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Materialism As Critique in the French Enlightenment

By

Blanca María Missé

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

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in

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of the

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Committee in charge:

Professor Déborah Blocker, Chair
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Abstract

Early Modern French “Materialism”: A Materialist History of the Concept and a Study of Two Materialist Philosophies (La Mettrie and Diderot)

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in French with a Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

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This dissertation is a study of the materialist current of the French Enlightenment. Far from assuming that early modern materialism constituted a homogenous philosophical current, my dissertation applies the materialist method of critique to the category of “materialism” itself. I argue that “Materialism” was invented in the 18th century, and it had little to do with the simple affirmation of the primacy of matter or the reductionist “one –substance monism”, as its detractors at the time wanted the public to believe. I show that the adjective “materialist” was coined in the context of a social transformation of philosophy (a social reconfiguration of philosophical activity with the rise of the bourgeois public sphere) and in the midst of an ideological crisis of French absolutism. I argue that religious and political authorities labeled a set of public philosophical interventions that advocated for a new conception of public philosophy, an experimental and critical one, as “materialists”. Most of the thinkers which were labeled as materialists (Julien Offray La Mettrie, Denis Diderot, Claude-Hadrien Helvetius, Paul Henry Thiry D’Holbach) borrowed from the emerging field of modern science a critical method of inquiry, yet, what distinguished them particularly was that they extended this critique to moral values, metaphysical concepts and the political institutions of the regime. They also shared a commitment to an intellectual political independence from the State and to the development of the critical function of philosophy in an expanded public sphere. It was for this reason that materialism was considered morally and politically “dangerous” as a philosophy, one that needed to be repressed and persecuted. By the early 19th Century with the re-institutionalization of philosophy by the Empire materialism as a public philosophical critique was dead.

After 1758 the debate around materialism polarized the Enlightenment movement itself. Some of the key figures of the Enlightenment, like Voltaire, Jean e Rond D’Alembert or Nicolas Condorcet, which had secured for them a place in the French academy, began to distance themselves from the materialist figures and from their public positions, by defending publicly the benefits of an “enlightened monarchy” and a necessary metaphysical base for science, philosophy and morality.

In my dissertation I argue that the “radical” and “political” dimension of La

Mettrie's and Diderot's philosophy is not to be found in the proposal of a positive program of reform. From the perspective of Critical Theory, I argue with Habermas and Adorno that 18th century Materialism was rather an exploration of the new public status of philosophy and the philosophical means to achieve a popular enlightenment. Besides being the first advocates for a public education system open to all and targeted to a diversity of social needs, French materialists reflected on the form philosophical texts should produce. Philosophical form, for La Mettrie and Diderot had to necessarily appeal not only to reason but also to imagination, using fiction, and requesting from the reader an active and open interpretation in order to "enlighten" him or her in a non-deterministic way.

Dedication

To Andreu Missé, my first reader and everlasting fan

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Introduction

The French Suicide

A couple of weeks ago, while presenting his most recent book, *Le Suicide français* on the popular prime-time public TV show *On n'est pas couché*, Eric Zemmour repeatedly, through statements like “tout était social, rien n'était naturel, que tout pouvait être déconstruit, et re-construit, et qu'il n'y avait rien d'inné, d'intangible”, argued that deconstruction and materialism had brought about the decay of all French cultural and political life since 1968.¹

During the course of the debate, some interlocutors argued that the causes of the French people's growing “unhappiness” and turn to far-right wing narratives were linked to the effects of the current economic crisis and their actual material situation. Ruquier, the show's MC, confronted Zemmour stating that: “si la majorité des Français avait de quoi se nourrir comme il fallait, d'être heureux dans leur vie, si les conditions économiques leur avaient été données, alors ils ne chercheraient pas de boucs-émissaires comme vous essayez de leur faire croire.”² Zemmour responded: “ça c'est un matérialisme limité, moi je pense qu'il y a autre chose que le matériel, il y a l'esprit et l'identité,” and later in the debate he complained about the actual state of French society: “nous ne sommes plus que des atomes qui ne pensons qu'à consommer, nous ne sommes plus des membres de famille etc.”³ For Zemmour, La Mettrie, Diderot, Sade, Fourier, Marx, Deleuze, Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler or Rancière all represent a pulsion to destroy what remains of a social link and a collective “ideal.” Their thought, supposedly, eliminates everything that differentiates humans from apes, as human existence ought to be more than the sum or combination of material interests, desires, and appetites.

We can imagine what Zemmour meant when he attacked deconstruction, and, although it's not something that I'll dwell on here, it's symptomatic that for him deconstructive thought is today's materialism. I want to pay attention to his conflation of these despairingly different and far removed philosophical methods because it reveals both the social-political continuity of a recurring metaphysical anxiety in bourgeois society and a discontinuity of the materialist tradition. What I am interested in is pointing out that Zemmour's critique of “materialism” is uncannily similar to the critique the Catholic Church had of a number of 18th-century philosophers that it called “materialist” as a way of dismissing their propositions. Julien Offray de la Mettrie, Denis Diderot, Claude Adrian Helvetius and the Baron D'Hollbach were called “materialist” because they questioned the existence of God, because they challenged moral values as “natural”, and because they criticized the legitimacy of the Absolutist French political regime: this made them, in the eyes of the most powerful institution at the time, “materialist”.

As a critic of the Enlightenment, and specifically of materialism, I can't help but smile at the *effet de montage* between Zemmour's tyrade and that of the French Catholic

1 On n'est pas couché, France 2. 4 October 2014. Television.

2 On n'est pas couché, France 2. 4 October 2014. Television.

3 On n'est pas couché, France 2. 4 October 2014. Television.

clergy's fearful declaration in 1758 in the face of a rising “materialist philosophy”: “Une religion sans culte, des passions sans frein, une société sans moeurs, des lois sans autorité, plus inventées pour intimider le crime que pour inspirer la vertu; le crime même dépouillé de tout ce qui en doit donner l’horreur. Tels sont les principes et les conséquences de ces pernicieux ouvrages.”⁴

What is this pervasive materialism that for almost three centuries now has been trying to, according to Zemmour, “kill” French civilization? To answer such a question one might expect that it would be possible to pursue an “objective” study of materialism to dissipate any ideological uses made of that particular philosophy. And while I share this desire, my study of materialism very quickly was confronted by two surprising discoveries, which are today widely accepted by a set of critics who undertook this project before me. The first one is that “materialism” is not as old as philosophy or human civilization, but rather a relatively new conceptual invention, that is, it has a *history*: the word only appeared at the very end of the 17th century and was popularized in the 18th Century. Given this, the emergence of materialism was therefore contemporary to that of the Enlightenment and accompanied the development of capitalism. The second finding was that “materialism” presented a real resistance to being “objectivized” for a scientific study. This had to do with the polemical nature of the history of the term and the absence of a single, strong common thesis that could allow for a definition of materialism as a *doctrine*. Most of the authors who were labeled as “materialists” for the first time in the 18th century did not share a coherent doctrine, nor did they defend the same conception of matter, nor epistemology, nor moral values, nor political proposals. Today, not a single historian of early modern materialism can establish that there was a coherent set of positive theses that generated a solid internal coherence amongst materialists. An “objective” study of materialism was thus out of the question. Of course, not all intellectual historians of the Enlightenment and “materialism” may agree with these two claims, or discoveries that I’ve made, but those who have attempted to study materialism from a materialist perspective—Olivier Bloch, Francine Markovitz or Pierre Macherey—all do.

A plurality of materialisms

In this dissertation I argue that if there is no objective take on materialism because there is not a clear “materialist” object or corpus to inquire upon, we can outline a kind philosophical *positioning* in the public sphere which was labeled as such because it had a set of common traits. Materialism was a critical intervention through philosophical discourse in the public sphere that confronted the ideological use of reason for oppression and domination. In this sense, was considered a political danger by first the existing established political authorities (the Monarchy and the Catholic Church) and later by the new intellectual forces (the Moderate Enlightenment securing its position in the Académie, but also the press and the secula *anti-philosophe* movement).

My dissertation is not an “appeal” to materialism, but rather an attempt to understand its first early modern expression, and if my approach can be clearly distinguished from Zemmour’s, it also needs to be separated from any attempt, like the

⁴ Procès verbal de l’Assemblée Générale du Clergé en l’Année 1758. 88

ones that Todorov or Israel have recently put forward, to find anything in the Enlightenment that could help us save or restore our modern democracy or any “European identity”.⁵

If one looks carefully at the philosophies of La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and D’Holbach (leaving aside other authors who were often also considered materialist like Jean Meslier, Marquis D’Argens, Nicolas Boulanger or Marquis de Sade), it is apparent that there is not a unified doctrine or even a set of common theses, but rather elements of a common practice of philosophy in the public sphere in a particular historical period of deep crisis of the traditional ideological institutions. In recent decades, most of the historians of materialism have accepted a plurality of materialisms, while the Christian apologetics and the 19th-century academic discourse saw a united “materialist” cabal. Yet they have all interpreted and managed this plurality with more or less what amounts to discomfort and anxiety.

The historians who have been able to cohabit peacefully with his materialist plurality and to explore its underground tensions are unfortunately a minority. The tendency has been, marked by Jonathan Israel’s studies, to reduce materialism to a unity, or at least to establish an internal coherence to it. In his well-known trilogy (*Radical Enlightenment*, *Enlightenment Contested* and *Democratic Enlightenment*) Israel proposes to establish not a plurality of voices, but the formation of two opposing tendencies, whose struggle structures the early modern and modern intellectual history. He divides thus the Enlightenment into two currents, the moderate and the radical, with the purpose of focusing on the understudied radical current. Israel equates radical Enlightenment with materialism, Spinozism, republicanism and atheism and defines it as a metaphysical *doctrine*: the elaboration of versions of the “one-substance doctrine” developed, according to him, by Spinoza.⁶ All of these diverse concepts are for him equivalents. Yet “Radical Enlightenment”, for Israel, was not only a philosophical doctrine but also a political program, a “set of basic principles that can be summed up concisely as: democracy; racial and sexual equality; individual liberty of lifestyle; full freedom of thought, expression, and the press; eradication of religious authority from the legislative process and education; and full separation of church and state.”⁷ In *Democratic Enlightenment* (2011), the most elaborated version of his thesis, he argued that the Enlightenment movement “was a wide range of opinion, certainly, but it was not a spectrum but rather a set of rifts between closely interactive competitors readily classifiable as a *single narrative*. Indeed, with its two main contending streams—moderate and radical—the Enlightenment can only be understood as a single narrative”⁸ [emphasis added]. The irony here is that Israel’s recuperation of a lost and radical current

5 Tzvetan Todorov, *L'Esprit des Lumières* (Paris: Laffont, 2006).

6 “As regards the Radical Enlightenment, there was only one lasting philosophical basis—one-substance doctrine denying there is any divine governance of the world. Lots of thinkers shared or participated in such a vision, and helped shape it.” Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 12.

7 Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010) vii-viii.

8 Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 6.

of Enlightenment, and his reappraisal of materialism along the way, argued through such grand unifying and idealizing claims are what allow ‘intellectuals’ like Zemmour to declare that yesterday’s materialism is today’s deconstruction, and that both are the demise of French Civilization. This was clearly not Israel’s intention to produce such an insult, but his ideological construction of an idealized “radical Enlightenment” created the conditions for such a rebuttal.

In a very different and more rigorous fashion, Italian critic Paolo Quintili’s work on materialism is just another example of this tendency of interpretation to recreate a unity of materialist thought:

“Or, les tendances radicales du matérialisme, pris dans ce dernier sens d’Henry More, vont procéder au XVIIIe siècle avec *la rigueur et conséquence dans la direction moniste* ici analysée, qui tend à *unifier* la matière, l’esprit et leur lois. C’est une direction qui sera indiquée par Hobbes et Spinoza. La substance du monde est *unique*, c’est Dieu même, et celui-ci est, ou peut coïncider avec la matière du monde naturel. La signification contemporaine du mot “matérialisme” se définit de façon stable à partir du moment où les *ambiguïtés* de la diatribe Cudworth-Boyle-More, seront surmontées par les La Mettrie, Meslier, Diderot et D’Holbach (...) à travers une négation explicite de l’autonomie ontologique et méthodologique de la *res cogitans* à l’égard du domaine de la *res extensa* et de ses lois”⁹ [emphasis added].

