468-469.

⁶⁷ Goodman, *Criticism in Action* 169-224.

passage that was certainly intended as tongue-in-cheek.⁶⁸ In fact, as Bernard Papin has proven, the *Supplément* bears all the signs of being a utopian text that does not propose to present reality as it is or as it should be, but functions as a mirror held up to the reader.⁶⁹

However, the clearest indication of the purpose of the *Supplément* is the actual contents of the conversations included. In this sense, the discussion between Orou, the Spanish-speaking native, and the chaplain of the expedition of Bougainville is most interesting. The conversation commences with Orou offering his youngest daughter to the chaplain to spend the night with. Bound by his vows of celibacy the chaplain declines the offer, explaining that his religion and holy orders prevent him from complying. Orou responds:

Je ne sais ce que c'est que la chose que tu appelles religion; mais je ne puis qu'en penser mal, puisqu'elle t'empêche de goûter un plaisir innocent, auquel nature, la souveraine maîtresse, nous invite tous; de donner l'existence à un de tes semblables.⁷⁰

Subsequently, Thia, Orou's youngest daughter, takes her turn to convince the chaplain of her willingness to give herself to him and of the innocence of this act. Faced with the incomprehension of his reservations by the natives, the chaplain proceeds to introduce to them the notion of god and explains to the sceptic natives that:

Il a parlé à nos ancêtres: il leur a donné des lois; il leur a prescrit la manière dont il voulait être honoré; il leur a ordonné certaines actions, comme bonnes; il leur en a défendu d'autres, comme mauvaises.

To which Orou replies:

J'entends; et une de ces actions qu'il leur a défendues comme mauvaises, c'est de coucher avec un femme et une fille? Pourquoi donc a-t-il fait deux sexes?⁷¹

The chaplain replies to Orou's last question that it had been god's will that men and women would only be united through marriage, a bond tying the two together for eternity. Surprised by such unreasonable regulations which, according to the chaplain, in practice are regularly

⁶⁸ *Supplément OPH* 472-473.

⁶⁹ Papin, *Sens et Fonction* 47-59; Cf. 60-118.

⁷⁰ *Supplément. OPH* 476.

⁷¹ *Ibid. OPH* 479.

disregarded without punishment, Orou delivers a hammering criticism of the European practice of marriage:

Ces precepts singuliers, je les trouve opposes à la nature, contraires à la raison. [...] Contraires à la nature, parce qu'ils supposent qu'un être sentant, pensant et libre, peut être la propriété d'un être semblable à lui. Sur quoi ce droit serait-il fondé? [...] Rien, en effet, te paraît-il plus insensé qu'un précepte qui proscrie le changement qui est en nous; qui commande une constance qui n'y peut être, et qui viole la nature et la liberté du mâle en de la femelle, en les enchaînant pour jamais l'un à l'autre; qu'une fidélité qui borne la plus capricieuse des jouissances à un même individu; qu'un serment d'immutabilité de deux êtres de chair, à la face d'un ciel qui n'est pas un instant le même, sous des antres qui menacent ruine; au bas d'une roche qui tombe en poudre; au pied d'un arbre qui se gerce; sur une pierre qui s'ébranle? Crois-moi, vous avez rendu la condition de l'homme pire que celle de l'animal.⁷²

Orou's repeated appeal to nature and reason in this passage is striking and reveals that he functions as Diderot's mouthpiece. However, his criticism of European morality is not only directed at individual practices such as marriage, it is also a stark condemnation of the influence of religion on society and morality. First Orou proclaims his abjection of the Christian god:

Je ne sais ce que c'est ton grand ouvrier: mais je me réjouis qu'il n'ait point parlé à nos pères, et je souhaite qu'il ne parle point à nos enfants; car il pourrait par Hazard leur dire les mêmes sottises, et ils feraient peut-être celle de les croire.⁷³

More importantly however, Orou assumes that the priests and magistrates responsible for fashioning the laws and morals in accordance with religious precepts themselves have no actual knowledge of the will and intentions of god, and therefore proceed to invent regulations and precepts that either suit them personally or serve no further purpose.⁷⁴ Subsequently, Orou proceeds to comment on the fact that in European society ecclesiastical authority exists together with secular political power. He envisions that Europeans are subject to three masters: god, his priests and the secular magistrates. Orou considers the effects for society of this arrangement to be disastrous:

⁷² Ibid. *OPH* 480-481.

⁷³ Ibid. *OPH* 481.

⁷⁴ Ibid. *OPH* 481-484.

Il n'y a point de bonté qu'on ne pût t'interdire; point de méchanceté qu'on ne pût t'ordonner. Et où en serais-tu réduit, si tes trois maîtres, peu d'accord entre eux, s'avisait de te permettre, de t'enjoindre et de te défendre la même chose, comme je pense qu'il arrive souvent? Alors, pour plaire au prêtre, il faudra que tu te brouilles avec le magistrat; pour satisfaire le magistrat, il faudra que tu mécontentes le grand ouvrier; et pour rendre agréable au grand ouvrier, il faudra que tu renonces à la nature. Et sais-tu ce qui en arrivera? C'est que tu les mépriseras tous les trois, et que tu ne seras ni homme, ni citoyen, ni pieux; que tu ne seras rien.⁷⁵

This passage describing the chaos that ensues within society as soon as its laws and morals degenerate from nature through the influence of Christianity is elaborated further in an abstract theory of conceptual history. The interlocutors A and B, who interrupt the narrative several times to provide comments and further discussion, describe French society and its laws and morals as strayed from nature through a historical process:

Une observation assez constant, c'est que les institutions surnaturelles et divines se fortifient et s'éternisent, en se transformant, à la longue, en lois civiles et nationales; et que les institutions civiles et nationales se consacrent, et dégénèrent en préceptes surnaturels et divins.⁷⁶

Religious precepts have thus slowly corrupted European society by imposing themselves ever more forcefully over time and eventually turned into law. This process of deviation from nature is thus not just caused by the ignorance and zeal of Christian apologetics; it is also a product of time itself, and one might assume, from a long history without enlightenment:

La vie sauvage est si simple, et nos sociétés sont des machines si compliquées! Le Tahitien touche à l'origine du monde, et l'Européen touche à sa vieillesse. L'intervalle qui le sépare de nous est plus grand que la distance de l'enfant qui naît à l'homme décrépité.⁷⁷

Completely in contradiction with contemporary notions of the progress of civilisation over time, European society is represented as damaged and corrupted by the historical accumulation of unfortunate laws, practices and morals which have no basis in nature.⁷⁸ This fictionalised history of the development of civilisations will re-emerge in the discussion

⁷⁵ Ibid. *OPH* 481-482.

⁷⁶ Ibid. *OPH* 460-461.

⁷⁷ Ibid. *OPH* 464.

⁷⁸ S. Stuurman, *Global Equality and Inequality in Enlightenment Thought* (Amsterdam 2010, third Burgerhart Lecture) 13.

below on the question whether political reform or revolution is the most effective way to invigorate and restore a corrupted society.

In light of these passages, the impression may emerge that Diderot would advocate a complete return to nature by abolishing a corrupt civilisation. However, he states clearly that not even the savages of Tahiti exist in the state of nature.⁷⁹ Culture is simply an automatic consequence of any society. While Diderot emphasises the difficulties and problems of society, he rejects a return to the forests as a viable solution.⁸⁰ Instead, the *Supplément* seems to advocate a gradual change in morality and civil laws in order to root out the unnatural regulations that have emerged over time through foolishness and Christian enthusiasm. This is confirmed by a short digression presented by the interlocutors on the fate of Polly Baker, a prostitute in the British colonies of North America who was punished repeatedly for giving birth to children out of wedlock. At the end of the story, these punishments are deplored and a change in the law is advocated.⁸¹ Meanwhile, it is also conceded that the adoption of Tahitian morals in Europe is not a viable option. In line with Papin's estimation of the *Supplément* as a utopian text, it is explicitly made clear that Tahiti is merely a mirror whose morals and laws are not suited for implementation in France.⁸² Finally, Diderot is cautious enough to make clear that although European morals and civil laws are thoroughly ridiculed in the *Supplément*, this does not entail that therefore his readers should ignore morality and transgress the law.⁸³ Diderot attempts to bring about a change in mentality, but does not have the intention of causing widespread disobedience. This attitude of abiding by the law and respecting the customs of society is also reflected in the care which Diderot took in arranging a marriage for his own daughter and the traditional values he displayed in the letter advising her to be a loving wife.⁸⁴

The passages discussed above constitute conspicuous examples of the argument for reducing the involvement of ecclesiastical institutions and values in early-modern European societies and states – an opinion that was almost universally supported and articulated by

⁷⁹ Ibid. OPH 508.

⁸⁰ Ibid. OPH 512-513

⁸¹ Ibid. OPH 489-491. Cf. D.L. Anderson, 'The Polly Baker Digression in Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*' *Diderot Studies* 26 (1996) 15-28.

⁸² *Supplément*, OPH 514-515.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ W.E. Rex, 'Contrariety in the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*' *Diderot Studies* 27 (1998) 149-167, 149-152.

Diderot's contemporaries of the *parti philosophique*.⁸⁵ By taking the regulation of human sexual relations – a touchy issue in any age, but highly controversial and hotly contested in Diderot's time – as its main subject, the *Supplément* intends to maximise its impact. When returning to Skinner's question discussed in the introduction and one asks what the intention of Diderot must have been in writing the *Supplément*, the answer is twofold. On the one hand, Diderot attempted to discredit the powerful position of the church in the regulation of society by choosing theologically inspired sexual moral standards as an object of ridicule and refutation veiled in a literary construction. At the same time, Diderot seems to encourage his readers to break free the hold of Christian morality and embrace the moral standards set by nature itself. It is important to realise that Diderot thereby did not advocate a kind of nihilism or libertinage which denies the importance of existence of morals altogether. On the contrary, Diderot extensive writing on the subject is an indication of his opinion that morality is indispensable to the survival of a society. Diderot thus neither advocates the abolition of morality nor the provocative and intentional disregard of a prevalent moral framework. Instead, he intends to incite a shift in morality itself, proposing to replace Christianity with nature as the source of moral guidelines.

Constructing a Natural Morality?

At this moment the obvious question arises what Diderot actually meant when he proposed to base morality on nature. His proposition is a clear example of the natural turn common to the social sciences as practised by proponents of the enlightenment. However, besides being an inherently vague notion, the turn to nature was conceptualised and put in practice varyingly by individual thinkers. For this reason it is not possible to understand what Diderot meant by his appeal to nature by simply repeating the general observations that Cassirer or Hazard have made on the issue. Instead, a more detailed discussion of Diderot's manner of deriving morality from nature is necessary. However, before turning to Diderot's ideas on the construction of a morality valid for society as a whole contained in the *Supplément*, it is necessary to establish his position on the question of the origin and nature of moral impulses in individual human beings.

Diderot's materialist vision on human physiology leads him to conclude that all intellectual activity – including moral judgements and behaviour – is in fact nothing other

⁸⁵ Hazard, *European Mind* 72- 86; Cf. P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York 1966) 212-422.

than a collection of material processes taking place inside the brain and nerve system. The most important factor determining these mental processes is the specific organisation of the cells – or fibres as Diderot calls them – of the brain. Diderot holds that as human beings differ among each other in material organisation, so do their capacities and inclinations in perception, reasoning and moral judgement. Thus, in Diderot's view not only the disparity in intellectual capacity among individuals is caused by material differences in their physiology, but also their moral outlook. This principle is elaborated in the *Rêve*:

Le Principe ou le tronc est-il trop vigoureux relativement aux branches? de là les poètes, les artistes, les gens à imagination, les hommes pusillanimes, les enthousiastes, les fous. Trop faible? de là, ce que nous appelons les brutes, les bêtes féroces. Le système entier lâche, mol sans énergie? de là les imbéciles. Le système entier énergique, bien d'accord, bien ordonné? de là, les bons penseurs, les philosophes, les sages.⁸⁶

This particular quote points to a very deterministic view of human nature according to which all capacities and potential of an individual is determined by inherited physical properties. However, Diderot is keen to add that habituation and education are also important factors in determining the physical properties of the brain of an individual, and thereby his or her intellectual capacities.⁸⁷ This topic is revisited in the *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, a critical evaluation of the *De l'Homme* written by his friend Helvétius. In the *De l'Homme* the author maintains that the human mind at birth is a *tabula rasa*, and that all properties of the mind are acquired through experience. Diderot responds by maintaining that inherited intellectual capacities are just as important.⁸⁸

The consequence of this notion that there exists no universal human nature, due to the differences in physical organisation as well as education and social surroundings, is that there is no consensus among individuals on moral issues. According to Diderot, individuals each possess a *morale particuliere*, and individual morality that is determined by both physical organisation and habituation. In his *Salon de 1767*, a treatise focusing on art and aesthetics, Diderot discusses the position of the artist in society and states:

⁸⁶ *Rêve* OP 393.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* OP 394.

⁸⁸ *Réfutation d'Helvetius* OP 456-464.

Je pensais que s'il y avait une morale propre à une espèce, peut-être dans la même espèce y avait-il une morale propre à différents individus, ou du moins à différentes conditions ou collections d'individus semblables.⁸⁹

Morals thus differ among individuals as well as groups of individuals. A similar statement is also made in the *Neveu de Rameau*, where Rameau's nephew points to the fact that moralities differ among people of different professions. He suggests that just as different existing languages are nothing but idiomatic variations on a theoretical universal language from which Diderot believed all other languages are derived, the morality of individuals of a particular vocation is an idiomatic variation on a universal morality.⁹⁰

The notion of a universal morality, or *morale universelle*, is not explicitly elaborated or used consistently by Diderot. Sometimes the term seems to denote the established moral framework of a particular society from which the *morale particulière* of individual members often deviates. Diderot gives the example of artists, who through their deviating habits and physical constitution often have particular moralities that differ markedly from that of their fellow citizens.⁹¹ This usage of the term seems related to Diderot's notion of the preference of the *volonté general* over the *volontés particulières* discussed in the article *Droit Naturel*. However, this particular meaning of the concept of a *morale universelle* occurs in practical discussions of the workings of actual society and differs from the abstract meaning the concept acquires in the more philosophical writings.

However, Anthony Strugnell has suggested that the natural morality praised in the *Supplément* is identical to the notion of an absolute *morale universelle* that could be applied to humanity as a whole.⁹² Although the notion of *morale universelle* is never mentioned in the *Supplément* itself, Strugnell bases this conclusion on several short remarks, for instance the statement in the *Salon de 1767* that 'l'organisation [de l'espèce] serait la base de la morale.'⁹³ According to Strugnell, Diderot envisions the existence of an absolute *morale universelle* based on the impartial and universal foundation of nature. He also assumes that Diderot would prefer the universal and equal implementation of this natural morality in all human societies

⁸⁹ *Salon de 1767* J. Assézat and M. Tourneux (eds.), *Oeuvres Complètes* 11 (1875-1877) 124.