For Quintili and Israel there is a progressive consolidation of the meaning of materialism throughout the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, and its history is to be seen as the result of the intellectual resolution of philosophical conundrums and the establishment of a coherent and unified narrative that somehow happened on its own. Their project is to establish the existence of materialism as a solid object of study, as a coherent tendency, whose internal dynamic, as it is grounded on an ontological unity (or monism), is to clarify any “ambiguities” or confusions”. For other critics, like Charles Wolfe or Jean-Claude Bourdin, there was a plurality of materialisms, yet their critical gesture consisted in reducing materialism to a set of common theses. In his recent article “Materialism” for the *Routledge Companion to Eighteenth Century Philosophy* (2014), Wolfe, adopting an analytical method, argued that there was a certain coherence of materialism throughout history, defined by three main theses: “(1) Everything that exists is material, or the product of interaction between or relations between material entities,” “(2) every mental phenomenon is just a corporeal (or sometimes just a “physical”) phenomenon or process, or reducible to it, or a consequence thereof” and finally “(3) In conjunction with (1) and (2), in fact guiding and motivating these positions, many philosophers were committed to a synergistic, anti-foundationalist form of philosophical reductionism, both at the explanatory and at the ontological levels.”¹⁰ Wolfe argued that

⁹ Paolo Quintili, *Matérialismes et Lumières: philosophies de la vie, autour de Diderot et de quelques autres, 1706-1789* (Paris: H. Champion, 2009) 176-177.

¹⁰ Charles Wolfe, “Materialism,” *The Routledge Companion to Eighteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Aaron Garrett (London: Routledge, 2014) 99, 100, 105.

this coherence could also be traced back to early modern materialism, even if to a lesser degree.¹¹

There is a difficulty in what I call the intellectualist or idealist history of philosophy when it comes to dealing with conflicting definitions or instabilities of meaning, which has to do with an inherent pulsion towards definition and systematization within the field, but also with an unconscious conception of the history of philosophy and its methodology of study. This form of reductive intellectual historiography, one entailing a psychological or teleological conception of the history of philosophy, assumed the Enlightenment intellectual plurality as a confusion that ought to be progressively streamlined and clarified by the very unfolding of philosophy's own rational progress. For more than a century it was the model of intellectual history, and even though neither Israel, Quintili, or Wolfe claim it directly, they have neither questioned it nor broken with it.

I argue, alongside other historians like Olivier Bloch, that this plurality of *matérialismes*, could be seen as a starting point to problematize the very notion of “materialism”. In this dissertation I attempt to recover a materialist history of materialism itself. As philosopher Didier Gil wrote in the Preface to Bloch's seminal *Matière à histoires* (1992):

"Ecrire l'histoire des matérialistes exclut ici toute construction a priori de l'objet et toute représentation qui unifierait abstraitement les occurrences sous la forme de systèmes. C'est à ce prix qu'on pourra apprendre, notamment, que le matérialisme n'est pas exclusivement ni même nécessairement là où, pour la part d'historiographie du matérialisme qu'il assume, certain matérialisme marxiste l'a cherché ni tel l'a trouvé. (...) Le concept de matière censé servir de bannière ne laisse pas d'engendrer des embarras chaque fois que l'occasion semble se présenter d'en faire le repère d'un discours, le mot lui-même étant bien souvent absent. Plus qu'un fait il y a là une règle: la matière d'une histoire du matérialisme est aporétique. (...) Il n'y a pas en effet de topique matérialiste dont on puisse dire qu'elle se transmette globalement, invariablement, et dans une transparence à travers l'histoire."¹²

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Materialisms but Never Dared to Ask (in Five Chapters)

In my dissertation I explain that this unity of “materialism” as a doctrine is not to be found in the 18th century itself, as Israel and others claimed, but rather in the history of the disputes around materialism after the French Revolution. My first chapter takes on

11 “If materialism was thus an ongoing, if intermittent, tradition I will nevertheless suggest that its distinctively eighteenth-century persona possessed three essential traits, some of which distinguish it from later versions familiar to us in philosophical discourse: it was a thoroughgoing naturalism, seeking to inscribe our knowledge of the mind (or soul), self, morals and beyond into a sphere compatible with experimental evidence; it was a particularly embodied set of theories, relying on (and conversely, nourishing) biomedical debates; yet it was also, frequently, more speculative than not, extending a kind of Lucretian “science-fiction” approach to the understanding of Nature of the sort more commonly associated with Campanella or Cyrano de Bergerac.” Wolfe, “Materialism” 93.

12 Olivier Bloch, *Matière à histoires* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1992) 14-15.

the challenge of writing a materialist history of materialisms and thus of the birth of the Enlightenment. I do so by borrowing a method proposed by two Marxist critics: Pierre Macherey and Max Horkheimer. Macherey's proposal to develop an *histoire-situation* of philosophical currents and ideals, in opposition to monumental and idealistic ones, is in fact an invitation for historians of philosophy to look at the articulation of philosophy with its material reality, its context of emergence and also the kind of intervention philosophy attempted to accomplish in its time. From the perspective of a *histoire-situation*, the Enlightenment as a whole should then, I argue, be understood as the culmination of a crisis of philosophy, as a moment of redefinition of the meaning of philosophical practice begun in the 17th century when philosophy progressively dissociated itself from university institutions that were controlled by the Church.

The social and historical situation of Enlightenment philosophy shows that this new philosophy was not only distinct due to its content and method, nor due to its proclaimed independence, but that it was also the opening of a new possibility: through this plurality of materialisms a new social function for philosophy—a critical function—emerged. I argue, with Horkheimer, that the French 18th century was the moment of a change in the social function of philosophy with the emergence of materialism, as a current of the Enlightenment, as a new critical philosophy. I also discuss the controversial claim Horkheimer made regarding early modern materialism: that this philosophy became "political". I want to question the concrete social and historical impact of the materialist intervention beyond its romanticization or demonization in the periods after the Revolution. I also counter the claims of the revisionist current of historiography of the French Revolution (Furet and Baker) who sought to depoliticize the nature of Enlightenment philosophy. As I argue, the deep ideological crisis of the French *Ancient Régime* in the middle of the 18th century gave a new political dimension to philosophy because it found a new public with the rise of a separate urban intellectual sphere. In this new social context a new kind of radical philosophy, based on experimental scientific methods, began to question moral values, the existence of God, the legitimacy and foundations of political institutions, and the need for a liberation of humanity. This philosophy was perceived as dangerous, unacceptable, and thus labeled as "materialist." The very emergence of "materialism" as an intellectual current to be repressed was, in my view, nothing but a symptom of its perceived political character. Lefebvre also situated the birth of materialism in a moment of crisis of philosophy as a moment of expansion of its scientific ambitions and social goals. Materialism was for him not to be defined as a particular doctrine, but as a set of positions regarding the three major rearticulations of philosophy: philosophy as a social practice (its new sociological dimension), philosophy and science (with the emergence of variants of natural philosophy and experimental one), and the new relation of philosophy with its public or audience, with the structural transformation that the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere represented.

The second part of my first chapter analyzes in detail how the crisis of philosophy was also a crisis of its *social subject*, which moved from being embodied in the university cleric to being appropriated by some sectors of the aristocracy, often discontented ones, in the emergence of a new social identity. The philosopher figure becomes "socialized" in the midst of the 18th century as in the public sphere philosophical activity is less and less associated with the expression of a class status. With the emergence of the figure of the "philosopher as Enlightener," Philosophy becomes defined by a mission or a function in

the public sphere. The sociological reduction of the Enlightenment philosopher to a “bourgeois” subject, as well as the idea of the rise of the self-sufficient author-figure have, as I show, been discredited by historiographical research. My argument is that despite the diversity of social origins of the new intelligentsia, there is a social construction of the Enlightenment philosopher based upon a public denial of class origins, and economic relations of dependency which nonetheless exist and constrain the activity of writers. In this context, my chapter ends by proposing to read Dumarsais's "Le philosophe" as the first articulation of "materialism", in his ambiguous formula of "peuple philosophique".

I devote my whole second chapter to analyze the concept and reality of an emerging “bourgeois public sphere” as it was first outlined by Habermas. I consider this change to be a material condition for the formulation of a new philosophy known as the “Enlightenment movement”. I examine the reception and use of the public sphere thesis in historians, literary critics and social science theorists by dwelling on what I consider to be the fundamental contradictions of that public sphere: its supposed “apolitical” character and its supposed “autonomy”. Against these two claims of a certain scholarship I argue, borrowing Bourdieu’s concept of the political economy in regards to the book production and circulation, that a materialist analysis of the public sphere unveils the inherently political character of the public sphere debates in early modern France and locates the threatened autonomy of the intellectual field.

I also pay attention to the changing Enlightenment institutions of the production of knowledge. One of the key institutions to understand the social nature and divisions of the Enlightenment movement was the academic system and royal patronage. The Académie Française and the Académie des Sciences were two mediations between the monarchy and the public sphere, and a way for existent political authority to gain intellectual authority. The role of Académies, which I argue where the “political blind spot” of Enlightenment philosophy has been widely ignored by the historians of philosophy: they unveiled the problematic nature of its portrayal as a universal and disembodied intellectual force, while it provided the material standpoint to gain such a legitimization from a scientific level.

My second chapter also examines a split use of reason between the public and the private sphere. I study the public use of reason that has been theorized by scholarship as the configuration of a “public opinion”, functioning as an “anonymous tribunal of reason,” potentially accessible to anyone and erasing all social and political determinations. I argue this use of reason found itself confronted to a set of social contradictions: reason seemed to follow a different logic in the private and public sphere, as in the latter it could not appear as expressing a private interest nor as being coextensive of a coherent practice. This idealized vision of a formally universal public opinion revealed to be itself an ideological production, a self-idealization of the public sphere. Such a mystification was singled out by 18th materialist philosophers themselves (like Diderot, Helvetius or La Mettrie) before been criticized by Marxist scholars—Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt—as being formal and thus falsely inclusionary.¹³

The critique and the visibilization of the limits of “public opinion” were questioned during the 18th century itself, and at the core of the “birth” of materialism. As

13 Oskar Negt, and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1993).

a public exercise of philosophy, materialism presented a resistance to both limits of the public sphere: its elision and thus erasure of the people, and the negation of a critical philosophical practice. I locate the publication of Helvetius *De l'Esprit* in 1758 as the moment of constitution, in the public sphere, of “materialism” as a kind of philosophy that presented political dangers. The anti-materialist pamphlets borrowed a rhetoric of epidemic and contagion to refer to the dangers of materialist philosophy, thus making evident that it was a political threat. Materialist philosophy, because of its extension of the experimental method of critique to moral and political ideas and its unveiling of the mechanisms of the discourses of power, was perceived as breaking the “social bond”. If extended to the people, the fear was that it would break the spell of ideology, and destabilize the cover of the extra-economic means of coercion maintaining the class structure of exploitation of the *Ancien Régime*. Yet “Materialism” became not the natural turn of Enlightenment philosophy as a whole, but the point of rupture in the newly born philosophical movement. My study of this division dispels the myth of a united Enlightenment, to borrow Gay's formula, “party of humanity”.¹⁴

My third chapter covers the history of materialism from the emergence of the word in the 18th century to its almost simultaneous transformation into a doctrine and erasure throughout the 19th century. I return to the plurality of materialisms in this chapter. By focusing on the emergence of the materialist epithet I intend to show its inherently polemical nature, where its semantics was reduced to its pragmatics as a social signifier of a philosophy that was both weak, wrong and dangerous. The “invention” of materialism is thus relativized not by the idea that some particular theses were sustained before French 18th century philosophers, but by the fact that there had been other “underground” philosophical currents which preceded, for example, libertinism, which was also a challenge to the monopoly of philosophy by the Church and an open invitation not to follow neither its moral nor its intellectual rules.

I chose not to begin my study of materialism by the linguistic and etymological study which I undertake in the third chapter in order to prevent a fetichisation or reification of language and first provide a social context to the linguistic configuration and evolution of “materialism”. This allowed me to relativize the importance of “matter” in materialism, and to show that the choice of that qualifier over others (“atheist”, “heretic”, “impious” or “libertine”) was the result of a strategic choice which did not flow from a purely intellectual analysis of the targeted philosophies. It was rather an attempt to label and identify those philosophies in a delegitimizing manner. By reviewing the ways “materialist” authors responded to the insult I provide additional grounds for the need to critically question the very category of “materialism”. Through this deconstruction of materialism I pose a series of questions: should we abandon the idea of any materialist tradition? Should we continue to use the “materialist” label? If so, how?

The second part of my third chapter deals with the way Enlightenment materialism was erased and rejected with the French Revolution and the suppression of a semi-autonomous intellectual sphere in the course of 19th Century. I argue that the re-institutionalization of philosophy in the early 19th century transformed materialism into a doctrine and into the opposite other of “rational philosophy,” condemning it to an underground existence. This reification of materialism as a reductionist doctrine has proved to be the most efficient weapon to disarm it and to deactivate its political

14 Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Knopf, 1966) 3.

efficacy.