⁹⁰ *Neveu de Rameau* L. Tancock (trans.), *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream* (London 1966) 61-62.

⁹¹ *Salon de 1767* *Oeuvres Complètes* 11 124-125.

⁹² Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 38

⁹³ *Salon de 1767* *Oeuvres Complètes* 11 125.

replacing the deviated moralities usually found. The manner in which this universal morality could be discovered is through the observation of nature and the usage of reason.⁹⁴

This last observation is supported by evidence from the *Supplément* where Orou and the chieftain also invoke reason as the instrument necessary to devise morals based on nature.⁹⁵ However, turning to the *Rêve D'Alembert* in which the personage of the sage is celebrated as a person 'entier énergique, bien d'accord, bien ordonné' who is especially suited to understand nature, Strugnell maintains that only a small number of sages are capable of interpreting nature with the purpose of grasping the absolute *morale universelle*.⁹⁶ Furthermore, Strugnell believes that in Diderot's opinion the sage is:

a microcosmic manifestation of the order and harmony of the physiological organization of the species. Consequently there is no divergence between the private ethics of the sage and the *morale universelle*.⁹⁷

It is at this point that Strugnell's abstracting interpretation arrives at its conclusion. In Strugnell's view, Diderot's theory of morality turns into a variation on Plato's ethics expounded in the *Republic* and *Phaedo*. Not only does Strugnell assume that Diderot believed in the existence of a morality that is absolutely true, he also thinks that like in Plato's philosophy, this absolute truth can only be discovered by an exceptionally wise or rational individual. The only differences with Plato's philosophy are that in Strugnell's representation of Diderot's ethics the role of the Platonic Ideas as the source of absolute truths is replaced by the abstract concept of nature, while the aptitude for reasoning necessary in the establishment of these truths is in Plato's philosophy caused by the constitution of the soul, while Diderot holds physiological organisation as the determining factor.

However, two immediate reasons for rejecting Strugnell's interpretation can be found. Firstly, the textual evidence cited to support his assumptions is flimsy at best, while ample examples can be found of passages that state the contrary. Thus while Strugnell holds that Diderot saw the figure of the sage as a person who is ideally suited to the interpretation of nature, and therefore of a natural morality, passages from the *Neveu de Rameau* suggest otherwise. Rameau's nephew for instance states:

⁹⁴ Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 38-42.

⁹⁵ *Supplément OPH* 480.

⁹⁶ Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 25-27.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 26.

That is what I value in men of genius. They are only good for one thing, and apart from that, nothing. They don't know what it means to be citizens, fathers, mothers, brothers, relations, friends. Between ourselves, we should resemble them in every respect, but not wish the species to be too numerous. We need men, but not men of genius. My goodness no, them we certainly don't want.⁹⁸

Here the sage is not represented as an individual of exceptional intellectual and moral qualities, but as a person who may have an aptitude for the study of nature, but often is defective in other areas of endeavour. Another point against Strugnell's interpretation is the fact that a passage in the *Supplément* suggests that the particular natural morality of the Tahitians is not necessarily applicable to European society. Diderot thus concedes that divergences in morality among civilisations, nations or communities are both inescapable as well as necessary. In fact, not only human nature or the organisation of the human species is to be the determining factor in devising a natural morality, but also the natural surroundings in which a particular community resides.⁹⁹

Secondly, Strugnell's interpretation requires several assumptions or extrapolations of Diderot's view to arrive at its conclusion. For instance, Diderot never explicitly states that the notion of *morale universelle* is the same concept as the natural morality described in the *Supplément*. Instead, in the *Salon de 1767*, the *Nevue de Rameau* and the *Rêve*, Diderot seems to acknowledge the fact that it is only natural that people of different physical constitutions or vocations have different moralities without suggesting that this detrimental to society as a whole. These differing constitutions and moralities correspond to the different roles of individuals in society. Thus artists and poets have a different physiology from natural scientists or manual labourers, which in turn differ from enthusiasts and madmen.¹⁰⁰ It could be maintained that subjecting humans who by nature have a divergent moral outlook to a universal and absolute morality, is in itself an idea that is contrary to nature. As the passages on the concept of a *morale universelle* all come from texts not especially concerned with morality, but either discuss the material causes of the divergences in human nature, or the role of the artist in society, it is to be assumed that these passages do not represent an abstract ethical theory, but are illustrations to another discussion or describe the working of the actual society in which Diderot lived.

⁹⁸ *Neveu de Rameau* 38.

⁹⁹ *Supplément OPH* 458-459.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid. OPH* 393.

Reason and Nature

However, the most compelling reason to reject Strugnell's interpretation is to be found in Diderot's conceptions of reason and nature and their application in his version of the natural turn. Starting with the first concept, a brief reflection on the actual meaning of the notion of reason would reveal its complexities. Some scholars, like Jonathan Israel, still seem to believe that 'reason' is a clearly defined term with a universal meaning, and 'reasoning' an activity that in all periods of history with all human beings consisted of the same type of thought-processes.¹⁰¹ However, it seems that the concept of reason is highly elusive, the more so because most people presume to know its meaning. In daily usage, the term 'reasoning' is often meant to refer to a particular form of thinking that attempts to come to conclusion through the use of logic. However, the intellectual historian must be aware of the fact that the concept of reason is not uniform and varies in meaning among historical periods.

Because of its elusive nature, establishing the defining characteristics, even in outline, of the conception of reason in a particular period – let alone a single author – is particularly difficult. In fact, to establish its crucial aspects it is necessary to contrast the reason of one period with that of another. Cassirer's famous characterisation of enlightenment reason is an example of such a comparison:

One should not seek order, law and "reason" as a rule that may be grasped and expressed prior to the phenomena, as their *a priori*; one should rather discover such regularity in the phenomena themselves, as the form of their immanent connection. Nor should one attempt to anticipate from the outset such "reason" in the form of a closed system; one should rather permit this reason to unfold gradually, with ever increasing clarity and perfection, as knowledge of the facts progresses. The new logic that is now sought in the conviction that it is everywhere present on the path of knowledge is neither the logic of the scholastic nor of the purely mathematical concept; it is rather "the logic of facts."¹⁰²

From Cassirer's description it becomes clear that the enlightenment rejects any notion that there exists some mode of logical thought about the world that is always correct in the way mathematics is exact and accurate in an absolute sense. However, more importantly, the thinkers of the later eighteenth century also emphasised the need to restrain reasoning, to refrain from all too speculative thought by staying close to the data recovered through investigation. Thereby enlightenment reason contrasts with that of the seventeenth century

¹⁰¹ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 869-870.

¹⁰² Cassirer, *Philosophy of Enlightenment* 9.

rationalists in the sense that it rejects the systematic intellectual constructions that, although internally coherent, were ultimately flawed due to their basis outside reality. Instead, the facts of reality are to form the basis from which reason through analysis is to arrive at a conclusion. Drawing its inspiration from the successes the scientific revolution had brought, enlightenment reason was thus above all an empirical concept. This mentality is exemplified in Diderot's empiricist epistemology and philosophy of science.

According to the enlightenment the proper object as well as subject of reason was thus both man itself and his environment, conceptualised in the notion of nature. The turn to nature that differentiated the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century from their rationalist predecessors is thus reflected in this particular conception of reason. In fact, it has been maintained by Peter Gay that for the enlightenment reason and the concept of nature are two sides of the same coin.¹⁰³ In this sense, the notion of nature is merely a conceptualisation of the proper object of study already inherent in the enlightenment conception of reason. At the same time, it is also a metaphorical manifestation of the empirical and scientific ideal of eighteenth century *philosophes*. However, because of its function as an abstract ideal that became commonplace and as such was often used in arguments but without describing its actual meaning, the actual contents of the concept of nature is generally difficult to establish.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, some general trends in the usage of the concept of nature during the eighteenth century have been established. Cassirer describes how the theorists of the early eighteenth century had rejected both scholastic and rationalist solutions to finding independent and absolute grounding of moral and legal notions and thereby effectively arrived at the same problem that occupied Plato in the *Republic* and *Gorgias*.¹⁰⁵ As a solution to the question how nihilism could be averted and morality and law could be established on firm and solid ground, these thinkers proposed to look to nature itself in order to find the ultimate rules that should govern human behaviour. The assumption behind this idea was that the basis for law and morality, by extension also of politics, should not be sought in revelation, but that the principles that should guide man's conduct lay hidden in the natural world – either because god had created the world in this particular way or because man, as a part of nature, simply was to conform to the rules and boundaries that nature has determined.

¹⁰³ Hazard, *European Mind* 305.

¹⁰⁴ E.C. Spary, 'The 'Nature' of Enlightenment' in: W. Clark et al. (eds.), *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe* (Cambridge 1999) 272-306; 296-298.

¹⁰⁵ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Enlightenment* 234-235.

In either view, nature was thus viewed as teleological. It is this particular notion of the appeal to nature that is attributed to Diderot by Strugnell.

These notions, inspired by Newtonianism in both natural and social sciences, gained a large following during the first half of the eighteenth century, but ultimately proved to be too vague to be convincing in practice. One of the problems was that nature was both an opaque and all-inclusive concept that could be used to support a wide range of contradictory positions. For example, it was possible to argue that man had the right to commit suicide, simply because he was able to do so. If suicide were to be prohibited, nature would have made it impossible. On the other hand, it could be proposed that suicide contradicted the tendency inherent in individuals as well as species as a whole to secure their survival.¹⁰⁶ In reaction, the concept of nature itself increasingly turned into a metaphysical concept, giving rise to a natural philosophy that – according to its critics – exhibited the same erroneous tendency to indulge in speculative thought unrelated to reality that had plagued seventeenth century thought.¹⁰⁷

This criticism of the Newtonian naturalism of the first half of the eighteenth century has been described extensively by Peter Reill. He has identified a group of thinkers critical of the practice of applying mathematical reason to the study of nature in order to find universal laws and standards. These enlightenment vitalists – as Reill calls them – emphasised an empirical and contingent approach over the establishment of coherence and predictability. Some of the most important of these vitalists were Buffon, Maupertius, Franklin and Von Humboldt among others, but their views also inform Diderot's thinking on nature. These critics came from diverse corners but were characterised by a very sceptical attitude towards the study of nature. On the one hand they emphasised the limits of the human capacity to penetrate the fabric of nature, while on the other hand they deemed the description of nature by a few all-encompassing laws to be impossible. Instead, the vitalists saw nature as a fluid and unitary whole, a collection of matter that continually changed both in form and attributes, but whose elements were always interconnected. Dismissing the notion of mathematical laws

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Supplement OPH* 506-507 where the two interlocutors A and B have a discussion that seems to display the futility of these kinds of arguments.

¹⁰⁷ P.H. Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley 2005) 5-6. A similar shift in outlook has been distinguished in the biological sciences in particular. Cf. J.L. Larson, *Interpreting Nature, The Science of Living Form from Linnaeus to Kant* (Baltimore 1994) 9-60.

governing the universe, vitalists posited the existence of life forces that drive the development of nature but which are not easily conceptualised by the scientist.¹⁰⁸

Diderot's view of the material world as described in the *Rêve* is a good example of this vitalist conception of nature. The world is conceived not as an ordered collection of objects whose relations are governed by timeless and universal laws. Instead, nature is nothing but an assortment of atoms whose arrangement is in constant flux, resulting in a Heraclitean perspective in which nothing is permanent but always in transition. Not only is the material construction of individual objects always changing, such seemingly permanent factors in nature such as the organisation of organisms in clearly definable species are only an illusion. In reality the face of living nature is constantly changing through the process of evolution. At the same time, the mechanisms that were at work in this chaotic bundle of atoms called nature could not always easily be described in Newtonian laws of nature.¹⁰⁹ Corresponding with Reill's characterisation of the vitalist point of view, Diderot – following Maupertius – posited the almost occult theory of the universal sensibility of matter. As a consequence Diderot held the sceptic opinion that whatever forces governed the organisation of atoms in nature, it would not be easy to recover and document them while it would surely be impossible to summarise them in a limited number of abstract laws.¹¹⁰ On the one hand, this estimation is visible in Diderot's sceptical remarks on the methodology of natural historians and botanists, contending that a rational method is only detrimental to the inquiring mind of the biologist who should instead experience and learn from nature as a child learning to speak, immersed in the language of his parents.¹¹¹ On the other hand, Diderot's notion of a shape shifting nature whose secrets could not be as easily unravelled and conceptualised – at least not within the foreseeable future – as some of his contemporaries thought, made that for Diderot the idea of deriving universal and fixed rules for the regulation of human conduct from this enigmatic entity was not possible.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 5-16; P.H. Reill, *Rethinking the Enlightenment, Nature and Culture in the High and Late Enlightenment* (Amsterdam 2008, First Burgerhart Lecture) 11-14; Cf. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Enlightenment* 73-77 on Diderot's uneasiness with the way nature was perceived by some of his contemporaries and 90-92 where Cassirer already hints at the findings of Reill.

¹⁰⁹ C. Dedeyan, *Diderot et la Pensée Anglaise* (Florence 1987) 189-201 provides an overview of Diderot's critical remarks on Newton and Newtonianism.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Enlightenment* 90-91.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 76-77.

¹¹² Reill, *Rethinking* 13; Crocker, *Nature and Culture* 44-46; 54-58.

Utilitarian Morality

So as a sceptic thinker who largely embraced the vitalists' conception of nature, Diderot would not have agreed with the notion of establishing absolute and universal notions in morality and law on the basis of nature in the way Anthony Strugnell interprets the *Supplément*. But how should Diderot's natural turn as presented in the *Supplément* then be conceived? To begin with, Diderot seems to suggest in the *Rêve* that as the consequence of the atomist world view that is expounded by d'Alembert and doctor Bordeu, a morality of nature is in fact non-existent. After the consequences of materialist nature had become clear to him D'Alembert had already exclaimed: 'Oh, comme cela simplifie la morale...'¹¹³ Later on, Bordeu revisits the topic on the suggestion of Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse:

Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse: Mais, docteur, et le vice et la vertu? La vertu, ce mot si saint dans toutes les langues, cette idée se sacrée chez toutes les nations!

Bordeu: Il faut transformer en celui de bienfaisance, et son opposé en celui de malfaisance.¹¹⁴

In this passage Bordeu in fact denies the existence of an independent morality, suggesting that actions may only be judged on the effect they have on the individual or society.