Let's return to Zemmour's obsession with the "decline" of French civilization and the need to reinvigorate the intellectual and ideological ground of the modern nation-state. The proclamation of a deep political crisis of what we call the "Western democracies" and the increased discontent of its citizens—in particular its youth—is not only expressed by Zemmour: it is a growing concern of all the political elites. It is both interesting and troubling that Zemmour's neo-fascist attack on post-modernism because the latter threatens the modern bourgeois "democratic ideal", is analogous to a concern amongst certain academics who feel their own civilization is under attack by the critical standpoints of Women's Studies, Ethnic studies and "Marxist" critiques of the Enlightenment. Jonathan Israel's whole Enlightenment project needs to be read as one of these reactions against post-structuralism, as for him there is

"a growing tendency, from the 1970s onwards, to contest the validity of the 'Enlightenment's' ideals and see its laying the intellectual foundations of modernity in a negative rather than a positive light has, at the same time, caused an escalating 'crisis of the Enlightenment' in historical and philosophical studies. In particular, Postmodernist thinkers have argued that its abstract universalism was ultimately destructive, that the relentless rationalism, concern with perfecting humanity, and universalism of what they often disparagingly called 'the Enlightenment project' was responsible for the organized mass violence of the later French Revolution and the still greater horrors perpetrated by imperialism, Communism, Fascism, and Nazism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries."¹⁵

For Israel, if everyone were to read his books and thus read the "true" Enlightenment, the "radical" one, all of the doubts, skepticism and growing critique about the Enlightenment generated by post-structuralist would vanish: "if one is talking "Radical Enlightenment," then the entire Postmodernist, Postcolonialist, Post-structuralist, and Darntonian critique falls to the ground because this is where the answers to their partially correct (but too narrow) critique essentially lie."¹⁶

The paradox of Israel's position, which I would like to highlight here, is that Israel proposed a restoration of the *ideals* of the Enlightenment in opposition to the postmodernist *critique*. He defended the Radical Enlightenment which was, as he acknowledges, a form of critique, by appealing to what I consider to be the opposite logic of materialist critique—that of making universal claims and defending moral and political ideals. He for instance writes:

"The inevitable recoil from Postmodernist "relativism" will presumably strengthen the appeal, at least in some quarters, of the Radical Enlightenment's claim that the improvement of human life inescapably involves emancipating men from the collective force of autocracy,

15 Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 1.

16 Jonathan Israel, "Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67.3 (2006) 525. The quote continues: "With this key we can also see more clearly, here together with the Postmodernists and Postcolonialists, how it came about that liberty, intellectual freedom, and constitutionalism were in many or most cases actually set back, rather than advanced in eighteenth-century Europe, and still more in the European colonial empires, despite the tremendous escalation in the rhetoric of "enlightenment," "liberty," and "reason." This is indeed a dramatic change in the situation regarding Enlightenment ideas as they appeared until recently."

intolerance, and prejudiced thinking, and establishing a predominantly secular morality, no less than it involves promoting the *ideals* of equality (sexual and racial), democracy, individual liberty, and a comprehensive toleration. Indeed, recent developments on all continents seem likely to lend new weight to the radical philosophes' argument that the moral basis of their *theorized* egalitarianism, democracy, toleration, and individual freedom, despite the arguments of the Postmodernists (which by no means lack weight in certain contexts), is after all concretely superior in terms of reason and moral equity ... —that is in ethical and political as well as social terms.”¹⁷ [emphasis added]

According to Israel, the one-substance radical Enlightenment produced the “ideal” of freedom of equality, or even further, it “theorized” modern democracy, becoming the theory of a future revolutionary practice. I am not exaggerating: for Israel “materialist” authors defined the “package” of modern democracy, and we should be grateful to them.¹⁸ My dissertation implicitly acknowledges that some of the critiques of bourgeois democracy and French republican ideas developed by Marxist, Feminist and Post-colonial are not only consistent but were already present in the Enlightenment materialist current. Contrary to Israel’s perspective on the Radical Enlightenment, I argue it was a radical one precisely because it refused to construe new “ideals” and proposed instead to sustain a negative force of public political critique grounded on experimental science.

In the fourth and fifth chapters of my dissertation, I look closely at two of the key “radical” and “materialist” philosophies, those of La Mettrie and Diderot. I argue that my understanding of these two materialist interventions in the public sphere show that Israel’s attempt to rehabilitate the “radical Enlightenment” current starts off on the wrong foot and is condemned to failure. Israel’s transformation of materialism into a unified narrative only mirrors the reaction by the established authorities in the 18th century to new critical uses of philosophy. Israel, much like the Christian apologetic discourse, reduces “materialism” to something it never was: a positive doctrine. By making materialism a more “progressive” or even an anti-colonial doctrine, Israel does not do justice to the philosophical projects he claims to represent. Thus after having deconstructed the supposed unity and internal coherence of the category of “materialism” from a linguistic point of view, I look at two particular materialisms as they are articulated in the texts.

In my fourth chapter the first claim I develop regarding La Mettrie, as I also do in my chapter on Diderot, is that materialism was neither a “monism” nor any kind of ontological doctrine. In each case there was a singular and particular development of a critical and experimental philosophy. Both authors shared the project of developing, out of Bacon’s natural philosophy as well as out of some particular sciences, a new “experimental” or “natural” philosophy. They did so by establishing a close dialogue

17 Israel, “Enlightenment!” 524.

18 “By 1789, radical thought and its social and legal goals had indeed come to form a powerful rival ‘package logic’—equality, democracy, freedom of the individual, freedom of thought and expression, and a comprehensive religious toleration—that could be proclaimed as a clearly formulated package of basic human rights.” Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 12.

with different scientific practices: anatomy, medicine and physiology for La Mettrie; biology and chemistry for Diderot. La Mettrie found in medicine an equivalent of what Diderot found in chemistry and his study of trades and manual work: a link to a scientific practice which exceeded its pure scientificity and provided a larger social framework for understanding philosophy. In La Mettrie's case, he borrowed from medicine its project of being a healing therapeutic practice. In Diderot's work, he articulated from the practice of the chemist and the laborer the problematic of the social utility of philosophy and its pedagogical role in articulating a diversity of languages and knowledges, and in enabling conversations between diverse sciences, arts and trades which were separated and isolated in the public sphere.

In my chapter on La Mettrie I argue that the very classification of philosophies according to ontological claims (materialist vs idealists), even though it was outlined as such by Wolff in 1732, was not developed until the 19th century. The singularity of La Mettrie's and Diderot's philosophies is that they refused any metaphysical foundation: they refused to be "monisms" and by that to belong to any ready-made philosophical category. This refusal is what ultimately makes them both rightly share the characterization of "materialist" and not, as my whole dissertation argues, as two proponents of a particular tradition.

I also argue that their materialisms exceeded the framework of any empiricism and rational psychology precisely because of the fact that they raised a particular awareness of the kind of social and political intervention philosophy could have in the public sphere. Along with most of their Enlightenment peers, both authors shared a profound interest in the new scientific discoveries and practices, which in their case led them to question and reformulate the social function of philosophy, and not merely "update" philosophy's physics. The key difference among thinkers like La Mettrie, Diderot, and Helvetius, which were labeled as "materialists", and others like Maupertuis or Voltaire (who also had contact and interest in the new developing sciences) or Condillac and Buffon (who also developed a version of "natural history") who were not labeled systematically as materialists, was not simply one of epistemology. Materialists indeed developed a unique understanding of the necessary collaboration of philosophy and science, versions of experimental philosophy, but in each case this new formulation of philosophy went beyond properly established scientific problems and transformed itself into a power of social and political critique.

In the case of La Mettrie, the social and political critique took the form of a natural history of moral and political institutions and also of the discourses which legitimated them. This is the case of the *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (1745), and also of the *Homme-Machine* (1747), the *Discours sur le Bonheur* (1748) and the *Discours Préliminaire* (1750), all of which I read closely in my fourth chapter. In the case of Diderot, this critique was more polymorphous: it was carried through many *Encyclopedie* articles and many dialogues and essays, yet some of his more interesting texts remained unpublished. In my chapter on Diderot, I chose not to focus on the most obviously "political" texts which have already been widely studied (like the *Encyclopedie* articles on "Natural Right", "Authority" and "Sovereignty") in order to bring to light another dimension of Diderot's political philosophy: its awareness of the new public status of discourse and knowledge, the proposal of an unprecedented articulation of intellectual and manual labor and a discussion of philosophy's social utility.

A second important line of argument I develop in these two last chapters is implicitly a problematization of how “radical” philosophy could contribute to political change or “enlightenment”. I argue that the political dimension of their philosophy does not lie in the proposal of a new political program, as Israel argued. For him, Radical Enlightenment was progressive because it provided the theory for a necessary practice, and the revolution was the encounter of these two:

“It was because social grievance was widespread that radical ideas proved able to mobilize support and gain an important field of action, an opportunity widened by the fact that one-substance monism yielded a metaphysics and moral philosophy apparently more consistent and free of logical difficulties than any philosophical alternative. While philosophies reconciling reason with religious authority, or, like Hobbes’s naturalism, with absolutism, or, like Hume’s scepticism, combining a pruned-back reason with tradition, inevitably incurred more difficulties than *la philosophie moderne* in looking consistent and in combining principles with sweeping reform.”¹⁹

For Israel, the greatness of materialism is that it permitted the formulation of a “package” of simple ideas that could mobilize people and unleash the tremendous human energy and illusion necessary to accomplish such a fantastic change like that of overthrowing a despotic regime. However, if one looks, as I argue, at La Mettrie’s and Diderot’s philosophies, one cannot find this conception of conscious radicalization or what at the time was called “enlightenment”. On the contrary, they thought of philosophy as a *reflective mediation* which had nothing to do with a *theory for practice*. La Mettrie, for example, argued that the role of philosophy was not only to undo the existing metaphysical conceptions and ideals (God, the Good, the Bad, Virtue, Vice, Law) but to prevent the creation of new ones through philosophical discourse and by reifying or idealizing nature as a more “radical” or progressive source of legitimacy. This is why, in his *Discours Preliminaire*, La Mettrie shifted the focus of his critique from Christian morality and Scholastic Metaphysics to the growing popularity of natural law theories. Both authors were far from mystifying the powers of philosophy. Each, in their own way, thought that social Enlightenment began by not only establishing a public system of education and increasing literacy, but also by learning how to read critically and imaginatively. The *Encyclopédie* was maybe the most popular project of this kind of “materialist enlightenment”. Implicitly referencing Spinoza, Diderot and La Mettrie argued that the way one learns to read a philosophical text critically could be the beginning of a new way of relating to other discourses and practices (religion, law, morals) which were already interpreting the world. The concern they both shared was not just how to make concrete changes in social policy, but more modestly and distinctively what form should the philosophical text propose or produce in order to incite this critical interpretation and not just appeal to the reader’s submission.

In their common rejection of philosophical systems and the traditional forms of philosophical writing, their philosophy was experimental first in the domain of *form* in the Adornian sense: they were concerned with the way ideas are organized, articulated and presented to the reader. My reading this far of La Mettrie and Diderot have made clear to me that the critical force of their texts, and of 18th century materialism at

¹⁹ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 14.

large, lies mainly in the quest for form and the necessary collaboration of what we today call “philosophy” and “literature”. This is -I now see, and will argue in my book- one of the sites for Adorno’s emphasis on and theorization of form. In order to produce a true “enlightenment”, which for materialists was necessarily a radical and political one, La Mettrie and Diderot had to break with traditional forms of philosophical writing and exposition -like the system or the classical treatise. Philosophy’s form had to necessarily appeal not only to reason but also more importantly to imagination through fiction, and requesting from the reader an active and open interpretation in order to “illuminate” him or her in a non-deterministic way. I thus also propose an Adornian reading of this aspect of early modern materialism, which was focused on the concern around textual form and interpretation far beyond the assertion of a normative content.

Chapter 1. The Emergence of “Materialism” and the Crisis of Philosophy in Early Modern France.

The major narratives of the advent of the “Age of Reason” and “Enlightenment” have for a long time suggested that the intellectual revolution that happened in the 17th-18th century was one about the *content* or the *method* of philosophy. This vision implies remaining in a purely “conceptual” history of philosophy, or rather assuming that intellectual history must just be the flat story of *who* said *what*, of authorship and message. Yet because ideas come printed in a text, this does not mean they can be simply abstracted and detached from the cultural, economic, and political gestures that brought them to light and gave them a meaning. In this work I would like to seize the historical importance of the rise of materialism in the 18th century both as a symptom of the crisis of philosophy and as a radical alternative for modern philosophy (an alternative that will be erased through the subsequent re-institutionalization of philosophy in the 19th century because of its political implications). And I want to do so by proposing a different kind of history a materialist one, borrowing Macherey’s exhortation to produce an “histoire situation” of philosophy.

I propose to see the emergence of a new philosophy as the result of a crisis of philosophy that had deep social roots: the transformation of philosophy from a corporation and a monopolic use of metaphysical reason, to the emergence of a secular field which allowed questioning metaphysics as the foundations of rationality, the transformation of the social subject of philosophy which becomes more socially diverse and challenges the association of philosophical practice to any social status.

Nonetheless, enlightenment philosophy was not only “the result” of a social transformation, as it offered the possibility of a new public practice of critique, and thus opened a debate of the scope and form of the social function of philosophy. Materialism was identified as a particular public use of reason, embracing resolutely a new critical function of philosophy, targeting the ideological foundations of the regime and presenting itself as a universal emancipatory project. I read in Dumarsais’s “Le Philosophe” (1742) the first attempt to question the social status of philosophical discourse and the social scope of the Enlightenment: was the distinction of the philosopher and the people to be an insurmountable one? Should philosophy desire the reconciliation of these two seemingly incompatible social categories?

1. The Enlightenment as a Crisis of Philosophy: Ideology and Critique

Reflection on the Historiography of Philosophy

In “Entre la philosophie et l’histoire: l’histoire de la philosophie” Macherey exposes the paradoxical ahistorical nature of the most frequent and widespread histories of philosophy, which he defines as the *histoire-monument* and the *histoire-spéculation*. The *histoire-monument*, whose modern version was created throughout the

Enlightenment and institutionalized after the French Revolution (see the inscription in the Panthéon: "Aux grands hommes, la patrie reconnaissante"), treats intellectual history as if it "avait accumulé un trésor, qu'elle ne devait pas cesser d'enrichir."²⁰ This conception of intellectual history as a collection of major works that needs to be preserved, cherished, and admired is based upon a "*philosophie idéale du musée imaginaire*," and can be understood as analogous to the museification that art and literature suffered throughout the rise of the bourgeois state after the Revolution.²¹ The paradox of such a history is that it erases the historicity of its own practice of selection and evaluation, to the point that philosophical works can only become part of the official canon at the expense of losing their own historicity. Once incorporated into the history-museum of ideas "leur substance est peut-être une histoire, au sens très particulier d'une histoire à raconter, mais elle serait tout sauf de l'histoire: tout au plus elle serait une histoire faite, déjà faite, donc le contraire d'une histoire se faisant ou à faire"²²

It seems that fortunately this monumental conception of the history of philosophy was partially abandoned by the scholarly and intellectual circles in the 20th century in benefit of another conception: *l'histoire-spéculation*. *L'histoire-spéculation*, according to Macherey, is shaped by either a Kantian or a Hegelian model and aims to be a "History of Philosophy" written in capital letters, one organized from an "objective" point of view: that of the truth of Philosophy, which is also the point of view of the bourgeois State. This conception of philosophy is closely associated with the rise of the bourgeois university in the 19th century, when philosophy became, once again, a professional activity linked to state institutions and the function of instruction.²³

The *histoire-spéculation* is the result of a modern "objectivation" of philosophy linked to the emergence of a new kind of state that needs to consolidate its symbolic power. In the course of this process philosophy was constituted as a defined corpus of knowledge, authors and concepts to be taught, ensuring the monopoly of symbolic capital by a selected few and its reproduction.²⁴

20 Pierre Macherey, *Histoires de dinosaure* (Paris: P.U.F, 1999) 288.

21 Macherey, *Histoires de dinosaure* 289.

22 Macherey, *Histoires de dinosaure* 289.

23 For a critical account of the institutionalization of philosophy throughout the 19th century in France and its subordination to the State, see Patrice Vermeren, *Victor Cousin: le jeu de la philosophie et de l'Etat* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

24 On constitution of philosophy professeurs as republican elites, see Fabiani: on the structuring of the republican professors and academics as a social "cast", see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Paris: Editions De Minuit, 1984) 53-168. Bourdieu however, not only developed a sociological analysis of the constitution of an intellectual elite and its mechanisms of social reproduction, but also analyzed the particular role of the new institutionalized philosophy in the ideological conformation of the republican intellectual elite through the elaboration of two main notions: the "*racisme de l'intelligence*", that is to say the socio-political use of "reason" to justify class oppression; and the "*raison scholastique*" that reproduces the social gap between those who know and those who do not and need to "learn.". Such a reproduction is achieved through the education system, and in particular through the "teaching" of philosophy. His initial confrontation and dialogue with philosophy started in the 1970 with a delimitation and critique of Sartre and phenomenology in *Le sens pratique*, and later with Heidegger's philosophy as the political problems of the adoption of a purely theoretical position in the social world. Throughout the 80s and early 90s, he re-approached philosophy's intellectual method and constitution of epistemological subjects which he systematized in *Méditations Pascaliennes* (Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1997). On the notion of "*racisme de l'intelligence*," see Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie* (Paris: Editions De Minuit, 2002) 264-268. On the notion of "*raison scholastique*" see Pierre Bourdieu,

The form of such a history is a totalizing one, which produces a system or a clearly delineated path of the advancement of “Reason” (with its ups and downs) which associates to each historical period a stage of development or regression of reason. This now common type of history of philosophy though, remains a logo-centric one, where philosophy is equated to a metaphysical conception of “Reason”, and does not acknowledge the existence of an outside (or inner) historical reality, much less a social or material one.

In both the cases of the *histoire-monument* and *histoire-spéculation*, the history of philosophy ends up being “idealist,” as it is reduced to a history of important philosophers and their ideas—and their reciprocal connections and articulations—which is predicated upon the refusal to consider the historical conditions of production and reproduction. Authors and philosophical movements that are considered minor or not rational enough are simply excluded from these histories—as has been the case first with the so-called “*libertins*” and later with materialist philosophy. In such histories the nature of philosophy is never questioned, but rather presented as a natural and self-evident object which remains unchanged throughout time: philosophy is never considered as an existing social practice or as fulfilling a social function. It is a history-container: it starts in Greek Antiquity and prolongs itself as a preserving channel of the philosophical objects or movement throughout time.

It is by no accident that most obvious example of such idealized and objectified history is to be found in the now traditional intellectual histories of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, both as a movement and a moment, has managed to produce a conception of philosophy that erases its own historicity and has shaped our ways of writing its history (through the monumental and speculative types). This moment has been deliberately constructed by some of its players and most of its historians as the *tabula rasa* of modern philosophy, as the new beginning of philosophy, the “*point zéro*”, which, like any origin, erases any past or causes and places itself outside of history. The construction of the moment of Enlightenment as the culmination of the “Age of Reason”, slowly growing out of the 17th century and overcoming the “Age of Darkness” disregards the fact that the medieval period was also an age of philosophy, where philosophy was equally at the center of the institutions of knowledge and had a prominent place in the Catholic university. It was only that it was a different kind of philosophy. The fact that we do not consider scholastic philosophy *real* philosophy anymore (because of its subordination to theology) is the result of the victory of a certain conception of the Enlightenment over another one. And I am not deploring this victory, just making it explicit; one of the major problems of the historiography of the Enlightenment has been to present this crisis and redefinition of philosophy through the lens of simple abstractions, the combat of Philosophy against Theology, of Reason against Faith, etc. This presupposes something very dangerous: that all philosophers always speak with the same voice, that philosophy itself is not by nature a site of intellectual and political

Meditations Pascaliennes 20-43; Pierre Macherey, "Bourdieu critique de la 'raison scolastique': le cas de la lecture littéraire," *Bourdieu et la littérature*, ed. Martin Jean-Pierre (Nantes: Cécile Defaut, 2010) 113-141; And Jacques sBouveresse, "Bourdieu, Pascal, la philosophie et la critique de l'illusion scolastique," *La Philosophie de la connaissance au Collège de France*. Web. 1 August 2014. Jacques Ranciere also criticized the use of philosophy in the reproduction of intellectual domination and inequalities from a different perspective. Jacques *Le maître ignorant* (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

struggle. This is one of the reasons why the history of scholastic philosophy (the one practiced in the Universities) as well as its contributions to the Enlightenment (what some critics have called the “Theological Enlightenment”) has been largely neglected.²⁵

The Enlightenment has indeed been theorized as an intellectual revolution that was the culmination of a “chain of revolutions” produced outside historical and social reality, a decontextualized “birth of reason.” And this narrative is not just a product of the intellectual historians but also that of many of the Enlightenment philosophers themselves: for example, Fontenelle or D’Alembert.²⁶ The latter clearly summarized this conception of an chain of intellectual revolutions which spread from one discipline to another and with no apparent external cause, naturally concluding in a new philosophy in the *Discours Préliminaire* to the *Encyclopédie*.²⁷

Against these conceptions of the history of philosophy, I would like to develop a version of the *histoire-situation* Macherey proposed for the rise of modern philosophy by focusing on the so-called “materialist” current. I contend that this current was a fundamental contribution to the understanding of the social challenges of the new 18th-century philosophy. The *histoire-situation* genealogy (in which Macherey places Althusser, Bourdieu, or Foucault) sees philosophy not just as a matter of content or “message” but as an *act* or a *social practice*.

Instead of being the history of a clear-cut object called philosophy, the *histoire-situation* is a history of the philosophical (*le philosophique*) that does not presuppose a continuity of what constituted philosophy but rather lies in a constant interrogation of the kinds of discourses, methods and practices which have been qualified as philosophical across the different periods. I would argue that the *histoire-situation* is itself a “materialist” kind of history because it socially situates the philosophical act by exploring what makes it philosophical and without precluding a-priori what philosophy could be. It explores the immanent potentialities of philosophy in a given social and political context:

"Il n'y a pas d'histoire de la philosophie authentique qui ne se proposerait aussi, et même avant tout, comme objectif de définir les conditions dans lesquelles se déroule concrètement le travail de la pensée philosophique,

25 See Jeffrey Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin De Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-century France* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2010).

26 See Jean Dagen. “La philosophie selon Fontenelle” *Revue Fontenelle* 2 (2005): 7-23 .

27 For D’Alembert, This “*révolution de l’esprit*” started in the 16th Century: it was first a revolution in the science of history, and later a revolution in the “*belles lettres*” and the “*beaux-arts*”. It was only in the second 17th century that it became a scientific and philosophical revolution: that of the development of Newtonian mechanics and the “new philosophy”. The revolution of philosophy, which was started by Bacon, was inspired by a return to the principles of Ancient philosophy: “L’univers et les réflexions sont le premier livre des vrais philosophes, et les anciens l’avaient sans doute étudié: il était donc nécessaire de faire comme eux.” D’Alembert *Discours Préliminaire de l’Encyclopedie* (Paris: Delagrave, 1893) 94. D’Alembert points out that in the order of these successive intellectual revolutions, the science of reason has therefore been the last moment and the achievement of this succession of revolutions, because according to D’Alembert the “regeneration” of reason was slower than the regeneration of memory and of imagination. But only reason, as the chief faculty, can synthesize and totalize, that is, become aware of this series of grandiose transformations and generalize them. This new beginning of philosophy is in fact a clear redefinition of philosophy where philosophy becomes more than a discipline: it becomes a new method of thinking and a new and more scientific use of reason. In the *Elements de philosophie*, D’Alembert states “la philosophie n’est autre chose que l’application de la raison aux différents objets sur lesquels elle peut s’exercer,” which can cover almost any object, excepted one: theology and religion. D’Alembert, *Oeuvres Philosophiques* 2:20.

travail qui fait d'elle, non le résultat ou le résidu d'une histoire qui lui demeurerait extérieure, mais la production historique d'une pensée en acte, qui s'avère, au présent, dans les limites concrètes imposées à son opération effective."²⁸

The *histoire-situation* of philosophy is not simply the social history or sociology of philosophy; that is to say, the empirical investigation of who and how philosophy was done. It departs from the latter but goes beyond and interrogates the social function of philosophy in a given society,]; that is to say, it interrogates its historical political dimension so often disregarded by intellectual history.

Enlightenment as a Crisis of the Social Function of Philosophy

Against the implicit assumption of a continuity of “philosophy” as a practice across centuries found in the majority of histories of the discipline, I will argue that in the 18th century there was a qualitative rupture or change not only in the content of philosophy but also in its social and ideological function. This change was only possible because of a broader context of social and political crisis of the political institutions of French absolutism, that is to say, a crisis of the usefulness and legitimacy of the dominant ideology. I propose re-considering the Enlightenment in its original social and political context of emergence and development, situating its discourse of “awakening” in a period marked by crisis and instability, and therefore as emerging also from an internal crisis of philosophy: that of scholasticism, the existing monopolistic institution of philosophy and its dogma. This crisis of philosophy made explicit by the Enlightenment is also to be considered a “historical” one because it has not yet been fully resolved because it is not only related to the question of intellectual independence, political freedom, and religious tolerance but also to the emergence of commercial and industrial capitalism. In this context I argue that early modern materialism (or materialist position) was a resolute attempt to resist the impulse towards a univocal and peaceful resolution of this crisis, and I propose a more radical mission for philosophy, or maybe more modestly to show the fact that there is no real resolution of those contradictions.