However, although Diderot may have recognised the fact that within a natural world itself devoid of intrinsic meaning and incapable of supplying man with a firm independent grounding of morality or law, he also acknowledged that in the daily practice of human society, the establishment and upholding of morals and laws was indispensable.¹¹⁵ But without revelation or strict laws of nature, the only option that remains is the construction of a pragmatic and purely utilitarian morality and legal system. In this conception, laws and morals are purely intended for the regulation of society and their merit will be established not by consulting revelations or nature, but by measuring their effectiveness in a particular situation. In this way, the principal source for morality and law is to be society itself.¹¹⁶ As Orou explains:

¹¹³ *Rêve* OP 364.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* OP 398.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Hazard, *European Thought* 406 on Diderot's mentality towards the absence of an absolute morality.

¹¹⁶ The contention that there is a relation and partial equivalence between naturalism and utilitarianism is not new and is discussed on a more abstract level in: J. Mandle, 'Does Naturalism Imply Utilitarianism?' *Journal of Value Inquiry* 33 (1999) 537-553, 538-540.

Il nous faut un règle plus sûre: et quelle sera cette règle? En connais-tu une autre que le bien général et l'utilité particulière?¹¹⁷

The question that Diderot proposes is at the basis of establishing morals and laws is thus not: how can we establish a universal morality on the basis of eternal truths found revelation or nature? But: what kind of moral and legal framework works best for a certain group of people in a particular situation?¹¹⁸

It is exactly this kind of almost common-sense morality that Diderot displays in the *Supplément* where Diderot maintains that:

Nous n'apportons en naissant qu'une similitude d'organisation avec d'autres êtres, les mêmes besoins, de l'attrait vers les mêmes plaisirs, une aversion commune pour les mêmes peines: ce qui constitue l'homme ce qu'il est, et doit fonder la morale qui lui convient.¹¹⁹

This quote displays the importance of human nature in the process of determining a morality. The principle that is to be behind the construction of morality and civil law is that human beings should be left free to fulfil their desires as long as the common good and the well-being of other individuals are not affected.¹²⁰ An example is the fact that permanent marriage is not practiced on Tahiti because someone's affection for a partner often disappears over time. It could be maintained that therefore the prohibition of divorce is contrary to human nature, although Diderot would probably propose that it is merely in opposition to the facts of reality. The practice of permanent marriage is repressing by constricting people in their actions without a solid utilitarian reason. Even more important is the fact that experience has shown that whatever sanctions may be placed on severing or violating the bond of marriage, people will always continue to transgress both the moral and the legal prescriptions against it.¹²¹ The usage of the term experience is important here. Diderot does not advocate the abolishment of permanent marriage because he has determined that it is contrary to some abstract notion in nature, but because empirical evidence proves that many people disregard

¹¹⁷ *Supplément OPH* 495.

¹¹⁸ Both Cassirer, *Philosophy of Enlightenment* 246-247 and Crocker, *Nature and Culture* 260 agree with this conclusion, although Cassirer suggests that this utilitarianism only evolved out of notion of *a-priori* natural laws. Crocker emphasises the fact that in his views on universal rights, Diderot still displays an adherence to universally established values.

¹¹⁹ *Supplément OPH* 505.

¹²⁰ This sentiment is reflected in the remarks in *Ibid. OPH* 510-511 which displays the restriction of sexual intercourse as senseless because man possesses the inherent drive to transgress these regulations which do not have any proportional utilitarian benefit to society or the individual.

¹²¹ *Ibid. OPH* 480-481; 510-511.

or resent the moral standard while the rule offers no real benefit to society. However, besides human nature, contingent factors such as the geographical location should also be taken into account. The moral code of the Tahitians is ideally suited to their environment in which the necessities of life are available in abundance. For this reason, there is little need for restrictions on human reproduction and for this reason Tahitian sexual morals do not need to be strictly regulated.¹²² In the end, the only function of moral codes and civil laws is regulating the relations between individuals in society by prohibiting actions that may be harmful and encouraging beneficial behaviour.

These same utilitarian standards are applied to criticise the existence of laws and morals imposed by religion. Firstly, the religious prescriptions that dominate European society are dismissed as based on false principles. More importantly, they forbid actions that are in themselves innocent to both the individual and society, therefore failing to provide a sound utilitarian reason why these actions should be forbidden. On the converse, Diderot maintains that the institution of religious law and morality is not only restricting the individual in his search for happiness, but it is also damaging to society as a whole. The reason for this lies in the fact that religious laws and morals often contradict with those upheld by the government, causing not only confusion but also the potential of conflict between proponents of church and state.¹²³

At this point it might be objected that Diderot does continually use the term *nature* as well as *raison* in his text. If Diderot did not believe in the existence of absolute reason or was sceptical about the possibility of arriving at fixed moral or legal boundaries through the study of nature, why did he use these concepts in the *Supplément* and elsewhere to support his argument? First of all, as the quotation on page 27 makes clear, Diderot does not suggest deriving morality from nature by using reason as Strugnell maintains, but actually uses the terms interchangeably. Thus he maintains that the strict regulation of sexuality in European society ‘opposes à la nature,’ while they are also ‘contraires à la raison’ – a usage that confirms Cassirer’s and Gay’s observation that the enlightenment concept of reason was inherently empirical and already contains the appeal to nature in itself.¹²⁴ For Diderot, both concepts thus seem to have the same meaning.

In order to understand Diderot’s usage of the terms of nature and reason, it first should be realized that contemporary discourse in the social sciences was obsessed with these

¹²² Ibid. *OPH* 460-461.

¹²³ Ibid. *OPH* 481-482.

¹²⁴ Ibid. *OPH* 480-481.

concepts – so much even that it often became impossible to ascertain their exact meaning. Nature and reason became catchwords that had a metaphorical rather than a concrete meaning. In Diderot nature and reason both signified the empirically ascertained reality – the ‘reality of facts’ in the words of Cassirer. Reason refers to the intellectual process through which factual reality may be discovered, while nature is nothing but the conceptualised facts reality themselves. Thus when Diderot maintains that the practice of marriage is opposed by reason and contrary to nature, he merely means to say that the facts of reality ascertained through the practice of reason contradict it.

In the construction of a morality, the most important facts of reality that should be taken into account are human behaviour and the properties of society. The characteristics of human nature may be similar around the globe, even though Diderot never definitively affirms this. However, societies differ enormously in their properties. Therefore these characteristics of society should above all determine a morality. An example of such a characteristic mentioned by Diderot in the *Supplément* is the location of a society and its potential to support additional population. Thus the libertine sexual morality of Tahiti is made possible by the fact that both unoccupied land and the first necessities of life are available in abundance. However, Diderot would concede that it is not feasible to introduce Tahiti’s morality in an already overpopulated nation such as France because the additional growth in population would cause famine and chaos – thereby implicitly and probably reluctantly acknowledging that the strict Christian rules on sexual relations in France may be in accordance with nature after all.

A similar factor important in determining Diderot’s utilitarian morality is the political constitution of the nation. Following Montesquieu, Diderot maintains that the state form of particular society is to be related to its dominant moral tendency. Thus a republic like that of the United Provinces or Venice requires an enterprising, egalitarian, modest, emancipated and politically aware people, while these same qualities are much less required, in some sense even undesirable in large monarchical states like Russia.¹²⁵ However, as shall be discussed more extensively below, the same utilitarian concerns that determine Diderot’s notion of morality also play an important role in his reflections on politics. Thus the constitution of a nation is to be determined by the size of a country and the education and morals of its citizens, with small states as possible republics or even direct democracies, while larger states such as

¹²⁵ Y. Benot (ed.) *Diderot, Voyage en Hollande* (Paris 1982) 56-61; 89-102.

Russia and France are better suited with to monarchy.¹²⁶ As is clear from this example, the same empirical facts of the situation and condition of a society that determined morality provide the utilitarian reasons for instituting a certain political system. It is this utilitarian element in Diderot's political thought that forms the connection to his thinking on ethics. It shall repeatedly become clear below that in the absence of firm belief that revelation or nature may provide absolute points of reference, Diderot's social thought is to a large degree informed by the pragmatic and utilitarian principle that whatever measures combine the enjoyment of man's natural freedom with a safeguarding of society and the individual, are to be implemented.

In conclusion, it has become clear that the role of the monist materialist ontology in Diderot's theory of law and morality is that of an excluding factor. It is Diderot's materialism that is responsible for the rejection of both a deity and a teleological conception of nature as the source of an ethical theory. At the same time, his scepticism contributed to the rejection absolutes. Left with no other options, Diderot – possibly inspired by his empirical philosophy of science – instead proposes a utilitarian theory of morality and law based on the facts of reality. Finally, the ethical theory of the *Supplément* also had a clear connection with contemporary European society. On the one hand it is clear that Diderot emphasis on the 'naturalness' of morals and laws was largely inspired by the – in his eyes – ridiculous moral precepts imposed by Christianity on European civilisation. On the other hand, the criticism of individual European conventions clearly had the purpose of inducing a transformation in public opinion.

¹²⁶ *Refutation D'Helvetius* V *OPOL* 478.

Human Rights and Anti-Colonialism

As we have seen, Diderot rejected revelation or a teleological conception of nature as independent reference points in order to ground a universal theory in the realm of morality and civil law. However, civil laws apply only within a certain society, and Diderot makes clear that morality too is specific to social and political associations rather than universal to human kind as a whole. Therefore, at this point the obvious question to ask Diderot would be: what obligations and rights actually exist in the state of nature? Locke – who had been an important influence on Diderot, especially in his early days as a political thinker – together with earlier proponents of natural law theory such as Grotius, Pufendorf and Barlemaqui, had conceived natural rights as unconditionally bestowed on every human being by god himself.¹²⁷ These rights could be ‘discovered’ by man either by revelation or through the use of reason.¹²⁸ In light of his monist materialist view of nature and his rejection of a universal morality, it would be expected that Diderot would deny the existence of such rights that are bestowed upon every human being solely by nature or revelation. For how could a meaningless, continually transforming collection of atoms imbued with the occult life force of universal sensibility, ever in itself contain the rules by which specimens of a particular kind of organisation of its matter should treat one another outside the rules and conventions that certain specific groups of the species had made among each other?

From Natural Rights to Human Rights

Characteristically, Diderot never unambiguously denied or confirmed the existence of absolute natural rights in the sense advocated by Locke and proponents of natural law theory. However, the following quotation provides a first hint to Diderot’s opinion on the matter:

On distinguée trios sortes de liberté. La liberté naturelle, la liberté civile, la liberté politique: c’est-à dire, la liberté de l’homme, celle du citoyen et celle d’un peuple. La liberté naturelle, est le droit que la nature a donné à tous hommes de disposer de soi, à sa volonté. La liberté civile, est le droit que la société doit garantir à chaque citoyen de pouvoir faire tout ce qui

¹²⁷ Locke’s influence on Diderot is most visible in his epistemology, but also in his early political theory displayed in the *Autorité Politique* discussed below. Cf. Dedeyan, *Diderot et la Pensée Anglaise* 274-288.

¹²⁸ A.J. Simmons, *The Lockean Theory of Rights* (Princeton 1992) 16-18.

n'est pas contraire aux lois. La liberté politique, est l'état d'un peuple qui n'a point aliéné sa souveraineté, et qui fait ses propres lois, ou est associé, en partie, à sa législation.¹²⁹

Besides the interesting contention that political liberty relies on the sovereignty of the populace and its right to devise its own legislation, which will be discussed more extensively below in the section on Diderot's constitutional theory, the description of natural liberty effectively maintains that in according to nature every man is free to do whatever he wants. It is only within the civic realm that man becomes subject to laws. Indeed, Jacques Proust has correctly maintained that according to Diderot the state of nature is characterised by complete theoretical 'liberté et égalité' among human beings.¹³⁰ Thus theoretically it is only when an individual enters society that his liberty becomes limited by the prevailing moral and legal conventions and he is absorbed into a necessarily unequal hierarchy of society.¹³¹

In the article *Droit Naturel*, published in 1755, Diderot discusses the issue of natural rights more systematically. Typically, Diderot commences the article by casting doubt on the whole concept of natural right while at the same time criticising those writers who have espoused the notion without being able to adequately define and justify it. Indeed, it has for instance been observed that a prominent author on natural rights as Locke devotes very little attention to the reason why natural rights would exist and what these rights should actually contain. Instead, he focuses mainly on establishing the universality and equal application of natural rights.¹³² However, returning to the *Droit Naturel*, Diderot commences by stating that:

L'Usage de ce mot est si familier qu'il n'y a Presque personne qui ne soit convaincu au-dedans de soi-même que la chose lui est évidemment connue. Ce sentiment intérieur est commun au philosophe et à l'homme qui n'a point réfléchi; avec cette seule différence qu'à la question: *qu'est-ce que le droit?* Celui-ci, manquant aussitôt et de termes et d'idées, vous renvoie au tribunal de la conscience et reste muet.¹³³

¹²⁹ *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1782 edition printed in Geneva) XXI.24, vi.126 Raynal's enormous work – the whole history is contained in ten volumes – has never been published in a modern edition. Also, none of the modern editions of Diderot's works has included a complete reproduction of all passages authored by Diderot. The collection *Oeuvres Complètes* edited by R. Lewinter (Paris 1969-1973) contains a selection of the most important passages. However, because of these difficulties, this thesis will reference directly to the 1782 edition of the *Histoire* available at the special collections of the Utrecht University Library. The first Roman numeral refers to the book, with the Arabic number denoting the paragraph. The second set of numbers refers to the volume and the page number where the passage can be found in the edition used here.

¹³⁰ Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* 417.

¹³¹ Cf. *Histoire* XVIII.2, ix.5-6 on Diderot's insistence that inequality is a necessary aspect of all societies and that the converse contention is both dangerous and the source of much misunderstanding.

¹³² Simmons, *Lockean Theory of Rights* 10-11.

¹³³ *Droit Naturel* OPOL 30.

Whereas the common man is unable to find a justification for natural rights beyond his instinctual sense of justice, the philosopher, after deliberating, would reply:

*Le droit est le fondement ou la raison première de la justice. Mais qu'est-ce que la justice? C'est l'obligation de rendre à chacun ce qui lui appartient. Mais qu'est-ce qui appartient à l'un plutôt qu'à l'autre dans un état de choses où tout serait à tous, et où peut-être l'idée distincte d'obligation n'existerait pas encore?*¹³⁴

Invoking Plato's idea that justice consists of rendering each what is due to him, the philosopher attempts to define natural right by referring to an underlying concept, only to be questioned again by Diderot. Because what is the validity and consequence of the notion of justice in a state of nature in which laws based on convention are absent, thereby absolving individuals of all obligations? Where Plato attempted to solve this problem by positing the existence of the Idea of justice, Diderot does not believe in the existence of lofty concepts that contain absolute truth.