Edelstein recently declared that “the Enlightenment constituted a *prise*, not a *crise de conscience*”.²⁹ With this statement Edelstein means that the Enlightenment philosophers were conscious actors very much aware of the effect of their discourses and public practices. There is no doubt about that. No one can question that Enlightenment philosophy was striving to become an emancipatory process of intellectual self-awareness of both the existing elite and the new group of intellectuals. This strive for lucidity is very clear for example in D’Alembert’s *Essai sur les éléments de philosophie*:

“Tout siècle qui pense bien ou mal, pourvu qu’il croye penser, et qu’il pense autrement que le siècle qui la précédé, se pare du titre de

28 Macherey, *Histoires de dinosaure* 300.

29 Daniel Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: a Genealogy* 13. “The Enlightenment was never just the sum of its parts: instead of an aggregate of ideas, actions and events, it provided a matrix in which ideas, actions and events acquired a new meaning. To partake in the Enlightenment, it was not enough to simply pen a materialist treatise or frequent a salon: it took the awareness, by oneself of others, that a particular action belonged to a set of practices considered ‘enlightened.’” Edelstein, *The Enlightenment* 13.

philosophe; comme on a souvent honoré du titre de sages ceux qui n'ont eu d'autre mérite que de contredire leurs contemporains. Notre siècle s'est donc appelé par excellence le siècle de la philosophie; plusieurs écrivains lui en ont donné le nom, persuadés qu'il en rejailliroit quelque éclat sur eux; d'autres lui ont refusé cette gloire dans l'impuissance de la partager."³⁰

Yet by also subsuming the whole Enlightenment under a movement of conscious awakening, Edelstein merges his voice with that of D'Alembert and Voltaire, who attempted to portray their own philosophical endeavor as the triumphant breakthrough of reason, and thus loses the possibility of a critical standpoint. The narratives of the *philosophes* were not descriptive; they had a significant performative dimension as they attempted to shape the field and the role of philosophers in one direction. As we will see, this enlightening practice of critique was meant for new social subjects, for new social groups in an emerging public sphere.

The "new" philosophy was only possible because there was a crisis of the old philosophical paradigm—which was also an ideological one—that established the cohesion between the spiritual and political power, wherein philosophy and the Catholic university played a key role. As Ribard noted:

"Entre 1600, et plus encore 1650, et la fin de l'Ancien Régime, en France, il n'y a ni représentation uniforme de la philosophie, ni consensus, même relatif, sur une figure sociale qui pourrait actualiser le type idéal du philosophe. Plus précisément, pendant cette période, les individus et les groupes qui prétendent incarner la forme moderne du philosophe sont trop différents pour qu'on puisse parvenir à une stabilisation: il n'y a pas grand-chose de commun entre un professeur de philosophie jésuite, un avocat cartésien, un épicurien bel esprit et un Encyclopédiste, hormis la revendication de la même appellation."³¹

This paradigm was embedded in a central institution: the university. The crisis of Catholic theology and its corollary, scholastic philosophy, which began in the 17th Century, permitted a fracture to forming the vertical organization of knowledge which the Enlightenment would continue to exacerbate. The emerging public sphere became a space for the formulation of a new role for philosophy. Philosophy was surely radically changed in its intellectual *content* in the 18th century, but this was because it changed in its *social practice and location*. It moved from the Catholic university to the Académie, the salons, the cafés, and also the book market.

I strongly believe that to frame the Enlightenment initially in terms of a *crisis* of

30 D'Alembert, *Oeuvres* 2: 9. But see also Voltaire in his *Lettres Philosophiques* and later in *Le siècle de Louis XIV* presents a similar triumphalist vision of the emergence of a new philosophy: "Le quatrième siècle est celui qu'on nomme le siècle de Louis XIV ; et c'est peut-être celui des quatre qui approche le plus de la perfection. Enrichi des découvertes des trois autres, il a plus fait en certains genres que les trois ensemble. Tous les arts, à la vérité, n'ont point été poussés plus loin que sous les Médicis, sous les Auguste et les Alexandre ; mais la raison humaine en général s'est perfectionnée. La saine philosophie n'a été connue que dans ce temps; et il est vrai de dire qu'à commencer depuis les dernières années du cardinal de Richelieu, jusqu'à celles qui ont suivi la mort de Louis XIV, il s'est fait dans nos arts, dans nos esprits, dans nos mœurs, comme dans notre gouvernement, une révolution générale qui doit servir de marque éternelle à la véritable gloire de notre patrie." Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes* 14: 156.

31 Dinah Ribard, "Philosophe ou écrivain ? Problèmes de délimitation entre histoire littéraire et histoire de la philosophie en France, 1650-1850," *Annales. Histoire, Science Sociales* 55:2 (2000): 357-358.

philosophy, leaving aside the celebrated (and celebratory!) narrative of the intellectual “revolution” is a more useful starting point from which to grasp the radicalism of the Enlightenment movement. This will allow us to perceive and understand the rise of materialism as the most radical expression of this crisis that I insist occurred within the changes that took place in the social sphere.

As Koselleck pointed out in *Crisis and Critique* (1988), the meaning of crisis is not originally the falling apart of things. Crisis, for Koselleck, is a deep moment of reflection and reformulation of the already existing things as they have changed and take a new shape. The critic reminded us that “crisis” in Greek means to differentiate, select, judge, and decide.³² He also notes a very important change in the meaning of the concept precisely in the 18th century, which is linked to the formulation of a new philosophy of history. Against the representation of a stable social world as organized and maintained by a vertical “natural order” embodied in the King and the Church, where crisis would represent an ultimate state of resolution and final judgment (that is the ultimate perfection of that order), Koselleck noticed in the Enlightenment the emergence of a post-theological sense of crisis, where it becomes a “permanent concept of history.” Crisis was not the end of “a chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required,” nor one leading to a “unique or final point, after which the quality of history will be changed forever” as medical and Christian theology prognoses. Crisis became a “permanent or conditional category,” an “historically immanent transitional phase.”³³ What Koselleck does not note, however, are two key factors: first, the prolonged social and economic instability of the late 17th and 18th centuries in France produced by the development of commercial capitalism and the recurrent crisis it began to create (in particular those associated with speculation over the price of grains and raw material); and, second, the constitution of an urban public bourgeois sphere separate from the monarchical sphere of power. The initial awakening of the Enlightenment, then, was not a triumphalist awakening to the powers of reason or philosophy, it was the *prise de conscience* of crisis as a state of being, a crisis which had no resolution in the horizon but which required of the philosopher a constant practice of critique, that is of constant evaluation, judgment, negation, and redefinition. A new conception of philosophy, that of *philosophy as critique*, was born.

A double proof of this re-evaluation of philosophy can be found by looking at the dictionary entries for the term “*philosophe*” in 18th-century France.³⁴ The meanings of

32 Reinhart Koselleck, *Crisis and Critique* 103. “Crisis meant discrimination and dispute, but also decision, in the sense of final judgment or appraisal, which today falls into the category of criticism.” Koselleck, *Crisis and Critique* 103.

33 Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67.2 (2006): 370-372.

34 The definition of *philosophe* in the *Dictionnaire Universel* of La Furetière of 1690 reads: “Philosophe: Qui aime la sagesse, qui raisonne juste sur les causes naturelles, et sur la conduite des moeurs. Les anciens Philosophes ont été de diverses sectes, les Epicuriens, Stoiciens, Platoniciens, Péripatéticiens, Pyrrhoniens, etc. Socrate était un philosophe Moral, Aristote un Philosophe Logicien etc. Quand on cite absolument le Philosophe, on entend parler d’Aristote.”

“Philosophe se dit au Collège du Professeur qui enseigne la Logique, la Morale, la Physique et Métaphysique. On le dit aussi de l’écolier qui étudie sous lui. Ce jeune homme a fait les Humanités, il est maintenant Philosophe.”

“Philosophe se dit aussi d’un esprit élevé au dessus des autres, qui est guéri de la préoccupation, des erreurs populaires, et des vanités du monde. Diogène était un vrai Philosophe. Les Philosophes Chrétiens sont beaucoup au dessus des Payens.

“Philosophe se dit quelquefois, ironiquement, d’un homme bourru, crotté, incivil, qui n’au aucun égard aux devoirs et aux bienfaisances de la société civile.

the term *philosophe* are multiple and with no apparent coherence. The controversy over philosophy was also at the core of the dictionaries' definitional impulse, which “more frequently serve as part of a polemic opposing philosophes and anti-philosophes than as a confirmation of the acceptance of different sense variants.”³⁵

As Bourdieu pointed out, the dispute and struggle for definition of a cultural practice is a feature of any *field* by distinction with the *corporatio* where the criteria are set a priori: “La lutte pour le monopole du mode de production culturelle légitime prend inévitablement la forme d'un conflit de définition, au sens propre du terme, dans lequel chacun vise à imposer les limites du champ les plus favorable à ses intérêts”.³⁶ What had changed with the emergence of a separate public sphere, which Bourdieu conceptualized as a field, was not just the existing definition of philosophy, but the rules of the game which defined what philosophy was and should be. The definition of what philosophy ought to be was to be founded on the defeat and exclusion of other practices. In the case of the early modern philosophical field, the struggle for the definition of philosophy was polarized between two different social practices of philosophy:

"Ces luttes, comme le montrent ces dictionnaires, mettent en place des pôles qui se définissent mutuellement et servent de référence pour le classement des philosophes: d'un côté le pôle professionnel-professoral, de l'autre le pôle non professoral — ce qui ne signifie pas nécessairement qu'il rassemble des amateurs, mais signale que l'accent n'est pas mis sur la

"Philosophe se dit particulièrement des Chimistes, qui s'appliquent ce nom par préférence à tous les autres." La Furetiere, *Dictionnaire*, 3:114. And let's look now at the 1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*: "PHILOSOPHE. s. m. Celuy qui s'applique à l'estude des Sciences, & qui cherche à connoistre les effets par leurs causes & par leurs principes. Pythagore est le premier d'entre les Grecs à qui on a donné le nom de Philosophe. les anciens Philosophes. les Philosophes Grecs. les différentes sectes des Philosophes. les Philosophes payens. Philosophe Stoïcien. Philosophe Platonicien. Philosophe Cynique. Philosophe Moral. Philosophe Chymique. un grand Philosophe. un celebre Philosophe. un des premiers Philosophes de son temps.

On appelle aussi, Philosophe, Un homme sage qui mene une vie tranquille & retirée, hors de l'embarras des affaires. C'est un homme qui vit en Philosophe, en vray Philosophe. il a quitté sa Charge pour vivre dans la retraite, & mener une vie de Philosophe.

Il se dit aussi quelque fois absolument, d'Un homme, qui par libertinage d'esprit se met au dessus des devoirs, & des obligations ordinaires de la vie civile. C'est un homme qui ne se refuse rien, qui ne se contraint sur rien, & qui mene une vie de Philosophe.

Dans les Colleges on appelle, Philosophe, Un Escolier qui estude ou en Logique ou en Physique.

Les Chymistes se donnent le nom de Philosophe par excellence. Ainsi en terme de Chymie on dit, L'or des Philosophes, la poudre des Philosophes, pour dire, L'or des Chymistes, la poudre des Chymistes." *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* (1694) 2:229.

The first striking thing when one looks at these definitions is not only the multiplicity of meanings of the term *philosophe* (as it refers not only to the “one that loves wisdom”, in its etymological sense), but also the very diversified range of social practices: the *philosophe* can be either a teacher in the College or university; he can be a dilettante aristocrat living semi-withdrawn from public life; he can also be a chemist, or a scientist. And indeed each one of these philosophers refers to very different philosophy: the *philosophie* of the collège is traditionally divided in four parts as established by medieval scholastics (Logic, Morals, Metaphysics and Physics); the *philosophie* of the *chimiste* refers to a knowledge that today would qualify as “scientific”, regarding of the components of matter and its inner properties; the “libertin” has a radically different practice of philosophy, which is not institutionalized, nor has a predefined content, for it is rather an expression of his independent subjectivity as a gentleman. By the end of the 17th century and with the rise of the “new philosophy”, a new meaning and practice of the *philosophe* emerged, where Newton and other scientists (*physiciens, géomètres*) will be considered as philosophers because of their scientific or rational study of nature.

35 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Making sense in life and literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press) 135.

36 Pierre Bourdieu, “Le champ littéraire,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 89 (1991) 13.

philosophie comme métier. C'est l'opposition de ces deux pôles qui délimite l'espace propre de la philosophie et le cadre de ses questions au cours de la période. Cette polarisation, d'autre part, tend à regrouper des manières de penser et des doctrines très différentes, voire incompatibles. Ce qui se conserve dans le temps, c'est la structure de la confrontation, qui à chaque étape constitue deux camps opposés, 'nouveau' et 'tradition', quelle que soit la diversité réelle de leurs représentants."³⁷

The "new philosophy" was in fact the name given to a variety of social practices of philosophy that shared distinctive non-professional and non-professorial features, but which were heterogeneous. Behind the instability of the meaning of the word *philosophe* we have therefore contending attempts to define philosophy which originated from different social actors and social practices. In this sense we could consider it initially a negative category.³⁸

A striking feature when looking at the multiplicity of meanings of the term *philosophe* is the mention of a social "challenge" presented by philosophy through the figure of the *libertin* (which will happen again in the figure of the materialist): the figure of the philosopher as a challenger of social and moral duties in society, as a figure that performs itself as one not respecting social norms and even laws appears in both dictionaries. The 1740 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* adds one adjective to the *libertin* philosopher's insubordination: he is an "homme qui par libertinage se met au-dessus des devoirs, et des obligations ordinaires de la vie civile et chrétienne" [emphasis added].³⁹ That is to say that starting in 1740 this new figure of the free-thinker appears as a public enemy of religion. Interestingly, this definition of the philosopher as free thinker, critical of "civil and Christian life" is maintained in the 1762 edition but disappears from the edition published at the end of the French Revolution in 1798, suggesting that by the time of the *Directoire* (1795-1799) the disturbing figure of the philosopher had been neutralized, and philosophy was being put back in the path of re-institutionalization and assimilation into the new political and economic regime.⁴⁰

If the 18th century appeared to its contemporary educated elite as the "century of

37 Ribard, "Philosophe ou écrivain" 361.

38 "C'est en tout cas ce que montre l'usage récurrent, tout au long des deux siècles, d'expressions comme « nouvelle philosophie » ou « nouveaux philosophes », chez les partisans comme chez les adversaires de ces manières nouvelles de faire de la philosophie. De fait, ces formules ne désignent pas une doctrine spécifique, mais le pôle non professoral dont elles masquent la diversité. Elles changent d'objet avec le temps, renvoyant selon les moments à Descartes ou à Newton, puis aux Encyclopédistes ou aux matérialistes. Plus bizarrement, au même moment, la « nouvelle philosophie » peut être rapportée tout ensemble à Descartes et à Gassendi, comme dans l'exemple donné par Richelet, ou encore à Descartes, à Gassendi et au P. Maignan, religieux qui n'écrit pourtant qu'en latin et sur des sujets techniques." Ribard, "Écrivain ou philosophe" 361.

39 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 3rd edition 2: 327. The dictionary of Jean-François Féraud of 1787-88 presents a similar portrayal of the philosophe: "On prend le mot de Philosophie en particulier, tantôt pour la Métaphysique, tantôt pour la Morale. On l'emploie souvent aussi pour signifier une certaine élévation et fermeté d'esprit par laquelle on se met au-dessus des accidents de la vie et des préjugés, des fausses opinions du monde." *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* 3:153-154.

40 The definition of the philosopher as a *chimiste* or a scientist had disappeared by the 1835 edition, when it seems that philosophy and science had been once again redefined. Their paths had been separated and chemistry became an independent science through the process of its institutionalization as a separate scientific practice in the academic field. See Bensaude-Vincent 92-104.

philosophy” and not as the century of science, colonial expansion, political instability, or recurrent commercial and food crisis, it was because philosophy changed its social and ideological function: what had been before only the science of legitimation had acquired a new critical function. It was initially subordinated to theology, justifying the natural order of things founded on metaphysical principles (those of Christian religion) and theorizing the “reason of State” which legitimized the absolutist regime, that is having fundamentally a function of symbolic legitimation of the existing political authority. However, in the mid-18th century, philosophy, and, more particularly, materialism acquired a new critical dimension which contested absolutism and the existing political relations. This conception of “critical philosophy” will be later theorized as “criticism” or “critical theory” by the Frankfurt School, in particular by Horkheimer and Adorno. As Horkheimer pointed out in his seminal article “The Social Function of Philosophy” (1939), for critical philosophy the “order of life, with its hierarchies of values, is itself a problem for philosophy”.⁴¹ For Horkheimer:

“The chief aim of such criticism is to prevent mankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members. Man must be made to see the relationship between his activities and what is achieved thereby, between his particular existence and the general life of society, between his everyday projects and the great ideas in which he acknowledges, Philosophy exposes the contradiction in which man is entangled in so far as he must attach himself to isolated ideas and concepts in everyday life.”⁴²

The critical function of philosophy, for Horkheimer was prompted first by a perceived “crisis” between the individual existence and the “general life of society”, which is to be read as a contrast between the philosopher relatively improved social status when confronted to the vast misery and oppression of the French “Tiers-Etat”. But it secondly deepened by the apparent insufficiency of philosophical activity (which reveals itself to be inefficient) and of the the formulation of mere “isolated ideas”, as the isolation of ideas seems to reinforce the alienation of everyday life. What Horkheimer is suggesting, is then a different meaning of critique than the Kantian one, which was self-contained in the world of reason. Here the critical function of philosophy is embedded with social experience.

However, the affirmation that “philosophy becomes politics” is another aspect of the Horkheimer’s attempt to modulate a logical transition from “philosophical critique” to a “critical function” of philosophy which appeared as a transitional practice to political action, or prompting one. Here Horkheimer was elaborating on the marxist critique of philosophy, as it was elaborated by Marx in his critique of Feuerbach, an elaboration that despite its attractiveness does not correspond to the critical function philosophy did have in early Modern France. That was a function of critique which attempted to grapple the very social contradictions or “contrasts” Horkheimer outlined and which can be more clearly explained by analysing the rise of the bourgeois public sphere, as I propose to do in my following chapter

41 Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 261.

42 Horkheimer 264-265.

Of course this conception of philosophy was not fully theorized by the Enlightenment participants themselves, but I argue that it clearly manifests itself in the French 18th century, and in particular through the materialist current. Yet I would not go as far as to assert, as Horkheimer did, that “the opposition of philosophy to reality arises from its principles”,⁴³ or that this “tension between philosophy and reality” is a “tendency embodied in philosophy”,⁴⁴ which implies that “real” philosophy is always critical or that its critical function is to be thought of as an inherent property. I think there is in such an affirmation a partial mystification of philosophy, as an ever progressive stance. For how to explain then the historical role of philosophy of maintaining and legitimizing the existing organization of society and oppressive regimes throughout most of its historical existence? The most obvious examples are the role of scholasticism throughout the Middle Ages (from the 12th through the 17th centuries) as a legitimizing force of the oppressive feudal society or the collaboration of some prominent philosophers like Heidegger with the Nazi regime, examples that should be enough to dispel any naive illusions about the intrinsic powers of philosophy.⁴⁵ Otherwise, and in order not to negate reality, one would have to take the radical position of arguing that Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Carl Schmitt, or Heidegger were not philosophers, of substituting a normative deliberation of what philosophy ought to be instead of the scientific description of what philosophy historically has been.

Therefore, one must not consider this change from the legitimizing to the critical function of philosophy as a simple matter of historical evolution or stages, but rather see the Enlightenment as the product of a political struggle to ensure the emergence of a public intellectual sphere, relatively autonomous from the Church and the State. And as any intellectual movement that battles and is imbricated with social reality, the Enlightenment was an heterogeneous one.

“Philosophy becomes politics”?

Any materialist account of the emergence of philosophy as a separate practice sees it necessarily as the result of a social division of labor which allows the separation of productive from symbolic and/or intellectual labor. Marxist theory has to clarify this labor process in greater detail. Behind the common understanding of the separation of manual from intellectual labor a sort of trauma, there is still debate regarding the either necessarily or circumstantially alienated character of philosophy.

In his important essay *Le Droit à la ville* (1968) Lefebvre presents this separation as a contradictory one, for it is both problematic and productive.⁴⁶ The French Marxist retraced the birth of philosophy through the emergence of the city, with its concentration of intellectual activity, the creation of a material but also symbolic space separate from

43 Horkheimer 257.

44 Horkheimer 260.

45 On Heidegger’s relationship with Nazism, see Emmanuel Faye, Heidegger, L’introduction Du Nazisme Dans La Philosophie: Autour Des Séminaires Inédits De 1933-1935, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005).

46 Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit À La Ville*, 1968, introd. Laurence Le Costes (Paris: Ellipses, 2009) 64-78.

the spaces of material production. This separation is of course an amputation and a loss, but it is a productive wound which stimulates the necessity of an intellectual activity (philosophy) that seeks precisely to recreate the lost totality. From the city it was possible to produce a vision or reconstruction of the totality of society and its necessary schemes of interpretation, which is lacking in the new fragmentary organization of social activity. And this speculative activity of giving a meaning to the different and separate aspects of human activity, connecting the pieces (from science, to esthetics, going through morality, politics and metaphysics) was to be referred to as philosophy.

On the other hand, in *Intellectual and Manual labor: A Critique of Epistemology* (1978) Sohn-Rethel links the emergence of philosophy to the development of “societies of appropriation” based on exchange and money as an early form of commodity fetishism.⁴⁷ That is to say, according to Sohn-Rethel philosophy appears more concretely in class-based societies which separate the sphere of material production from that of intellectual elaboration. In his view, throughout history, philosophy has been an alienated and alienating practice because of the effects of exchange relations in a society where manual labor is systematically separated and subordinated to intellectual labor, and where the intellectual producer is separated from the social totality, thus producing a philosophy which reflects this alienation.⁴⁸

However, for Horkheimer, the social function of philosophy does not flow directly or mechanically from the existing division of labor like a natural supuration. Of course it is framed by this existing social division but it is always the result of a political determination. In the end it has to do not with the existence of social contradictions but with the political attitude the philosopher takes in relation to those contradictions. The choice between assigning either a critical or legitimizing function to philosophy is always *political*, and it is also always in the last instance and despite many determinations, a *choice*. In an alienated society not all philosophy has to be alienating, nor will all philosophy have an emancipatory character in an emancipated society.

For Horkheimer the critical function of philosophy is a political function which is not only a structural tendency or potentiality embodied in philosophy itself but also one enabled in specific historical circumstances as it emerges when “the basic problems of societal life” do not find a “temporary practical solution.” This was very much the case in 18th-century France.⁴⁹ Horkheimer asserted that this critical function has some limits as it cannot per se change the existing social configuration. As a general rule, philosophy

47 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1978).

48 Sohn-Rethel saw in the Enlightenment—and particularly in Kant’s philosophy—the ultimate form of intellectual alienation as his exploration of the conditions of knowledge and his “critique” of the powers of reasons is anything but materialist: because of the isolation of the intellectual from the sphere of production, he misses the main condition for the production of knowledge: the existing social division of labor and its mediation through exchange. Sohn-Rethel has been criticized by other Marxists for equating the forms of fetishism around the money form which emerged in Antiquity with the particular commodity fetishism produced by industrial capitalism, a methodological mistake which has to do with his emphasis on exchange and circulation and his contournement of the contradictions inherent to the process of production. For a critique of Sohn-Rethel from this perspective, see David Black *The Philosophical Roots of Anti-Capitalism* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2005) 1-44; and Anselm Jappe, “Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of ‘Real Abstraction’”, *Historical Materialism* 21:1, 2013: 3-14.

49 Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* 261.

cannot replace politics. Yet what is interesting is that Horkheimer presented the French Enlightenment as an exception which confirms this rule: philosophy has a critical role, but it cannot be a substitute for political action. He asserted that in Enlightenment France, exceptionally, “philosophy itself becomes politics” because philosophy attacked “the Church hierarchy” and the “inhuman judicial system”.⁵⁰ This claim that French Enlightenment as had, as a whole, a critical function vis-à-vis the dominant ideology, has to do with the role he saw in what Horkheimer identified as the materialist current of the Enlightenment.⁵¹

Yet this assertion that the Enlightenment is the moment when philosophy becomes political, is by no means a self-evident one. To restate such a thing today is even more difficult as it necessitates that one address decades of revisionist scholarship against the traditional Marxist understanding of the Enlightenment. The question of the political character of early modern philosophy deserves a deeper consideration on two levels: first a discussion regarding which are the *theoretical* grounds for philosophy, in general, to be considered “political” (as it is not a necessary nor natural transition from being “critical”); and, second, an analysis of the specific *historical* circumstances under which one could assert that philosophy has had a political effect.

Regarding the theoretical grounds for considering the political character of philosophy, I would like to make two points. First it is important to clarify that to affirm that philosophy had or could have a political character or dimension does not mean to assert that Enlightenment philosophers thought of their own activity as an intrinsically political one, that is, as a substitute or new equivalent for politics. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nor does it mean that philosophy was the code name for politics, even if some philosophers did consciously pursue political goals on some occasions. Asserting the political character of philosophy means that philosophical activity was contending with political stakes impossible for their participants to avoid. Philosophy as a social practice has to be considered as somehow always overdetermined by the political stakes, meanings, and functions a given society places in it, regardless of the intentions of its participants.