However, this does not entail that Diderot therefore wishes to give up the notion of natural right. As a humanitarian he finds the notion too sympathetic to give up on mere philosophical difficulties and sets out to define a concept of natural right that is also applicable in a nature in which no absolute and natural justice exists. Diderot commences by attempting to prove the utility or even necessity of natural rights. First, Diderot posits the existence of free will and liberty, and assumes that man is endowed with the capacity for reason.¹³⁵ Subsequently, by invoking the biblical wisdom of 'do not do unto others what you would not wish others to do to you,' Diderot supposes that the reasonable man will see that acting in accordance with justice and natural right is as beneficial to himself as it is to others.¹³⁶ However, Diderot allows for the possibility that persons do not respect natural rights, either because they have become slaves to their passions and have lost their capacity to reason, or because they – like Thrasymachos in Plato's *Republic* – have formed the confused idea that might is right, that justice is nothing but the will of the strong and that therefore they are allowed to do anything as long as they are not opposed.¹³⁷ By wilfully disregarding the natural rights governing the human species, these persons place themselves outside humanity and can themselves no longer appeal to the natural rights they transgressed. Consequently,

¹³⁴ Ibid. *OPOL* 29.

¹³⁵ Ibid. *OPOL* 30.

¹³⁶ Ibid. *OPOL* 30-32.

¹³⁷ Ibid. *OPOL* 30-31. Plato, *Republic* 336b-339b.

Diderot maintains that it is in the interest of humanity as a whole to dispose of the offender in order to prevent repetition. Although he recommends attempting to persuade those rational persons that merely have formed a misguided idea of justice, the practical corollary of the exclusion from humanity in society would probably mean imprisonment.¹³⁸ In absence of an external justification, Diderot's main argument in favour of accepting universal natural rights is thus utilitarian: if people would respect each other's rights, humanity as a whole would be better off.

However, if Diderot had thereby established an independent justification of natural rights, the problem of actually defining these requires another solution. First of all he maintains that: nous ôtions à l'individu le droit de décider de la nature de juste et de l'injuste.'¹³⁹ Instead, because humanity as a whole will benefit from the protection of natural rights, but also will have to respect them, the best option is to consult humanity as a whole:

Où porterons-nous cette grande question? Où? Devant le genre humain; c'est à lui seul qu'il appartient de la décider, parce que le bien de tous est la seule passion qu'il ait. Les volontés particulières sont suspectes; elles peuvent être bonnes ou méchantes, mais la volonté générale est toujours bonne; elle n'a jamais trompé, elle ne trompera jamais.¹⁴⁰

La volonté générale, the general will of mankind is thus the arbiter that must define the content of natural rights.¹⁴¹ Important is the fact that Diderot is referring to the general will of whole mankind, and not – as would Rousseau several years later – to the general will of an individual nation. Unfortunately, Diderot does not mention how and when this general will is to be established and the whole idea remains largely hypothetical.

Still, the idea of determining natural rights by consulting the opinion of humanity as a whole is an original and effective solution to the problem of defining natural rights within a world view in which there is no intrinsic meaning and all morals, laws and rights are merely determined by convention. However, the question does arise in what extent the rights defined arbitrarily by Diderot's council of humanity actually could still be called *natural* rights. As artificial concepts defined by and applicable to the whole of humanity, Diderot's rights might rather be called *human* rights. In fact, the establishment of Diderot's natural rights requires humanity as a whole to submit to a single system of legal rights that supersedes any national

¹³⁸ Ibid. *OPOL* 31-32.

¹³⁹ *Droit Naturel OPOL* 32.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. *OPOL* 32-33.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. *OPOL* 32-34.

interests or laws and is applicable to all individuals merely on the basis of being a member of the human race. In fact, Diderot's article has been cited as an important text in the development of the notion of universal human rights, first proclaimed unilaterally in the United States and France in the decades following its publication.¹⁴² Indeed, Diderot's attempt to disconnect the theory of natural rights from its association with a particular concept of a Christian god and the universal but eternally vague notion of 'nature' by advocating its adoption by appealing to mere common-sense, while proposing to define it in a democratic manner, could be seen as a pioneering effort to define a secular, concrete and globally supported conception of universal rights. From now on, universal rights did not need to be 'discovered' through the use of reason, they were simply *declared*.

Yet, what the article *Droit Naturel* fails to explain is the reason why Diderot personally imbued the notion of universal rights with such urgency. Of course, the article ascribes the notion of natural right with the utilitarian benefit of reducing injustice and discord among mankind by proscribing certain ways of treating fellow man. However, this abstract notion can hardly account for Diderot's enthusiasm for human rights expressed in the encyclopaedic article and his later fervent defence of the natural rights of non-European peoples. Why did Diderot care this much for the implementation of universal but artificial rights? Again, the answer cannot be found in Diderot's ontology, for his perspective of nature would only deny the existence of absolute and inherent rights. Besides the weak utilitarian argument, the reason why Diderot advocated the institution of human rights was because he personally sympathised with the victims of exploitation and oppression.

Traditionally the immediate origins of the concept of human rights are sought in the notion of natural right expounded by the natural law theorists.¹⁴³ However, recently the case has been made that the emergence of human rights was not solely an intellectual process, but also involved a transformation in the way sympathy with fellow man as well as the value of human life in general was perceived. For instance, Lynn Hunt has described the process by which humanitarian values disseminated through the effect of art forms such as the novel. She maintains that the sentimental and introspective nature of the eighteenth century novel introduced readers into the psyche of the protagonist, thereby displaying another person's thoughts and anxieties. Together with the enormous publicity generated by notorious violations of human dignity vehemently criticised by *philosophes* – the Calas affaire for

¹⁴² L. Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights, A Brief Documentary History* (Boston 1996) 35-38.

¹⁴³ M.R. Ishay, *The History of Human Rights, from Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley 2004) 84-116.

which Voltaire was mainly responsible is a prominent example – these trends in the sphere of art and literature caused a definite shift in mentality. Victims of the cruel judicial system were no longer regarded as villains whose public execution brought spectacle and amusement. Instead, they were increasingly seen as sensible beings that deserved pity on the soul account of their humanity.¹⁴⁴

Furthermore, Michael Frazer has identified an intellectual current in enlightenment thought that proposes to expand the province of contemplation. He maintains that certain proponents of the enlightenment, including Hume, Adam Smith and Herder, had a conception of thought that included not only rational deliberation but also a form of sentimentalism ultimately based on the rehabilitation of the passions as legitimate sources of ideas and urges.¹⁴⁵ This observation is primarily important concerning the topic of morality and rights. Frazer maintains that:

Rationalists begin with normative theory – discovering valid moral principles on the basis of reason alone – and only then turn to empirical investigation to determine how imperfect, real-world creatures such as ourselves may be better brought in line with reason’s authoritative demands. Sentimentalism, however, begin where rationalists end – with the empirical investigation of what actually leads real-world human beings to follow the norms that they do. Sentimentalists describe these norms as the outcome of our moral sentiments, products of the mind as a whole.¹⁴⁶

The main thesis of the sentimentalist point of view is thus that the determination of the regulation of human relations should not only be based on rational deliberation, but should take into account the passions and moral sentiments that are present in all human beings. For this reason ‘the empirical social-psychology of reflection offered by sentimentalism can be understood largely in terms of the reflective expansion and correction of our sympathetic bonds to our fellow human beings.’¹⁴⁷ It is this expansion of social and moral thought from the realm of rational deliberation into the sphere of sentimental thought ultimately based on the passions that is analogous to the social developments described by Hunt. In a sense, the theoretical sentimentalism attributed by Frazer to Hume and Smith could be regarded as the abstract manifestation of the spread of humanitarianism in wider society that caused the

¹⁴⁴ L. Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights, A History* (New York 2007) 35-112.

¹⁴⁵ M.L. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy, Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (Oxford 2010) 3-10ff.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 8.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

notion of human rights to gain widespread acceptance. It was this development that eventually made it possible to declare human rights as self-evident. This self-evidence is not attested through rational deliberation, but by consulting the sentimental faculties of the human psyche.

Diderot's views on human rights can be related to both the social developments discerned by Hunt and the intellectual current identified by Frazer. As a self-declared humanitarian who himself was influential in the movement advocating a more humane treatment of individuals worldwide, and who as an esteemed novelist was also instrumental in the popularisation of the literary trends contributing to the popularisation of the humanist perspective, Diderot advocated the notion of human rights not only because of mere utilitarian concerns, but also because he sincerely and instinctively believed that human beings were to be protected from inhumane treatment. Similarly, Diderot's opinions on human rights – especially if applicable to the people who fell victim to oppression and slavery as a consequence of European colonial ambitions – exhibits characteristics of the sentimentalism described by Frazer. To be sure, Diderot's thoughts on morality and rights cannot be equated with the sentimentalism of Hume. And indeed, Frazer concedes that most enlightenment thinkers incorporated both rational and sentimentalist elements in their theories.¹⁴⁸ Thus Diderot's approach to morality when dealing with sexuality in the *Supplément* is both empiricist and rational while rehabilitating the passions as legitimate urges. As we shall see below, Diderot turns towards the sentimentalists' tool of moral indignation when defending the human rights of the victims of European oppression overseas.

Human Rights in Action: Anti-Colonialism and the Abolition of Slavery

While Diderot had in the *Encyclopédie* discussed human rights in a theoretical manner, later in his career he would increasingly voice his opinion on the practical implementation of these rights. Especially in his contributions to the *Histoire Philosophique et Politique des Établissements et du Commerce des Européens dans la Deux Indes* published with the Abbé Raynal as its official author, Diderot ventures from the theoretical discussions of the *Encyclopédie* and displays his strong opposition to the acts of barbarity and inhumanity committed in their overseas empires. However, the history of the *Histoire des Deux Indes* – as the work is usually known – as well as the status of Diderot's contributions to the text is complicated. Although it is not possible to address here all aspects of this history, it is necessary and instructive to clarify Diderot's role in providing content for the *Histoire*.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 6.

The *Histoire des Deux Indes* was first published anonymously in 1772 – with a publication date of 1770 in Amsterdam indicated on the title page – and met with great popularity, its importance distributing enlightenment views rivalling that of the *Encyclopédie*. As was common early-modern practice, the book was revised and expanded with every new edition. The third edition of 1781 incorporated a large number of new passages that were much more critical compared to the earlier material and especially disapproving of the conduct of the European powers in their colonies. However, French absolutism was also an important target of criticism, and the new edition even contained a paragraph that addressed Louis XVI personally and called on the monarch to realise a large number of political reforms.¹⁴⁹ In response to these new passages, the *Parlement* of Paris condemned the book in 1781 and had it torn apart and burned by the public executioner and ordered the theological faculty of the Sorbonne to devise an official censure and repudiation of the theses contained in the *Histoire*.¹⁵⁰

Already in the 1780's it had been rumoured that the new contributions of the second and third editions of the *Histoire des Deux Indes* had in fact been written by Diderot. The reason of this speculation probably lies in the fact that several of the new contributions in both style and content closely resembled passages that had earlier been published by Diderot in Grimm's clandestine *Correspondance Litteraire*. Although these suspicions were further confirmed during the nineteenth century when Diderot's writings that had remained unpublished during his lifetime became available, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that any certainty could be provided on the issue. The reason for this lies in the fact that in the first decade of the twentieth century the manuscripts contained in the so-called Fonds Vandeul became available. This primary collection of Diderot's manuscripts had been inherited by his wife's descendents, who for obscure reasons had not decided to release them until then. The manuscripts of the Fonds Vandeul contained an unknown collection of short political writings that turned out to be draft versions of passages added in the later editions of Raynal's *Histoire*.¹⁵¹ Due to the work of Michèle Duchet, who has meticulously compared passages found in the manuscripts as well as in other writings by Diderot with the

¹⁴⁹ *Histoire* IV.18, ii.165-169.

¹⁵⁰ Benot, *Diderot, de L'Atheisme à L'Anticolonialisme* 162-163; The repudiation of the Sorbonne survives and can be viewed at the special collections of the Utrecht University Library: *Censure de la Faculté de Théologie de Paris contre un Livre qui a pour titre: Histoire Philosophique et Politique des Établissements des Européens dans les Deux Indes par G.T. Raynal* (Paris 1782).

¹⁵¹ M. Duchet, *Diderot et l'Histoire des Deux Indes ou l'Écriture Fragmentaire* (Paris 1978) 28-48.

content of the *Histoire*, it is now possible to attribute to Diderot a large number paragraphs with absolute certainty.¹⁵²

An important section of the *Histoire* written by Diderot is the passage criticising the practice of slavery. Of course, Diderot was in no way the only eighteenth century author censuring the mistreatment of Africans by European colonial powers.¹⁵³ However, what makes Diderot's particular denunciation of the practice of slavery interesting is his explicit appeal to natural rights to support his contention. When discussing the concept of natural liberty – a liberty that all human beings should possess – Diderot proclaims that 'La liberté, est la propriété de soi,' it is the right 'de disposer de soi, à sa volonté'¹⁵⁴ Subsequently, the natural liberty of the human being is compared to the servility to which the animal legitimately may be subjected:

On enchaîne et on assujettit la brute, parce qu'elle n'a aucune notion du juste et de l'injuste, nulle idée de grandeur et de bassesse.¹⁵⁵

The defining characteristic that entitles man to a natural liberty that excludes enslavement is thus his faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong. A few lines below, Diderot describes a moral conscience as an important distinction between human and animal.¹⁵⁶ It is these attributes that entitle a person to the protection of the natural rights of the human race – later to be called human rights – that according to Diderot are forbid slavery. The defining theoretical reason why according to Diderot slavery should be prohibited is that it prevents persons from exercising certain inherently human attributes – such as reason, moral conscience and free will. Slavery therefore severely limits its victim's natural liberty and in fact forces a person into a sub-human state.

The passage quoted above thus displays Diderot's allegiance to the notion of a universal humanity that is present in all human beings regardless of their origin. Siep Stuurman has shown that this anthropological notion was by no means prevalent with most of Diderot's contemporaries. In fact, Diderot's view that in nature all human beings are equal and therefore can appeal to the same rights was only shared by a small number of thinkers such as the Abbé Raynal and Anquetil Duperron. It is this anthropological perspective that

¹⁵² Ibid. 64-105 contains a table of all passages by Diderot.

¹⁵³ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 603-609.

¹⁵⁴ *Histoire* XI.24, vi.126.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. XI.24, vi.126.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. XI.24, vi.126.

human beings are by nature equal and that membership of a more advanced culture or civilisation does not entitles individuals to a superior status that may be used to legitimate the oppression and enslavement of supposedly inferior societies.¹⁵⁷ This rejection of the common contemporary idea of the inherent European superiority over other peoples – either on grounds of nature or through advanced civilisation – is at the basis of any theory of truly universal rights but is also visible in the *Supplément*. In fact, Diderot maintains that despite all European innovation, the members of the simple society of Tahiti lead happier lives and have better morals than their European counterparts whose morality has been corrupted by civilisation while the quest for luxury has obstructed them of attaining happiness.¹⁵⁸

Besides this notion of the natural equality of man, Diderot also employs sentimental arguments in order to arouse sympathy for the victims of the slave trade.¹⁵⁹ In an especially evocative passage, Diderot emphasises the harsh fate of those Africans unfortunate enough to be transported across the Atlantic:

Ces vérités éternelles et immuables, le fondement de toute morale, la base de tout gouvernement raisonnable, seront-elles contestées? Oui! Et ce sera une barbare et sordide avarice qui aura cette homicide audace. Voyez cet armateur qui, courbé sur son bureau, réglé, la plume à la main, le nombre des attentats qu'il peut faire commettre sur les côtes de Guinée; qui examine à loisir, de quel nombre de fusils il aura besoin pour obtenir un nègre, de chaînes pour le tenir garrotte sur son navire, de fouets pour le faire travailler; qui calcule, de sang-froid, combine lui vaudra chaque goutte de sang, dont cet esclave arrosera son habitation.¹⁶⁰

Of course, the term 'vérités éternelles' is here not used as a real philosophical concept. However, as is clear from the rest of the passage Diderot does not attempt to establish an abstract concept of absolute morality, he is merely trying to appeal to the moral conscience of the reader in order to arouse sympathy for the African's fate and establish the criminality of the slave trade. The eternal moral truths invoked here are nothing but the sentimental and humanitarian arguments discussed in various ways by Hunt and Frazer.

Besides slavery, Diderot was also very critical of European colonial ambitions and the topic is an important theme in the *Histoire des Deux Indes*. Again, Diderot was not alone in his objections against colonialism, and in fact could be regarded as part of a much larger anti-

¹⁵⁷ Stuurman, *Global Equality and Inequality* 14-27.

¹⁵⁸ *Supplément OPH* 468-470; *Histoire* XVII.4, viii.214-221.

¹⁵⁹ More passages by Diderot condemning the practice of slavery can be found at *Histoire* VIII.22, iv.215-218; XI.1, vi.1-3; XI.24, vi.117-139.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* XI.24, vi.127.

colonialist movement.¹⁶¹ However, the *Histoire* was not the first text in which Diderot had addresses the issue of colonialism. In the *Supplément de Voyage de Bougainville* – probably written before the contributions to the *Histoire* although certainly in the same decade – Diderot displays a fictional speech by the chieftain of the tribe encountered by Bougainville on Tahiti. At some point the chieftain mentions the metal plaque that the French crew has placed on the island to signify their possession of the land. In the following passage the chieftain ridicules Bougainville’s attempt to appropriate the island:

Orou! toi qui entends la langue de ces homes-là, dis-nous à tous, comme tu me l’as dit à moi-même, ce qu’ils ont écrit sur cette lame de métal : *Ce pays est à nous. Ce pays est à toi! Et pourquoi? Parce que tu y as mis le pied?*¹⁶²

Some of Diderot’s contemporaries would have replied that the Tahitians as savages are rightfully subjected to European authority. This subjection could actually be beneficial as it would bring European culture, civilising the savage inhabitants of the island. However, on grounds of the same argument about the universal nature of man, the statements of the chieftain are lent legitimacy:

Celui dont tu veux t’emparer comme de la brute, le Tahitien est ton frère. Vous êtes deux enfants de la nature; quel droit as-tu sur lui qu’il n’ait pas sur toi?¹⁶³

However, portraying Diderot as radically opposed to all colonialism in principle would be a serious misrepresentation.¹⁶⁴ In the *Histoire* Diderot proceeds to discuss the principles that should guide the process of colonisation. At the very start it is asserted that: ‘La raison et l’équité permettent les colonies, mais elles tracent les principes don’t il ne devrait pas être permis de s’écarter dans leur fondation’¹⁶⁵ The crucial condition under which colonisation of a certain area is to be permitted is that it is uninhabited. In Diderot’s view, lands that have not yet been occupied by a society or person – and therefore belong to no one else but nature – are available to be appropriated by colonisers.¹⁶⁶ The same applies to land that is partly inhabited by a native population and partly vacant. In this case, the coloniser is allowed to take the areas

¹⁶¹ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* 590-603; Benot, *Diderot, de l’Atheisme à l’Anticolonialisme* 156-161.

¹⁶² *Supplément OPH* 467; the passage is also included in the *Histoire* VIII.1, iv.126.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* 468.

¹⁶⁴ Benot, *Diderot, de l’Atheisme à l’Anticolonialisme* 187-188.

¹⁶⁵ *Histoire* VIII.1, iv.159.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* VIII.1, iv.160.

that are not yet in use, but must leave the lands of the aborigines alone. Diderot maintains that as the coloniser is not permitted to appropriate the territory of the natives, the land taken by the coloniser is not to be contested by the aborigines.¹⁶⁷ It seems that Diderot had not thought of the possibility that a territory could be inhabited by a nomadic people relying on a large area of land to supply its essentials.

At the same time, the colonisation of inhabited territory as well as the subjection of the societies occupying the area is strongly condemned.¹⁶⁸ The only thing a foreign visitor may legitimately request is hospitality, if he demands anything more he becomes a ‘voleur et assassins’¹⁶⁹ Subsequently Diderot maintains that any foreign power attempting to control the internal affairs of a society encountered abroad may be opposed by any means necessary:

A plus forte raison pourra-t-elle, sans blesser les lois de l’humanité et de la justice, m’expulser et m’exterminer, si je m’empare de ses femmes, de ses enfants, de ses propriétés; si j’attente à sa liberté civile; si je la gêne dans ses opinions religieuses; si je prétends lui donner des lois; si j’en veux faire mon esclave.¹⁷⁰

It is striking that Diderot does not employ the term ‘lois de la nature’ but ‘lois de l’humanité,’ displaying the fact that Diderot regarded these principles of justice not as the product of nature but the attribute of mankind as a whole.

In conclusion, it is clear that Diderot did not derive his endorsement of universal human rights and opposition to European atrocities overseas from the theory of natural rights as expounded by Locke and other proponents of the natural law tradition. Instead, Diderot’s human rights were an artificial construct with the explicit purpose of protecting individuals from certain treatment by others. These rights were necessitated by their utilitarian advantages, but the issue of human rights was made acute by the brutal behaviour of Europeans towards the inhabitants of other continents. Diderot was strongly opposed to these practices because of his humanitarian feelings based on a sentimental empathy. Furthermore, convinced of the idea of the universality of human nature, Diderot maintained that savages could aspire to the same rights as civilised Europeans. However, as Stuurman has rightly remarked, there is no direct relation between these opinions and Diderot’s ontological

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. VIII.1, iv.160-161.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. III.2, ii.12-13; III.38, ii.149-162; VII.1-2, iv.1-7;

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. VIII.1, iv.160.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. VIII.1, iv.161.

beliefs.¹⁷¹ It could be maintained that Diderot's denial of the existence of both god and a teleological nature made him reject traditional natural law theory. However, the theory of universal human rights that replaced it is most of all based on Diderot's sentimental humanism and inspired by and directed at the contemporary developments in the European colonies.

¹⁷¹ Stuurman, *Global Equality and Inequality* 5.

Constitutional Thought

Diderot disclosed his reflections on internal political arrangements and constitutional thought in two periods of his life that were separated by roughly twenty years. At the beginning of his career he wrote several articles on politics for the *Encyclopédie*, of which *Autorité Politique*, published in 1753, was by far the most important. As Diderot's first attempts at political philosophy, these articles represented mainly ideas and opinions formulated by others rather than original contemplations. Nevertheless, Diderot managed to give the mixture of ideas combined in the *Autorité Politique* a certain subversive flavour and a personal touch, making the article worthy of discussion. However, Diderot's most interesting and original political thought was produced in the years 1770-1775, when the sexagenarian had completed his life's greatest endeavour and relieved of his editorial duties was free to pursue issues at his own pleasure.¹⁷² While he had largely ignored the sensitive topic of politics during his later work on the *Encyclopédie*, either because he lacked the time or due to caution not to endanger the project any further by offending official sensibilities after the outrage provoked by *Autorité Politique*, Diderot approached politics with a new enthusiasm and freedom after the project was finished. Because the political thought of the *Encyclopédie* differs markedly from that of the writings from the 1770's, it shall be treated in a separate chapter.

The Political Thought of the *Encyclopédie*

In *Autorité Politique* – the most important and at the time controversial political article in the *Encyclopédie* – Diderot sets out to explain the legitimate origins and boundaries of political authority. In the article *Encyclopédie*, Diderot had explained the principle of selection of the contents of this enormous work:

En effet, le but d'une encyclopédie est de rassembler les connaissances éparses sur la surface de la terre.¹⁷³

In line with this principle, the *Autorité Politique* does not contain many revolutionary political ideas and the works of natural of law theorists Grotius and Pufendorf, known mainly to Diderot through his reading of secondary sources, have been identified as important indirect

¹⁷² This judgment is shared by J. Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* (Paris 1967) 341.

¹⁷³ *Encyclopédie*, V 635.

influences.¹⁷⁴ It is reasonable to assume that the opinions displayed in the *Autorité Politique*, as well as in the other political articles of the *Encyclopédie*, are a moderated representation of Diderot's actual views. On the one hand this restraint was caused by a caution not to thread on political sensibilities and offend authorities that might endanger the project of the *Encyclopédie* – an attempt that was in the end not entirely successful.¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, as the passage quoted directly above makes clear, the purpose of the *Encyclopédie* was not to transmit the private opinions of the authors of individual articles, but to serve as a compendium of human knowledge. It is not unlikely that this principle impelled Diderot to partially conform the views and language expressed in his political articles to general consensus.¹⁷⁶

The issue that was at the basis of the political thought of most early modern theorists – the circumstances and reason of the formation of society – is discussed in the later article *Cité*. Diderot presents several possible theories but is ultimately ambivalent on the question what the ultimate reason has been that has prompted man to associate in political communities. He regards Aristotle's claim that man is an inherently social being predetermined by nature to live in a collective as plausible, but impossible to prove. The notion that man has started to live in cities to facilitate the establishment of conjugal and hierarchical relations is dismissed with reference to patriarchal families that lead a complete but independent existence.¹⁷⁷ Finally, Diderot entertains the possibility that the establishment of civil society has the function of optimising the satisfaction of passions inciting man to revel in luxury and debauchery. This last notion, possibly referring to Rousseau, is however not explicitly endorsed.¹⁷⁸ When revisiting this question twenty years later, Diderot would contend that the reason humans united in a society was the utilitarian reason of ensuring persistent access to primary necessities of life.¹⁷⁹

Unwilling to take a definitive position on the question *why* man has decided to set up political communities, Diderot is more interested in the issue *how* political authority was

¹⁷⁴ J. Lough, 'The Article *Autorité Politique*' in: idem (ed.), *Essays on the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D'Alembert* (Oxford 1968) 424-462, 437-439; Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* 346-348.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 100

¹⁷⁶ Mason and Wokler, 'Introduction' in: idem (trans. and eds.), *Diderot, Political Writings* xi-xii.

¹⁷⁷ Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* 408-416 discusses this question more extensively and has determined an ambiguity and possible development with Diderot endorsing the Aristotelian notion of man's natural sociability in some early writings, while it is questioned in the article *Cité* and dismissed in the *Histoire*.

¹⁷⁸ Mason and R. Wokler (trans. and eds.), *Diderot, Political Writings* 12. This particular article is not included in the French edition of Vernière.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. page 64-65.

established. In the *Autorité Politique* he commences by positing the thesis that origin of political authority lies outside nature, and thus in human society. Diderot states that:

Aucun home n'a reçu de la nature le droit de commander aux autres. La liberté est un présent du ciel, et chaque individu de la même espèce a le droit d'en jouir aussitôt qu'il jouit de la raison.¹⁸⁰

In a state of nature man is thus essentially free, with the only exception that children, who do not yet possess reason, are subject to paternal power – the only kind of authority that is established by nature.¹⁸¹ Any kind of political power is thus a purely human construction. Diderot distinguishes between two types of political authority: power derived from violent oppression and command acquired through the consent of the citizenry. The type of power based on the notion of 'might is right' is dismissed as limited to the period the oppressive power can be maintained and derided as illegitimate. Diderot considers the possibility that illegitimately acquired power may be eventually earn the consent of the people and thus transform into a legitimate authority. However, legitimate political authority is typically conferred by a contract of the people deciding to bestow it on a sovereign. The notion of the necessity of public consent legitimating political authority is hereby implicitly stressed and assumed to be borrowed from Locke, with whose work Diderot was well acquainted.¹⁸²

In a subsequent controversial passage, Diderot attempts to prove that political authority derived from consent is in accordance with god's will, while its opposite – usurped despotism – is actually an affront to god. This thesis is supported by the argument that god never transmits his rights over mankind, even though he allows men to construct an order of subordination amongst themselves. However, Diderot maintains that god's tolerance to the exercise of political power is limited to the legitimate kind of authority based on popular consent. This unusual point is backed by the notion that only god has the right to claim absolute obedience and that therefore despotic political power constitutes a transgression of divine prerogatives. Furthermore, Diderot maintains that the elaborate and submissive rituals usually surrounding despotism constitute a form of idolatry in conflict with the precepts of

¹⁸⁰ *Autorité Politique* in: P. Vernière (ed.), *Diderot, Oeuvres Politiques* (Paris 1963) 9. This view of paternal authority as natural is a classic element of established natural law theory and is also discussed by Grotius, Pufendorf and Barbeyrac. Cf. Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* 345.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* OPOL 9.

¹⁸² S. Goyard-Fabre, 'Les Idées Politiques de Diderot au Temps de l'Encyclopédie' *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 148-149 (1984) 91-119, 96-97.