The second point is that one of the reasons this question is more difficult to deal with regarding the Enlightenment is that it is a challenge to determine, or at least circumscribe, what could have been the political stakes of philosophy in a society so different from ours, as was the end of the *Ancien Régime*. And this difficulty has been further increased, and not mitigated, by the revisionist scholarship on the Enlightenment—influenced, amongst others, by Furet amongst others—which has sought to depoliticize the stakes of critical philosophy by making them foreign to the contemporary mind and separate from any meaningful social struggles. Scholars who managed to depoliticize the stakes of Enlightenment philosophy in its time did not do so by producing a credible historical account of the political irrelevance of philosophy—

50 Horkheimer 271.

51 Regarding Horkheimer’s view on the Enlightenment, I think his first formulation (1925-1935) and his emphasis on the French Enlightenment (before *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the reduction of the Enlightenment to Kant) is the most interesting one. See John Abromeit, “A Materialist Interpretation of the History of Modern Philosophy,” *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) 85-140; and Peter Stirk, “A History of Bourgeois Society,” *Horkheimer: A New Interpretation* (Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) 14-36.

which would be pretty difficult—nor by presenting a more compelling explanation of the French 18th century and the role of philosophy in it. They did so by establishing a double epistemological break, or rather a “wall”, between philosophy and politics. The first “wall” is one that states that politics in Early Modern France are too complex for the average mind to understand, that the historical distance makes them so foreign to the present reader that what used to be political is no longer recognizable. This historicist claim has been used against the Marxist view of the Enlightenment to qualify it with supreme injure: that it is anachronistic because it proposes a conception of the political (rooted in class struggle) supposedly out of sync with the historical object.⁵² The second “wall” is that historians have separated the “political” from the “social” and the “economic,” placed in an virtual autonomous and abstracted sphere, which in return had to be embodied somewhere, so it was pushed back into “social and cultural practices” (Chartier) or “political languages and cultures” (Baker).

In *Inventing the French Revolution* (1990) Baker proposes dealing with the “ideological origins” of the French Revolution where ideology is reduced to a “politics of language” (following Pocock’s idea), rejecting any “sociology of ideas” or any “notion of ideology as the mere reflection of some more objective or real interests of social groups or classes.”⁵³ Following Furet’s precept of the need to “redécouvrir l’analyse du politique comme tel,”⁵⁴ Baker not only separates “the political” from the social but also criticizes any notion that the politics of the early modern period could be readily comprehensible the contemporary reader. In his critique of Mornet's work (*Les origines intellectuelles de la révolution Française*, 1933) Baker points that what the latter is "missing in [his] formulation—or more properly precluded by it- is exactly the sense of politics as constituted within a field of discourse, and of political language as elaborated in the course of political action".⁵⁵ Because Mornet does not reconstruct the “political culture” and the “political language” of the time and instead, projects an anachronistic view of what the revolution is into the past—falling into the trap of the origins denounced also by Chartier⁵⁶—Mornet missed what Baker considers to be the main debates, that is, those

52 In “A New Political Culture” Chartier developed a similar argument. Chartier “A New Political Culture,” *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* 136-168. For a very good response to Chartier, see William Beik, “La participation politique du menu peuple dans la France Moderne”, *Pouvoirs, contestations et comportements dans l’Europe moderne*, ed. Jean-Pierre Poussou and Alain Tallon (Paris: PUPS, 2005) 43-60 .

53 Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 24.

54 François Furet, *La Révolution Française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

55 Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* 24.

56 See Roger Chartier “The Chimera of Origins”, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* 4-10. Chartier appealed to Foucault to argue that such a category implies a “linearity of the course of history, justifying a never-ending search of the beginnings” which ends up “annulling the originality of the event as already present before it happens.” It further creates an hermeneutical closing of history as it assumes “that every historical moment is a homogeneous totality endowed with an ideal and unique meaning present in each of the realities that make up and express that whole.” Chartier, *The Cultural Origins* 4. Against this totalizing paradigm, which according to Chartier leads to a unique and teleological interpretation of events, the French historian proposes—by tracing the *cultural* origins of the Revolution—embracing the “genealogical” or “archaeological” analysis which assumes a radical discontinuity of history and focusing not on ideas but on “forms of sociability, means of communication and educational processes.” Chartier, *The Cultural Origins* 6.

around constitutionalism.⁵⁷

The question here is not to figure out which interpretation of the revolution is the right one as much as to identify a trend of historiography, which under the auspices of rejecting any “chimera of the origins” refuses to set any beginning in history, any continuity or form of causality, thus defying our common patterns of understanding.⁵⁸ Such a *poiesis* of history, to use Ranciere’s terminology, inserts a radical alterity between us and the past, between the historian and its public or readership, between our conception of the political and the historian’s. The *poiesis* functions in such a way that we are obliged to believe the historian’s view of what “political” meant at a given time, on what was political and what was not, putting solely in their hands the keys of the door to our common past.

Yet this particular historical *poiesis*, is not only a problem of hierarchy of knowledges, perpetuation of symbolic domination and violation of the basis of any democratic practice of culture. It goes beyond this. It is also implicitly a political manipulation of the past: emptied of its real and authentic political meaning, Enlightenment philosophy has become an empty signifier upon which historians, literary critics, and all sort of humanities and social sciences scholars project their own vision of what politics is and ought to be. And because this important issue is never up for discussion, a particular conception of the political is always transmitted through the different narratives of the Enlightenment, a conception which have little to do with the movement itself. The Enlightenment was a moment of open debate and dispute about the political with a plurality of voices, a *plurality* and *polemics* historians tend to erase.

So while pretending to open the gates of the authentic world, neither Furet, nor Chartier nor Baker explained or justified what they considered to be “political” in the first place. Baker for example, precluded this important discussion by asserting from the beginning of his introduction that by “politics” he meant: “an activity through which individuals and groups in any society, articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another, the political culture may be understood as the set of discourses and practices characterizing that activity in any given community”.⁵⁹ Baker further concluded that “political authority is essentially a matter of linguistic authority” and the French Revolution, as Sewell saw it, was “an evolving counterpoint of linguistic claims”.⁶⁰

Baker’s reductionism of the political world to linguistic games (and the overall “linguistic turn” in scholarship) has been recently criticized by Sewell, who stated that “the fact that all human activities are structured by and bring into play linguistic or

57 Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* 24. As Baker pointed out, “we should aim ... to identify a field of political discourse, a set of linguistic patterns and relationships that defined possible actions and utterances and gave them meaning. We need, in short, to reconstitute the political culture within which the creation of the revolutionary language of 1789 became possible.” Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* 24.

58 For a critique of the concept of anachronism, see Jacques Rancière, “Le concept d’anachronisme et la vérité de l’historien”. *L’Inactuel* 6 (1996):53-68; and for a critique of historicist epistemologies see Jacques Rancière *Les Noms De L’histoire: Essai De Poétique Du Savoir* (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 1992).

59 Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* xii.

60 William H. Sewell, “A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution”, *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, ed. Gary Kates (London: Routledge, 1998) 147.

paralinguistic meanings does not imply that those activities are nothing but the production of meaning, or that linguistic conceptual vocabulary can describe them adequately”.⁶¹ More interestingly, Sewell’s remarkable critique of Baker’s linguistic reductionism unearths another feature of this particular historical *poiesis*: the fact that the first reduction of “the complexities of social life to language” permits and obscures a second, which is more problematic: the reduction of political text “to their study of their logic,” of their literality.⁶² A reading that not by accident is always that of a unified voice. These readings, “rather than bringing to the surface the partially suppressed multiplicity of voices that always coexist in a text, they try to discern each text’s central tendency, its essential intellectual argument.”⁶³ If everything,—or the most things—is in the text, and little or nothing to be sought outside of it, then, paradoxically, the text becomes poorer, not richer, through this isolation. The more society is reduced to language, the poorer language becomes in return, for it is this embedding of texts in the social, cultural and political life which exceeds it which gives them their richness, depth and complexity. By detaching a text from its social and political context (i.e. its readership), from the possibility of it having a meaning beyond its literal expression, it is deprived of its supposedly internal and self-contained meaning.

Yet the literary practice of Enlightenment philosophers was always and systematically to assign multiple possible meanings to their texts, and it was within the multiplicity of voices and their openness to diverse interpretations that some of its more radical politics were contained. They made a political use of the new mode of circulation of texts in an emerging sphere characterized by a socially diverse audience and highly politicized stakes. For materialists, the multiple political readings of their works and their ambiguous codings were a hope for emancipation.

After having distinguished politics (*la politique*)—the content, form and stakes of political debates of Early Modern France, which is the object of historical research—from the political (*le politique*)—which is and will always be *the* object of public debate—it becomes clear that while the historian has a say on the first he does not have any particular authority on the second. From this perspective, the main anti-Marxist revisionist argument asserting that the Marxist reading of early modern history is anachronistic has no intellectual legitimacy. Thus, the best that can be expected from any scholar is honesty with his or her reader, which means “simply” to make explicit the implicit choice that constitutes their conception of politics.

Regarding the political character of philosophy and the conception of the “political” I intend to mobilize throughout this introduction, I obviously will therefore not rely on Baker’s a priori (almost metaphysical in its functioning) linguistic definition, but rather, at least initially, on Althusser’s. His definition of the political character of philosophy, however bold and rough, is the best starting point:

“la politique qui constitue la philosophie (tout comme la philosophie qui soutient la pensée des politiques), ne s’identifie pas à tel épisode de la lutte politique, ni même aux prises de parti politiques des auteurs. La politique

61 Sewell 146.

62 Sewell 147.

63 Sewell 147.

qui constitue la philosophie porte sur une toute autre question et tourne autour d'une toute autre question: celle de l'hégémonie idéologique de la classe dominante, qu'il s'agisse de la constituer ou de la renforcer, de la défendre ou de la combattre."⁶⁴

Here Althusser locates the political character of philosophy in its relation to the ideological hegemony of the ruling class, which assumes two things: that we are dealing with a class society and that the dominant class has one or several (as Poulantzas will develop) ideologies which need to become hegemonic in society to assure the continuation of its domination and the reproduction of its conditions for it.

For Althusser, philosophy always has a political function because it must, explicitly or implicitly, assume a particular *prise de position* in the social field in relation to the dominant ideology: that of either resisting and confronting it, or that of reinforcing it. Althusser implies that there is no neutral situation or attitude, only degrees of positioning on one side or the other. However Althusser never concretely explains how philosophy could do so, and nor does he develop many examples. But what is clear to him is that if philosophy does not want to become part of the state ideological apparatus of social domination—that is to say if it does not want to become simply ideology—it must reaffirm its critical function.⁶⁵

The novelty of the Enlightenment is that this political character or this social function of philosophy was up for debate for the first time. In this sense, the political character of philosophy became perhaps more conscious as it became more and more apparent to its participants. This was only possible, as I will show in the following chapter, with the rise of a separate bourgeois sphere, separate from both the Church and the monarchy, where for the first time it was possible to conceptualize an independent determination of philosophy vis-à-vis these institutions.

The second issue raised by Horkheimer's provocative comment regarding the political character of philosophy as an "action" is on the order of *historical* evaluation. For him Enlightenment philosophy had factually a huge political impact in *Ancien Régime* society because he assessed that "tradition and faith were the two of the most powerful bulwarks of the old regime, and the philosophical attacks constituted an immediate historical action", which amounted to the equivalent of some sort of political action.⁶⁶ This is a view the early Darnton sustained after studying the clandestine literature which circulated in the *Ancien Régime*, in particular the satirical and pornographic fictional works representing and mocking the King and contributing to his progressive "desacralization," and of course the many philosophical texts questioning the legitimacy of the existing religious and political order.⁶⁷

64 Louis Althusser, *Positions* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1976) 129.

65 I will not use in this work a particularly Althusserian conception of ideology (nor a Gramscian one). Nor I will enter the debate about the nature of ideology. However for a brief and critical account of Althusser's conception of this notion see Isabelle Garo Garo, Isabelle. "The Impossible Break: Ideology in Movement Between Philosophy and Politics", *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, ed. Katja Diefenbach (London: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2013) 275-282; and Jan Rehmann *Theories of ideology* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 147-162.

66 Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* 271.