Christianity.¹⁸³ Finally, the point is laboured even further by invoking two quotes from Paul's epistle to the Romans stating that 'Toute puissance qui vient de Dieu est une puissance réglée' and advising: 'Que votre soumission soit raisonnable.'¹⁸⁴ The first of these two quotes, often invoked by advocates of divine-right kingship, is unorthodoxly interpreted by Diderot as meaning that only legitimate power based on consent stems from god.¹⁸⁵

In light of the hostile views on Christianity and theism in general voiced in the *Pensées Philosophiques* – a text predating the first volume of the *Encyclopédie* by several years – it is not likely that Diderot himself believed these arguments appealing to god.¹⁸⁶ However, in light of the large readership of the *Encyclopédie* Diderot utilised the article to disperse a veiled criticism of absolutism by undermining the fundamental theological foundations of divine-right kingship in a way that was largely in accordance with established natural law theory while through its moderation and appeal to the deity it attempted to conform to popular opinion. In a sense, Diderot attempted to reinterpret the traditional theological arguments in favour of absolutism and reformulate them to support limited government by consent.¹⁸⁷

That Diderot's opinions of the *Autorité Politique* threatened to undermine the established political order was also recognised by alarmed contemporaries. Despite Diderot's caution, the article caused considerable controversy and several critical and hostile discussions in conservative journals. Especially Diderot's association of government by consent with divine will and his unusual interpretations of scripture were derided.¹⁸⁸ The notoriety of Diderot's remarks was further increased by the fact that they advocated limited royal government shortly after the controversy the refusal of sacraments to Jansenists which ultimately caused the temporary banishment of the Paris *Parlement*.¹⁸⁹ Although the *philosophes* in general were no supporters of the *Parlements*, which had often decided to ban their publications, Diderot's article could in the context of the time be interpreted as veiled

¹⁸³ Ibid. *OPOL* 10-12.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. *OPOL* 12; *Romans* 13:1; *Romans* 12:1.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. *OPOL* 12-13. D. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution, from Calvin to the Civil Constitution 1560-1791* (New Haven 1996) 244-247 has claimed that this interpretation of the relationship between monarch and deity is possibly influenced by Gallicanism and ideas articulated in the Jansenist political ideology hostile to absolutism.

¹⁸⁶ *Pensées Philosophiques* XIII, XV, XIX, XX, XLV, L, LIX, LX, LXII.

¹⁸⁷ More traditional arguments in favor of limited monarchy are given in the article *Représentants* *OPOL* 47-48.

¹⁸⁸ Lough, 'The Article *Autorité Politique*' 430-434.

¹⁸⁹ J. Rogister, *Louis XV and the Parlement of Paris 1737-1755* (Cambridge 1995) discusses the affair at length.

support of the only real constitutional check on royal power.¹⁹⁰ In the years following publication, the controversy over *Autorité Politique* lingered on in refutations published as pamphlets or as articles in periodicals and prompted Diderot to add an erratum to subsequent editions of the *Encyclopédie* in which he explains and tones down his statements.¹⁹¹

Although the article commences with some relatively radical notions, the second half of *Autorité Politique* explaining the practical terms and conditions of the social contract between sovereign and people is largely in accord with contemporary conservative opinions – so much so that Diderot’s iconoclastic opening may seem merely symbolic or even insincere. Diderot starts with explaining that in establishing a social contract transferring sovereignty to an independent political authority, the people may decide on a variety of arrangements – or constitutions. Although Diderot’s discussion in the article is mostly concerned with kingdoms, he concedes that a people may choose to confer authority on persons for a short period of time as is usual in republics, on one person for a lifetime as in Poland, or on a single family for eternity, thereby constructing a monarchy.¹⁹²

More importantly however, Diderot maintains that once sealed, the social contract between ruler and people cannot be broken by either side.¹⁹³ The right of rebellion – even with the intention of dissolving the contract and recovering sovereignty – is thus denied. In light of this contention Diderot’s earlier statements emphasising popular consent may seem futile and even hypocritical. The consent of subjects is of little importance to a ruler who can expect complete obedience and does not have to fear rebellion. The idea of consensual government in this arrangement is thus nothing more than a theoretical principle that cannot be enforced. In this sense there seem few decisive practical differences between Diderot’s social contract and the kind of pact proposed by Hobbes. Indeed, the article in the *Encyclopédie* on Hobbes, also written by Diderot, does not criticise Hobbesian political theory on this point. Instead it mostly focuses on Hobbes’ pessimistic view of human nature, promoting the contrary idea that through the use of reason and the acquisition of knowledge, man can eventually become good.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ J. Lough, *The Encyclopédie* (Geneva 1989) 292. Cf. J. Hanrahan, *Voltaire and the Parlements of France* (Oxford 2009)

¹⁹¹ *Autorité Politique*, Mason and R. Wokler (trans. and eds.), *Diderot, Political Writings* 11-12. This addition is not included in the French edition by Vernière.

¹⁹² *Ibid.* OPOL 15.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* OPOL 20.

¹⁹⁴ *Hobbisme*. Mason and R. Wokler (trans. and eds.), *Diderot, Political Writings* 28-29. This particular article is not included in the French edition of Vernière.

However, despite the fact that Diderot apparently has little problems with the fact that a people is strictly bound to a sovereign until an unforeseen circumstance – such as the dying out of the royal family – voids the contract, he emphasises that the sovereign power does not own the people, but actually is in service of its subjects. Diderot thereby stresses the fact that the sovereign is to act in accordance with the interests of his people and should regard the well-being of his subjects above his private welfare.¹⁹⁵ This insistence displays the eventual utopian character of Diderot's political theory in the *Autorité Politique*. Because neither popular uprising is legitimated, nor political representation explicitly advocated, the welfare of the state comes to rely completely on the character and intentions of the sovereign.¹⁹⁶ Even though some vague notion of the limitation of royal authority is advocated, Diderot's arrangement completely ignores one of the main commonplaces of political thought since Plato's *Laws*, namely that sovereigns with unchecked power tend to place their own interests above that of their people.¹⁹⁷

In the end, the political theory displayed in the *Autorité Politique* was both impractical and wholly theoretical. It consisted of an eccentric combination of ideas from the natural law tradition presented in a fashionable style and completed with some Diderot's characteristically subtle but potentially subversive remarks. Although Diderot closely follows natural law theory – a tradition he would later depart from as shall become clear below – he was never concerned with examining the argumentation behind the notions he borrowed. As an early and largely derivative work, the departure from the natural law tradition noticeable first in the article *Droit Naturel* from 1755 and even more prominently in the political texts from the 1770's is not yet visible in the *Autorité Politique*. It is reasonable to assume that Diderot, as a novice in political thought, had not yet had the opportunity to formulate a personal position – let alone a coherent political theory. For this reason the prominent place of natural law theory – which remained a most prominent and established tradition until well beyond the first half of the eighteenth century – in this early encyclopaedic article is not surprising at all.

Diderot's as a Political Actor

After discussing the subject of practical politics briefly in his articles for the *Encyclopédie*, it was only in the 1770's, after the completion of encyclopaedic project, that the *philosophe*

¹⁹⁵ *Autorité Politique* OPOL 16; 20.

¹⁹⁶ Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* 122-124. This position is probably borrowed from Pufendorf.

¹⁹⁷ Plato, *Laws* 713c-d.

would seriously turn to political matters. It was in a series of political treatises written in the years 1771-1775 that Diderot elaborated and refined his ideas into radical political vision. At the same time, Diderot also became personally involved in several contemporary political controversies. In 1752 he had penned the final part of the apology of the Abbé des Prades, an occasional contributor to the *Encyclopédie* who through the unorthodox notions contained in his doctoral thesis in theology had become the target of Jansenist outrage followed by government censure, ultimately forcing him to flee the country.¹⁹⁸ Another apology, published in 1770, defended the Abbé Galliani, who had questioned the physiocratic insistence on deregulation of the grain trade.¹⁹⁹ Finally, in 1771 Diderot defended his friend d'Holbach from an *examen* written by Frederik II of Prussia in a pamphlet titled *Pages contre un Tyran*.²⁰⁰

However, Diderot's most important engagement in contemporary politics came in 1773 when the old man who had never left his country finally answered the request of Catherine II of Russia to visit her. Several years before in 1766, Catherine had announced her intention to reform and modernise her realm, convening a legislative assembly that was supposed to have codified a new law code on the basis of her extensive written instruction – the *Nakaz*. In the end, the project failed when the assembly had descended into chaos and was disbanded in 1768 at the start of the war with the Ottoman Empire. However, despite this failure, Catherine had requested Diderot – who had previously acted as her cultural attaché in Paris and who she later had appointed as royal librarian – to advise her on the modernisation of Russia and the contents of the *Nakaz*. The numerous conversations between the empress and the *philosophe* have later been summarised by Diderot in the *Mémoires pour Catherine II*.²⁰¹ It has been suggested that the political ideas contained in the *Mémoires* are much less radical than Diderot's personal views. The reason for this moderation probably lies in the fact that the *philosophe* conversed with an absolute monarch who also happened to be his benefactor, and that causing displeasure through all too critical remarks would have been unwise.²⁰² This suggestion certainly seems plausible, especially in light of the fact that upon his return from St. Petersburg, Diderot wrote the *Observations sur le Nakaz*, a very critical commentary of Catherine's instruction that he prudently never published during his lifetime.

¹⁹⁸ J.D. Burson, *Theological Enlightenment* 239-274.

¹⁹⁹ *Apologie de L'Abbé Galiani* in: *OPOL* 61-128.

²⁰⁰ *Pages contre un Tyran* in *OPOL* 129-150. Cf. G.B. Rodgers, *Diderot and the Eighteenth Century French Press* (Oxford 1973) for an extensive treatment of Diderot's publications in the press.

²⁰¹ Diderot, *Mémoires pour Catherine II* edited by P. Vernière (Paris 1966).

²⁰² Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 159-160.

When the Russian empress finally read the work after Diderot's death, after which his library was transferred to her according to an arrangement that was made to provide Diderot's daughter with a dowry, her displeasure with the text was notable.²⁰³ Together with the contributions to the *Histoire des Deux Indes*, the *Observations* contain the most extensive and detailed exposition of Diderot's constitutional thought.

In overview of these texts written in the 1770's, the impression emerges that Diderot's political thought was closely connected with contemporary events and mainly concerned with providing commentary and solutions to what Diderot discerned as the major problems of European states. As shall be discussed below, Diderot's attention turns to such contemporary problems as the reform of the French absolutist monarchy, the modernisation of Russia, the decadence and corruption of England and the Dutch Republic and finally the revolution in the British colonies in North America. It follows that Diderot's political thought is closely bound to contemporary political events and practices – an observation also made by Anthony Strugnell.²⁰⁴ To be sure, Strugnell's contention is even stronger as he maintains that Diderot's political theory developed through the events in France as well as his experiences in Russia and Holland from a theory of enlightenment absolutism into a notion of revolutionary republicanism.²⁰⁵ Because Diderot was actively involved with contemporary political developments – both domestic and international – there certainly is some truth in this view. However, as shall be discussed more extensively below, Diderot's political views also changed significantly in their first principles. Whereas the *philosophe* had based his politics of the *Encyclopédie* on natural law theory, in his later writings a form of utilitarianism similar to that displayed in the morality of the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* emerges.

The Origin of Society and Popular Sovereignty

Although Diderot is very interested in the differences between natural and civilised man, his account of the ascent from the state of nature to the foundation of the state is rather brief. Already questioning the Aristotelian notion of the natural sociability of man in the *Encyclopédie*, he rejects it outright in the *Observations de Nakaz* by stating that the reason that primitive man decided to join and form a society is that through collaboration they could

²⁰³ *OPOL* 332-334.

²⁰⁴ Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 229-231.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 151-177; 190-193.

protect themselves from the dangers posed by the nature that surrounded them.²⁰⁶ Sustenance and protection are thus the initial goals of society, although Diderot concedes that following its establishment a society and its members may also legitimately pursue secondary goals such as embellishment through art or personal satisfaction through luxury.²⁰⁷ However, with the establishment of society, man also gains a new enemy – his fellow man. It is for the regulation of relations between members of society that the state is established.²⁰⁸

A similar notion of the necessity of the regulation of society by an independent and impartial state had induced Hobbes to propose the unconditional obedience of citizens and allocation of absolute sovereignty in a single rule. However in the *Histoire*, Diderot is extremely critical of Hobbes' scheme:

Ainsi la société est née des besoins des homes, le gouvernement est né de leurs vices. La société tend toujours au bien; le gouvernement doit toujours tendre à réprimer le mal. La société est la première, elle est dans son origine indépendante et libre; le gouvernement a été institué pour elle et n'est quo son instrument. C'est à l'une à commander: c'est à l'autre à la servir.²⁰⁹

Besides the strong repudiation of Hobbes' argument on the grounds of the utilitarian reason that absolute monarchy is simply not a functional type of government, it is Diderot's usage of the concept of 'nature' that is again striking. Here too, 'nature' is nothing but the abstract conceptualisation of the empirical fact of the inequality of men. Furthermore, Diderot's usage is also in accord with his rejection of the straightforward teleological interpretation of nature as the deposit of eternal truth on which universal law may be based. This is evident from his rejection of tyranny of which nature itself had sown the seeds. Diderot envisions nature not as an impartial guide from which the eternal principles of political organisation can be distilled, but simply as a senseless reality in which empirical facts are to serve as the basis of a political theory.

Instead of advocating unlimited monarchy, Diderot revolves this relation by maintaining that the state is only a gradually evolved consequence of society and ultimately invented to serve its members. From his simplified foundation myth, Diderot thus deduced that the state was invented to serve its citizens and should continue to do so:

²⁰⁶ *Observations* LXXI OPOL 402-403.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* LXXIII OPOL 403-405.

²⁰⁸ *Histoire* XVIII.42, ix.155-156.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.* XVIII.42, ix.156.

Le gouvernement doit sa naissance à la nécessité de prévenir et de réprimer les injures que les associés avoient à craindre les uns de la part des autres. [...] Ainsi la société est née des besoins des hommes, le gouvernement est né de leurs vices. La société tend toujours au bien; le gouvernement doit toujours tendre à réprimer le mal. La société est la première, elle est dans son origine indépendant et libre; le gouvernement a été institué pour elle et n'est que son instrument.²¹⁰

This order of the abstract notions of state and society provides the basis for Diderot's justification of the notion of popular sovereignty.

To be sure, Diderot had endorsed the notion of popular sovereignty long before he wrote the passage quoted above in the *Histoire des Deux Indes*. Already in the article *Autorité Politique* he had maintained that sovereignty ultimately lay with the people rather than the monarch, even though he had at that point denied the right of the people collectively dissolve their social contract and relieve their king from his authority.²¹¹ In the years since the completion of the *Encyclopédie* Diderot started to advocate a more comprehensive and less symbolic notion of popular sovereignty. First in the *Mémoires pour Catherine II* Diderot cautiously attempts to convince the empress of the notion of the sovereignty of her subjects and their right to convene in a legislative assembly.²¹² However, this notion of the subservience of the sovereign power – even in the case of monarchy – to the sovereignty of the people is only explored in all its consequences in the much less restrained *Observations*.²¹³ Significantly the first sentence of the work affirms that: 'Il n'y a point de vrai souverain que la nation.'²¹⁴

Besides the evolutionary argument that the state is only a consequence and tool of society and therefore by definition subservient to the will of the people, Diderot also advances in the *Observations* a utilitarian reason for removing sovereignty from the monarch. He maintains that in reality the monarch invested with the sovereignty over a nation, despite good intentions only rarely acts with the welfare of his people in mind. Instead, sovereigns are on the whole prone to elevate their own interests above those of their people.²¹⁵ Diderot warns that in an absolute monarchy, where the preservation of the laws, the state and public interest

²¹⁰ Ibid. XVIII.42, ix.155-156

²¹¹ *Autorité Politique* OPOL 15.

²¹² Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 172-173.

²¹³ *Observations* I; VII; VIII; XI; XIII; XV OPOL 343; 354-355; 355-356; 358; 360; 361.

²¹⁴ Ibid. I OPOL 343.

²¹⁵ Ibid. V OPOL 352-353.

are entrusted to a single person, it is more common to have an aggressive despot hostile to society than a moderate and wise king defending the realm.²¹⁶ For this reason, Diderot rejects the traditional distinction between monarchy and despotism that has been prevalent in political thought since Plato:

Je ne vois que quelque forme de différence entre le despotisme et la monarchie pure. Le Despote fait tout ce qu'il veut, sans aucune forme; le monarque est assujetti à des formes qu'il néglige quand il lui plaît et qui ne font que suspendre ses volontés sans les changer, quand il les respecte. [...] La monarchie pure reste ce qu'elle est ou retourne au despotisme, selon le caractère du monarque. C'est donc une mauvaise espèce de gouvernement.²¹⁷

Earlier he had already contended that:

Il n'y a qu'un palais dans un empire, il y a des centaines de millions de maisons autour de ce palais. Pour une fois que le sens commun, la grandeur d'âme, l'équité, la fermeté, le génie tombent du ciel sur ce palais, ces qualités qui font le grand roi doivent une centaine de millions de fois tomber à côté. On doit donc, selon une loi de nature que nous ne pouvons déranger, s'attendre à être gouverné par un sot, par un méchant ou par un fou. On n'a rien fait tant qu'on n'a pas pourvu à cet inconvénient.²¹⁸

Besides the repetition of the point made in the previous quotation, this passage also displays the way in which Diderot uses the concept of natural law in a way similar to the usage in the *Supplément*. Here 'loi de nature' does not refer to a universal and timeless law that is enshrined in nature itself. Diderot merely wants to support his thesis that experience has shown that unchecked authority invested in a single person will eventually lead to the abuse of power. The concept of natural law is thus invoked for rhetorical reasons and used in a proverbial sense. Like in the *Supplément*, nature is used as an abstract conceptualisation of the empirical facts of reality on the basis of which a utilitarian theory is constructed.

The only way of solving the problem inherent in the system of monarchy is by on the one hand locating sovereignty in the hands of the people, on the other hand by curbing the authority of the monarch. Both these notions had been present in embryonic form the article *Autorité Politique*, but only in the *Observations* does Diderot present them explicitly as utilitarian mechanisms for restraining the power of the monarch to the benefit of the nation.

²¹⁶ Ibid. VII *OPOL* 354-355.

²¹⁷ Ibid. VIII *OPOL* 356.

²¹⁸ Ibid. VI *OPOL* 353.

The manner in which the authority of the monarch is to be limited is twofold. The first measure to prevent despotism is the institution of a written law code in which the prerogatives and limits of royal power are described:

Dans quelque contrée que ce puisse être, l'autorité souveraine doit donc être limitée, et limitée d'une manière durable. La problème difficile à résoudre, ce n'est donc pas de donner des lois et même de bonnes lois à un peuple, c'est de mettre ces lois à l'abri de toute atteinte de la part du souverain. L'action héroïque d'un bon despote, c'est de lier un bras à son successeur.²¹⁹

Diderot's insistence on a written and codified constitution in which the roles of all state institutions including the monarchy are described – which recurs several times in his *Observations* – is striking in light of the fact that no contemporary European nation at that time possessed such a fixed constitutional document. On the one hand this insistence inspired by the fear that without codification monarchs could over time easily transgress regulations made in the past.²²⁰ On the other hand however, the emphasis on a written constitution may be explained by Diderot's observation – already present in the observations on the development of society in the *Supplément* discussed more extensively above on page 28 – that society and governments exhibit the tendency of diverting from 'nature.' In the *Supplément* Diderot had mainly mentioned the potential of revealed religion in diverting the laws and morals of a society from the empirical facts of reality, thereby restricting human freedom while ignoring utilitarian concerns and thus slowly causing a drift from 'nature.' However, in the *Observations*, but especially in the *Histoire*, the concept of the drift of nature is also applied to the political sphere. A clear example of the corruption of an institution of state cited by Diderot is the English Parliament, which through bribery and nepotism had diverted from its original role as a check on royal authority.²²¹ Diderot had witnessed a similar corruption among the political class of the Dutch Republic.²²² In order to limit this insistent perversion of the institutions and *moeurs* of a society, a central and fixed law code could assist in preventing a drift away from 'nature.'

Another damaging element that needs to be eradicated from politics in a healthy society is organised religion. As an atheist, Diderot holds religion to be 'un tissu d'absurdités'

²¹⁹ Ibid. VII *OPOL* 355.

²²⁰ Ibid. XIII; XV *OPOL* 360-362; *Histoire* XIV.2, vii.228-229.

²²¹ *Histoire* XIV.2, vii.224-230.

²²² Ibid. II.27, i.320-327.

with the explicit goal ‘à entretenir l’ignorance’²²³ He also derides the church for its role in the suppression of free expression:

Le philosophe dit beaucoup de mal du prêtre; le prêtre dit beaucoup de mal du philosophe; mais le philosophe n’a jamais tué de prêtres, et le prêtre a beaucoup tué de philosophes; mais le philosophe n’a jamais tué de rois, et le prêtre a beaucoup tué de rois.²²⁴

The last sentence of this quote is part of Diderot’s advice to Catherine that despite appearances the church is a potentially subversive element in the political system of a realm and detrimental to the interest of monarch and people alike. Also expressed in the *Supplément*, the main reason for this lies in the fact that revealed religion introduces the veneration for deity into society which may cause both private citizens and official magistrates to hold allegiance to god as more important than that to society and the state. As a consequence, the presence of revealed religion a society inevitably causes unrest and sometimes even disobedience – even in a democracy.²²⁵ It is clear that on the issue of religion and its relation to politics, Diderot’s opinion was influenced by his own resentment to the French Catholic Church, which was caused both by his intellectual aversion as well as his personal experiences with its attempts to prevent the spread of radical enlightenment ideas. However, the most prominent and convincing argument advanced at the influence of religion in politics is again utilitarian in nature.

Popular Representation, Civil Liberties and Democracy?

Besides a passive law code, the second barrier against the potential despotism of a monarch envisioned by Diderot is the active participation of the populace in its government. Unfortunately Diderot is not very clear about the actual prerogatives and rights of the political representation of the people. In the *Observations* he first states that:

Mais quelle est cette portion d’autorité qu’il doit abdiquer? En quoi consiste-t-elle? Qui doit en être dépositaire? C’est un corps représentant la nation qui doit en être dépositaire. Quel doit être la prérogative de ce corps? De réviser, d’approuver ou désapprouver les volontés du souverain et de les notifier au peuple. Qui doit composer ce corps? Les grands propriétaires.²²⁶

²²³ *Observations* III OPOL 347.

²²⁴ Ibid. III OPOL 348-349.

²²⁵ Ibid. III OPOL 346-349.

²²⁶ Ibid. XXIII OPOL 368.

In a previous chapter Diderot had compared these representations with the *Parlements* of France.²²⁷ In some sense the role of the representative body as described in this quote is similar to that of the *Parlements* in the sense that it is to revise and approve the wishes of the sovereign but does not seem to have the right to initiate legislation. However, earlier Diderot had maintained that ‘il ne peut y avoir de vrai législateur que le peuple,’ and it seems that this task is to be attributed to the representations rather than the people themselves.²²⁸ In a later chapter, Diderot also emphasises the importance of separating legislative from executive power, maintaining that failing to do so would result in despotism.²²⁹ It thus seems that despite his ambiguity, Diderot did intend the people’s representation to possess legislative powers. However, although he concedes that changes in law might be necessary over time, it does not seem like Diderot fully appreciated the importance of legislative responsibility to the well-being of the state.²³⁰ More importantly however is the prerogative accorded to the representatives to judge the monarch on his merits. Every five years, the representative body is to pronounce their opinion on the actions of the ruler while retaining the right to depose the king if his conduct has not satisfied expectations.²³¹

Diderot is very vague on the procedure for the election of members to representations. By making wealth a condition for membership of the representative council, Diderot’s intention was not to introduce an oligarchic element into an otherwise monarchical constitution in the sense envisioned by theorists of classical republicanism. However, Diderot is in agreement with the widely held notion that citizens without property would have no real stake in society and therefore have little interest in the preservation of the state. By making wealth a condition for becoming a representative, Diderot intends to insure the election of politically engaged representatives with an interest in maintaining order and stability. At the same time, the inclusion of women among those eligible to vote and sit in representation is not mentioned.²³² Despite Diderot’s ambiguity on the issue of election, it could be inferred

²²⁷ Ibid. XVII *OPOL* 364.

²²⁸ Ibid. I *OPOL* 343.

²²⁹ Ibid. XXXIX *OPOL* 377.

²³⁰ Ibid. V *OPOL* 353.

²³¹ Ibid. I *OPOL* 344.

²³² E. de Fontenay, *Diderot, Reason and Resonance* (New York 1982) 101-111; 134-145 is the only study that considers Diderot’s opinion on women at any length.

from his remarks elsewhere that popular representatives are ideally selected through popular elections.²³³

Besides these theoretical remarks on the importance of popular representations, Diderot also applauded the actual representational institutions that existed in Europe in the eighteenth century. Thus Diderot applauded the English constitution even though he was very critical of English political habits and morals.²³⁴ In light of Diderot's initially negative opinion on the actions and role of the *Parlement* of Paris, which was shared by many other *philosophes* including most notably Voltaire, it is striking that when the judicial magistracy was abolished by Maupeou in 1771, Diderot condemned this action.²³⁵ However, despite their shortcomings and even though they were technically not representative institutions, the *Parlements* had been the only check on royal authority in *ancien régime* France and for this reason Diderot was genuinely distressed by their abolition.²³⁶ In fact it seems reasonable to assume that despite Diderot's misgivings the abolishment of the *Parlements* was one of the factors that made Diderot emphasise the importance of a codified constitution.

Besides the direct involvement of the populace in the affairs of state through official institutions such as a representative body, Diderot also emphasises the right of individual citizens to discuss openly any topic or issue – including politics. From the passage discussing this freedom of expression it is clear that Diderot felt very strongly on the issue. He himself had been imprisoned at the castle of Vincennes in 1749 for the expression of his opinions on ontological matters, and his life's work – the *Encyclopédie* – had been repeatedly endangered by the attempts of royal censorship to halt its publication.²³⁷ As a cautious man, Diderot had refrained from publishing most of his most radical and interesting works during his lifetime for fear of reprisal. However, contributing anonymously to Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes*, the *philosophe* saw the opportunity to speak his mind on the matter with impunity:

En conséquence viola l'homme de génie réduit au silence ou étranglé, et une nation retenue dans la barbarie de sa religion, de ses lois, de ses mœurs, et de son gouvernement.²³⁸

Little later, Diderot explains the adverse effects of strict censorship:

²³³ Ibid. XI *OPOL* 358.

²³⁴ *Histoire* XIV.1-2, vii.222-235.

²³⁵ Cf. Hanrahan, *Voltaire and the Parlements*; D. Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution* (Baton Rouge 1985).

²³⁶ Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 136-138.

²³⁷ Wilson, *Diderot* 103-116; 275-290.

²³⁸ *Histoire* X.13, v.209

La logique d'une administration prohibitive pêche de tous côtés. On n'arrête point les progrès des lumières ; on ne les ralentit qu'à son désavantage. La défense ne fait qu'irriter, et donner aux âmes un sentiment de révolte, et aux ouvrages le ton du libelle, et l'on fait trop d'honneur à d'innocents sujets, lorsqu'on a sous ses ordres deux cents mille assassins, et que l'on redoute quelques pages d'écriture.²³⁹

Freedom of expression is in Diderot's view thus not only the inalienable right of the individual citizen; it is also indispensable to the spread of knowledge and the general well-being of a society. There is therefore no utilitarian reason to restrict it.

The image that emerges from the description provided above of Diderot's constitutional designs is that the *philosophe* regarded a limited monarchy roughly based on the English model as most practical. This image requires some qualification however. First of all, the most important source for Diderot's practical constitutional designs is the *Observations de Nakaz* – a text that is a commentary on a legislative document written by an absolute monarch wishing to reform the state. For this reason it is not surprising that the *Observations*, which occasionally even addresses Catherine II in the second person, is mainly concerned with the discussion of the constitutional reform of monarchies. It should be emphasised that Diderot at no point in his political writings – not even in the early *Autorité Politique* – explicitly qualifies the term 'le souverain' as referring exclusively to a monarchical ruler – even though it is often implied that this is the meaning intended. However, both in the encyclopaedic article as well as in the *Observations*, Diderot mentions the possibility that the sovereign people decide to entrust their sovereignty to another entity or institution.²⁴⁰

However, it should also be remembered that in the Europe of the 1770's virtually all states were governed by monarchies. At the same time, Diderot did not regard the republican systems of Venice or the Dutch republic to be viable alternatives, on the one hand because of the apparent corruption that had plagued the politics of the two nations while the latter had increasingly started to resemble a monarchy due to the encroaching power of the Stadtholder.²⁴¹ Also, Diderot thought republican systems to be unsuitable to large continental empires such as France or Russia. To be sure, Diderot had discussed the notion of democracy favourably in a short chapter in the *Refutation d'Helvetius*, but here the term democracy had

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ *Autorité Politique* OPOL 15; *Observations* II OPOL 345.

²⁴¹ *Voyage en Hollande* 52-58; Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 190-193.

taken the meaning that remained customary until the nineteenth century and referred to direct a democracy on the model of classical Athens. As is evident from both Montesquieu and Rousseau, democracy in the eighteenth century was unambiguously associated with the selection of representatives by lot.²⁴² However, Diderot had repeated the familiar objection that despite its merits, democracy was only a viable constitution in small city-states in which citizens could gather in a central assembly.²⁴³ As a result, the only viable alternative that represented itself was a monarchy limited in its power by a constitution and popular representation.

As a consequence of this inability or unwillingness to transcend the familiar state form of monarchy, the question rises in what sense the conclusions of Diderot's constitutional thought were democratic. Recently Jonathan Israel has maintained that the intellectual current of the 'radical enlightenment' – to which Diderot supposedly was a major contributor – has been responsible for the formation of the intellectual origins of what Israel refers to as 'democratic republicanism.'²⁴⁴ At the same time Israel describes the parallel school of thought referred to as the 'moderate enlightenment' as supporting the constitutional model of mixed monarchy and proponents of *Anglicisme*.²⁴⁵ When observing the main constitutional tenets of Diderot's political theory, it becomes clear that it is difficult to classify these as belonging to either two of the main enlightenment currents identified by Israel.

If the term 'democratic' in Israel's concept of 'democratic republicanism' is regarded as referring to the practice of what is today known as 'democratic elections,' it could be maintained that as Diderot's constitutional designs incorporate a representative body that is preferably composed through free elections, the constitutional thought of the *philosophe* probably has some similarities with the notion envisioned by Israel. However, Diderot's constitutional remarks do not seem to explicitly advocate a republic and in fact barely ever mentions the state form. In this sense, Diderot's constitutional thought might as well be regarded as a specifically progressive variant of the model of mixed monarchy ascribed by Israel to the 'moderate enlightenment.' Thus although it is certainly true that Diderot's political thought exhibits several elements characterised by Israel as typical to the 'radical enlightenment' – such as the insistence on freedom of speech, the hostility towards organised religion and the reverence of natural rights – its constitutional designs are less revolutionary.

²⁴² B. Manin, *The Principles of representative Government* (Cambridge 1997) 70-79.

²⁴³ *Refutation D'Helvetius V OPOL* 478.

²⁴⁴ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 240-263.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 287-294; 356-363.

Towards Revolution

However, this does not entail that Diderot eschewed the notion of political revolution. In the *Autorité Politique*, he had argued that whatever despotism a people would have to endure, it was bound to its social contract with a sovereign and did not possess the right to disband it through popular uprising. However, as is discussed more elaborately above, this was a notion borrowed from natural law theorist Pufendorf. In his *Histoire*, Diderot was extremely critical towards this idea of a binding social contract:

Qu'il n'est nulle forme de gouvernement, dont la prérogative soit d'être immuable. Nulle autorité politique qui créée hier, ou il y a mille ans, ne puisse être abrogée dans dix ans ou demain. Nulle puissance, si respectable, si sacrée qu'elle soit, autorisée à regarder l'état comme sa propriété. Quiconque pense autrement est un esclave. C'est un idolâtre de l'œuvre de ses mains.²⁴⁶

Accordingly, in his later writings, when Diderot had rejected the natural law tradition, he no longer denied the right to revolution. In fact, at some point he would even seem to endorse it. In the *Observations* he expressed these sentiments for the first time when he cautions Catherine that 'le principe secret de tous les désordres, c'est que, sans s'en douter, le souverain égoïste se sépare toujours de sa nation' and that 'voilà le moment de la révolte.'²⁴⁷ Earlier he had already warned her that 'chez un peuple brave, ce viol ne se fait pas sans assassinats et sans meurtres'²⁴⁸

As a text advising a monarch on potential political reforms, the *Observations* seems to contain the implicit notion that reform is a viable way of bringing about political changes that reduce the chance of popular uprising. However, after Catherine's plans for reforms had stranded and the political situation in France became increasingly hopeless, Diderot in the *Histoire des Deux Indes* is much more pessimistic about the potential of political reform:

Un gouvernement est toujours une machine très compliquée qui a son commencement, ses progrès et son moment de perfection, lorsqu'il est bien conçu; son commencement, ses progrès et son moment d'extrême corruption, lorsqu'il est vicieux à son origine. Dans l'un et l'autre cas, il embrasse un si grand nombre d'objets, tant au-dedans qu'au dehors, que sa dissolution amenée, soit par l'imbécilité du chef, soit par l'impatience des sujets, ne peut avoir que les suites les plus effrayantes. Si l'impatience des sujets vient à briser un joug sous lequel

²⁴⁶ *Histoire* XVIII.42, ix, 158-159.

²⁴⁷ *Observations* XLIV OPOL 380.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* XV OPOL 363.

ils sont las de gémir, une nation s'avance plus ou moins rapidement à l'anarchie, à travers des flots de sang.²⁴⁹

Diderot thus envisions that, despite all intentions for reform, political systems simply have a limited lifespan. However, elsewhere the notion of revolution is not only applied to government, but also to a nation as a whole:

La condition du restaurateur d'une nation corrompue est bien différente. C'est une architecte qui se propose de bâtir sur une aire couverte de ruines. C'est un médecin qui tente la guérison d'un cadavre gangrené. C'est une sage qui prêche la réforme à des endurcis. Il n'a que de la haine et des persécutions à obtenir de la génération présente. Il ne verra pas la génération future. Il produira peu de fruit, avec beaucoup de peine, pendant sa vie, et n'obtiendra que de stériles regrets après sa mort. Une nation ne se régénère que dans un bain de sang.²⁵⁰

These remarks are particularly interesting in light of Diderot's views – discussed more extensively above – on the historical development of the laws and morals of societies, which have the tendency to revert from 'nature' over time by embracing restricting regulations without utilitarian justification, in particular through the subversive influence of organised religion. Not only does Diderot repeat his scepticism of the notion of political reform, it seems that in the *Histoire* he may view violent revolution as a way in which the nation might be purged from elements that have corrupted it and have contributed to the alienation of civilisation from 'nature.'

To be sure, Diderot's turn towards revolution was probably more definitively influenced by contemporary events. Even though Diderot shared the widespread optimism upon the ascendancy of Louis XIV and the re-instatement of the *Parlements*, he nonetheless maintained that France's political and social problems ran so deep that more drastic and radical measures were required.²⁵¹ However, the most important event that inspired the *philosophe* in his endorsement of revolution was no doubt the uprising of the British colonists in Northern America. Through his contributions to the *Histoire de Deux Indes*, Diderot became one of the most important advocates for the American cause.²⁵² The revolution in North America was the first time since the Dutch revolt in the sixteenth century that a people had succeeded in reclaiming its sovereignty from its monarch and in thereby demonstrated

²⁴⁹ *Histoire* I.28, i.184.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.* XI.4, v.15.

²⁵¹ *Refutation D'Helvetius OPOL* 465-466.

²⁵² Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics* 208-209.

that even in the eighteenth century revolution remained a possibility. In this sense, the American Revolution provided Diderot with a powerful example.

In his extensive discussion of Diderot's political thought, Anthony Strugnell has perceived this turn towards revolution as the end of a long evolution in Diderot's political thinking. Strugnell maintains that as the editor of the *Encyclopédie* Diderot sincerely supported the notion of enlightened absolutism. He contends that this belief in the advantages of an absolute but wise ruler only slowly vanished due to the mounting political controversy in France over the banishment of the *Parlements* and Diderot's disappointment in Catherine II after the abandonment of her plans for political reform.²⁵³ There certainly is some sense to Strugnell's observation. When at the start of the 1770's Diderot for the first time in twenty years again turned to the discussion of political matters, the events of these past two decades had drastically altered the domestic and international political landscape. The controversy over the banishment of the *Parlements* and the following political stalemate in his native France had showed Diderot that the mere theoretical notions of popular sovereignty and representation could easily be abolished and thus were not sufficient. The increasingly complicated situation in France as well as the failure to convince Catherine II to reduce her despotism to a limited monarchy contributed to Diderot's awareness of the problems inherent in the notion of enlightenment absolutism and displayed the difficulty of reforming the confused political institutions of the *ancient regime*. Not only became a written and fixed law code limiting the authority of the monarch a first requirement of Diderot's political vision, the nation also gained the prerogative of deposing its government through revolution – a notion that became especially viable through the example of the American uprising. The American Revolution provided an example of a successful attempt to overthrow a corrupt and unreasonable government, thereby proving that collective violent opposition could be a viable option to get rid of an oppressive regime.

Yet besides these contextual factors, there is also a fundamental shift discernable in the fundamental principles underlying Diderot's political theories. In his article *Autorité Politique*, Diderot had merely refashioned notions borrowed from the natural law tradition into an eclectic mixture that in the end was utopian in essence and unrealistic in practice. However, in his political texts from the 1770's Diderot distanced himself from natural law theory and constructed his own political theory based on the independent standard of utilitarianism. Thus Pufendorf's notion of the permanent and binding social contract endorsed

²⁵³ Ibid. 93-228.

in the *Encyclopédie* is flatly rejected on the grounds that such an arrangement is instrumental in the development of a despotic government inimical to the public interest. The concept of a binding social contract is thus dismissed because whatever legalist arguments can be found in favour, in practice it is an obstacle to the realisation of the proper goal of a government – ensuring the well-being of society. While on the one hand this move reduces the status of the foundation myth at the basis of the social contract to its proper status – that of a myth – it also points to Diderot’s rejection of all arguments for a political theory except that of public utility. In light of the ultimate goal of the state – serving the public good of society – Diderot rejects all appeals to external authorities or arguments, including those of revealed religion, legal consistency or Newtonian physico-theology. Just like his morality and civil law, Diderot’s political theory is thus ultimately utilitarian in nature.

Finally, the role of ontology in the construction of constitutional politics is largely excluding in a sense that is very similar to that displayed in the discussion on Diderot’s ethics. Thus Diderot’s materialist monism excludes both divine right and natural law as possible ways with which to advocate the institution of absolute monarchy. However, as a materialist world view does not provide any legitimate absolutes on which to base a particular political theory, the only standard by which a constitution may be evaluated is utility. The arguments by which Diderot defends his constitutional designs are not drawn from revelation or abstracting notions of nature, but from the empirical reality of daily life. Consequently, Diderot’s constitutional theory is decidedly utilitarian in nature. At the same time, the empirical arguments Diderot advances in favour of his positions are clearly drawn from the contemporary political context. The unifying thread in all these arguments is the insistence that despotic or even benignly monarchical government is a perversion of the purpose of the state and opposed to the interests of the people. Instead, the authority of the executive needed to be checked while sovereignty had to be allocated to the populace itself.

Conclusion

In overview of Diderot's political thought, it becomes clear that Jonathan Israel's characterisation of the political ideology of the 'radical' enlightenment is not entirely beside the point. Indeed, Diderot is a strong supporter of the eradication of the influence of the Church in the political realm and a passionate advocate for the implementation of universal human rights – both notions defined by Israel as belonging to the current of the 'radical' enlightenment. Although it is debatable whether Diderot's constitutional theory qualifies as 'modern democratic republicanism,' his notions of popular sovereignty and limited executive power could very well be regarded as anticipating contemporary parliamentary democracy in several respects. This conclusion does not settle the question whether the 'radical' tradition of enlightenment was indeed *the* intellectual origin of 'modern democratic republicanism' as it is entirely possible that Diderot merely reflected notions held by many other thinkers, including those not associated with 'radical' thought. Nevertheless, the identification of these ideas with Diderot does confirm that proponents of the 'radical' tradition indeed propagated these ideas.

The question how these political ideas were actually related to Diderot's ontological beliefs is more complicated to answer. The discussion of Diderot's ethics and constitutional theory has shown that the belief in a materialist monism is in itself not a basis for moral and political thought. The rejection of god and natural teleology merely causes a repudiation of contemporary arguments in favour of deriving morality and law from these ostensibly absolute authorities. The role of Diderot's ontology in his theories of ethics and politics is thus primarily excluding – his materialist monism excludes all possibility of finding absolute reference points with which to ground an abstract theory. On the basis of his ontology Diderot thus not only dismisses the use of revelation or teleological nature, he rejects all attempts to relate politics and ethics to ontology in any possible way. This latter opinion is also in complete accord with Diderot's eclectic conception of knowledge and his aversion to all forms of philosophical system building.

Having arrived at the position that ethical and political thought could in no way be based on abstract philosophical notions not grounded in reality, Diderot sets out to devise an alternative that stands firmly in empirical facts. Inspired by the empiricism that characterised his philosophy of science, Diderot designs an ethical and political theory that has utility as its only standard. This standard is to be tested only through the use of the empirically ascertained facts of reality. Conceptualised as the concept of nature, this empirical reality is to be

reflected in the ultimately artificial constructs of morality and law. Diderot thereby fashions an ethical and political theory that is utilitarian, secular, independent of any type of ontology and ultimately designed to preserve human freedom as much as possible.

At the same time, it is Diderot's contemporary social and political context that supplies the bulk of the empirical facts on the basis of which Diderot's particular political theory is constructed. It is the oppressing and despotic nature of absolutism that induces him to advocate limitation of executive power and popular sovereignty. It is the abolition of the *Parlements* that proves to him the importance of a written law code. It is his experience with censorship that makes Diderot support freedom of expression. Similarly, the grim fate of many Africans makes Diderot denounce slavery and advocate the implementation of human rights. These examples display the fact that Diderot's political writings were undeniably concerned with contemporary issues. Indeed, when one returns to Skinner's question and asks what Diderot's intention has been in writing his political texts, the inescapable conclusion must be that the main purpose of most of Diderot's political writings has been to bring these issues to the attention of the general public in order to produce a change in public opinion. The construction of a workable and coherent political and ethical theory was in this sense only a secondary objective. These conclusions apply to the *Histoire des Deux Indes* above all, but are also not out of place concerning the articles in the *Encyclopédie* or the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. Only the *Observations de Nakaz* may be conceived as a purely theoretical political text.

Returning to the conception of the enlightenment as divided by a limited number of intellectual traditions, it has become clear that a distinction ultimately based on ontological divergences as envisioned by Israel is of questionable merits. The monist materialist ontology may have led proponents of the 'radical' enlightenment to renounce traditional ways to construct an ethical and political theory, but it did not induce them to construct new ontologically based theories. Instead, as is illustrated in this discussion of Diderot's political thought, the 'radical' enlightenment rejects ontology altogether in the construction of political and ethical theory, replacing it with the standard of utilitarianism. As a consequence, the politics of the 'radical' enlightenment is not only secular; it is wholly independent of any kind of ontology. This is the reason that, following the formulation of a utilitarian and empirically based political theory by 'radical' thinkers, this political programme was ultimately adopted not only by individuals who shared the 'radical' enlightenment's monism, but also by people who had a widely differing world views including deists and even Christians. It could thus be

said that with the enlightenment – and the ‘radical’ enlightenment in particular – the bond that had existed since Plato between ontology and ethics as well as politics, was finally severed.

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