67 The most important works of Robert Darnton on this issue include: *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*,

I would not go as far as Horkheimer as to judge that the Enlightenment philosophers public *prise de position* was equivalent to political action because such a claim presupposes a set of assumptions which have been complicated, to say the least, by historical research. The first assumption is that Horkheimer assumes philosophy was widely read in society, which we know today it was not. Its readership was restricted to the enlightened circle. Secondly it presupposes that it was philosophy, and not other kinds of clandestine literature (like political *libelles* or the fictional irreverent texts Darnton mentions), which had the greatest effect.⁶⁸ In *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* Darnton noted that the public authorities had created a new *catégorie-valise*, that of “*livres philosophiques*” to refer to all the kinds of “dangerous” and illegal literature produced in France which spanned a set of books (like erotic and pornographic literature or political pamphlets criticizing the court and the King) which would not be considered strictly philosophical texts today. This economic and legal category does not only show the new malleability of what philosophy was but also the clear political character as philosophy was assimilated with transgression, subversion and also clandestinity.⁶⁹

The final assumption is of a different kind. It is a philosophical one: that the text always produced its desired effect. Horkheimer was not an idealist; he knew perfectly well that philosophical texts—even the most radical ones—did not per se transform the existing relations of power. The only thing they had the chance to transform directly, if anything, is the consciousness (and not necessarily the actions) of its readers and public. Yet this particular intellectual illumination is what philosophy aims at doing. It is its challenge, but it cannot be taken as a given. That does not mean they had no political effect on those who read them, but that in order to appreciate how philosophy could have had a political effect, we need to understand under which conditions it could challenge the dominant ideology, and which were the structural limits of such a possible challenge.

Sketching the Ground of the Ideological Crisis in Early Modern France

Enlightenment philosophy could only have a potential political effect because there was a deep *ideological crisis* in 18th-century France, one which started in the late 17th century and which the consolidation of absolutism and the development of capitalism only revived decades later. The Enlightenment was the product of combined crisis with reciprocal effects. The internal crisis of philosophy was also a reflection of the ideological crisis of the absolutist regime that expressed itself in the demise of scholasticism and the symbolic monopoly of the Catholic Church. The crisis of

(Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1982) and *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, (New York, London, Norton 1995), but he has developed an extensive scholarship on that matter.

68 Can books make revolution? There has been in the French Revolution historiography of the past half-century a huge debate around this issue, which of course has broader historical and theoretical implications beyond the specific historical context of the French Revolution. Most of the arguments of this debate can be found in the essay collection Haydn T. Martin, *The Darnton Debate. Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

69 See Robert Darnton *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) 234-248, and “Livres philosophiques,” *Enlightenment Essays in Memory of Robert Shackleton*, eds. Robert Shackleton, et al. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1988) 89-109.

philosophy alongside the emergence of a new critical and radical philosophy within the Enlightenment was maybe one of the stronger blows to the ideological apparatus, and therefore deepened this crisis. Indeed some philosophers had the conscious intentions to promote some political ideas, even if we know today that none of them openly desired or had as prospects the French Revolution.⁷⁰

What is an ideological crisis? Poulantzas's definition is perhaps the clearest:

"By ideological crisis must be understood chiefly a crisis in the dominant ideology in a social formation, i.e. a crisis in the ideology of the dominant class in that formation. The ideology of the dominant class (the real "cement" of a social formation) is attacked first of all among the mass of the people, i.e. among the oppressed classes, whom it is the main function of this ideology to keep politically subject and subordinate."⁷¹

Baker, who studied the political culture of the end of the Old Regime, notices the emergence of what he calls a "politics of contestation", which I take to be one of the clearest expressions of this ideological crisis of French absolutism. After 1750 the politics of contestation "became a systematic, rather than a merely occasional feature of the political culture of the Old Regime".⁷² Baker sees this crisis as the combination of the explosion of the Jansenist crisis were "the crown proved powerless to control the many ramifications of this profoundly divisive issue", but also increased "contradiction between the particularistic logic of a constituted social order underlining a traditional conception of royal government in the judicial mode, and the universalistic logic inherent to the development of the absolute monarchy, which sustained a conception of royal government in the administration mode," a crisis fostered by the growth of the administrative apparatus of the monarchy, i.e. the increase of officeholders.⁷³ This crisis amongst different sectors of the ruling classes was also demonstrated in "the repeated remonstrances presented by the parliamentary magistrates to the king and in the stubborn refusal of the magistrates to abandon their position even in the face of exile" and the

70 See Roger Chartier, "Do books make revolutions?" *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991). 67-91.

71 Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship* (London: NLB, 1974) 76. In contrast to with Althusser's monolithic conception of ideology, Poulantzas—who was partially influenced by the work of Gramsci—developed a more differentiated and nuanced conception of what an ideological crisis could look like by distinguishing between "generalized ideological crisis" and more complex pictures when "ideological sub-groupings" enter into crisis while still dominated by the dominant ideology. Following the traditional Marxist viewpoint, Poulantzas saw the Enlightenment as the moment of overcoming the ideological crisis of feudalism and the emergence of a bourgeois ideology: "It therefore becomes clear that every crisis of the dominant ideology affects the ensemble of the ideological world of a social formation, But it does not always affect it in the same way. For example, it is possible that an acute crisis in the ideology of the dominant social force could allow the ideology of the antagonistic social force to advance or progress in the formation. It is even possible for the one relatively speaking to replace the other before a revolution in the strict sense had actually taken place, the classic case being the surreptitious replacement of feudal by bourgeois ideology before the French Revolution." Poulantzas, *Fascism* 76-77.

72 Keith Baker "Reason and Revolution", *In the Presence of the Past. Essays in honor of Frank Manuel*, Eds. Richard Bienvu and Mordechai Feingold (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991) 28. See also Keith Baker "Politics and Public Opinion", *Press and Politics in Pre-revolutionary France*, Ed. Jack Richard Censer and Jeremy D. Popkin (Berkeley: U of California, 1987): 204-246.

73 Baker, "Reason and Revolution" 82.

“illegal and clandestine circulation of the parliamentary remonstrances”.⁷⁴

I cannot give here an exhaustive historical account of the roots of this ideological crisis which were the product of multiple levels of contradictions and tensions which began to accumulate in the late 17th century and exploded one century later (in particular in the 1750s and 1760s until the 1789-93 revolution tore apart the absolutist state). However, I can offer a necessarily lacunar and partial synthesis of what I believe were the different levels of crisis which manifested themselves or emerged at the level of the political superstructure and consequently began to shatter it.⁷⁵ Of course in such a brief historical balance one needs to make some interpretative choices. I will draw most of mine from more contemporary Marxist approaches to the understanding of the social and political structures of early modern France enriched by the contributions of cultural and social history, in particular those of Roche.⁷⁶

In pre-capitalist societies, the ideological and political superstructure play an almost structural role in perpetuating exploitation, and in this regard their challenge or

74 Baker, “Politics and Public Opinion” 209.

75 Regarding the benefits and pertinence of the use of a more differentiated “base-superstructure model” for understanding early modern France see David Parker, “French Absolutism, the English State and the Utility of the Base-Superstructure model” *Social History* 15.3 (1990):287-301.

76 See in particular Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998). It is important to understand what the weight and role of some ideological apparatuses was in early modern France for it is at this level that philosophy would have an impact. One of the features of pre-capitalist modes of production outlined by Marx and later theorized by Anderson is that they “extract surplus value from the immediate producers by means of extra-economic coercion”, in contrast to capitalism which is “the first mode of production in history in which the means whereby the surplus is pumped out of the direct producer is 'purely' economic in form—the wage contract.” Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1979) 403. This means that in pre-capitalist modes of production, the relation between the economic structure and the political superstructure was a different one, where the political and ideological apparatus did not have a separate existence like they would later acquire under capitalism. In the early modern period, ideological apparatuses had a primary and not a secondary role in the reproduction of the social order and of production. This is the reason why Marxists since Anderson talk of an absolutist regime instead of a “feudal one”. It was the political ideology of the ruling power and not one particular mode of social interaction amongst the elite which better characterizes the functioning of such a society. As Anderson explains: “the ‘superstructures’ of kinship, religion, law or the state necessarily enter into the constitutive structure of the mode of production in pre-capitalist formations. They intervene directly in the ‘internal’ nexus of surplus-extraction, where in capitalist social formations, the first in history to separate the economy as a formally self-contained order, they provide by contrast ‘external’ preconditions. In consequence, pre-capitalist modes of production cannot be defined except via their political, legal and ideological super-structures, since these are what determined the type of extra-economic coercion that specifies them.” Anderson, *Lineages* 403-404. Beik also explained that the social system of 17th and 18th century France did not correspond, strictly speaking, to either feudalism or capitalism: “Although the classification of particular social systems as modes of production is a complicated operation, discussion for our period surrounds two basic possibilities: feudalism and capitalism. The first is an essentially agrarian form of society in which production is done on a small scale, mostly for local consumption, and the basic social contrast is between a class of landed lords and a class of dependent peasants. The second is a society of commodity production and market relationships predicated upon the contrast between the owners of capital and the ‘free’ labor force they employ. Early modern France corresponded to neither of these stereotypes but contained elements of both. It was part of the famous ‘transition from feudalism to capitalism’ which can be dated roughly as the period between the fourteenth-century ‘crisis of feudalism’ and the bourgeois revolution of 1789.” Beik, *Absolutism* 22.

In *Absolutism and Society* (1985) Beik developed Anderson’s analysis more precisely in regards to 17th century France, proposing a definition of absolutism as a “type of authority distinctive of feudalism,” where because of the relative economic independence of the producers (peasants and artisans) “the process of surplus extraction must therefore be imposed by extra-economic means: the nobles assert their right to receive labor services or payments in kind or in money, partly by force, but more significantly through political and ideological advantages which are built into the social system”. William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 29.

weakening is a direct threat also to the social structure of class division. In fact this is what happened in 18th century France: the development of a semi-autonomous urban bourgeois sphere, which became a locus of ideological contestation, was rightly perceived as a challenge to the regime, as it weakened the extra-economic means of coercion of the Absolutists and the nobility as a class. However, I will not argue that the this emerging bourgeois sphere alone created this ideological crisis, as Habermas sometimes seems to imply, but to be sure it contributed to its deepening and radicalization.⁷⁷

77 One of the central features of this feudal and absolutist political ideology mentioned by Beik was the form of hierarchical social organization: the feudal type of legal organization of the preeminence of "rights over land, land over people" which "were expressed in a series of gradations; there was no absolute private property and no absolute freedom for the individual". Beik 29. Another feature, equally central, which Beik surprisingly did not mention but upon which Althusser did remark, was the alliance of the political and religious power. The fact that the Absolutist state was a religious, Christian one, is not a matter of detail: "il est absolument évident qu'il existait un appareil idéologique d'État dominant, l'Église, qui concentrait en elle non seulement les fonctions *religieuses*, mais aussi *scolaires*, et une bonne partie des fonctions d'information et de 'culture'." Yet, as Parker shows, both features—the ideology of hierarchical social order and the divine or metaphysical legitimation of it—are intrinsically linked, for this alliance marked the rise of Absolutism in the 17th century as it managed to overcome the crisis of the existing feudal society, a crisis marked by the religious wars on the one hand and the dispute amongst different sectors of the elites, which forced the centralization of the political apparatus at all levels and the need to conduct a religious homogenization and refoundation of the country. David Parker provides here a very clear and succinct explanation of the nature of the absolutist state: "The main functions of the state apparatus were first, supplying the army and raising taxes to pay for war, and second, providing a mechanism for the general regulation of disputes between sections of the upper classes themselves; coming a good third during the early part of the reign of Louis XIV was the preoccupation with the imposition of religious uniformity." Parker, "French Absolutism and the English State" 298. For a more detailed account of the French Absolutist state, see David Parker *Class and State in Ancien Régime France* (London: Routledge, 1996) and William Beik *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-century France*. Roche in his masterpiece of cultural history *France in the Enlightenment* (1998) develops briefly these two aspects of the absolutist political ideology even though he does not share Beik and Parker's Marxist understanding of feudal absolutism as a class based system of exploitation. Nonetheless he describes with critical distance the ideological pillars of the regime, the first being the alliance of the two powers, the State and the Church the material and the symbolic one. The second ideological pillar being that of the legitimation of class society through the ideology of "société d'ordres" and privilege.

Regarding the sacralization of the monarchy, which presented itself as one "*droit divin*" Roche notes that it is a feature of any state to rely on "*enlisting the support of believers*" in its political hegemony Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* 353. The specificity of this *Ancien Régime's* social justification of royal power rested though "on a profound union of two sources of legitimacy; one was political based on the king's acceptance by his human subjects, while the other was religious, based on a transcendent ideal. The enthronement ceremony demonstrated this alliance to its spectators and, through newspapers and images, to the public at large." Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* 353-354. The Gallican doctrine which established this official alliance of the two powers at the end of the 17th century was clearly expressed in the works of Bossuet, like the *Politique tirée de l'Écriture sainte, Sermon sur l'unité de l'Église* (1709). This doctrine asserted that "Kings derived their authority from God and stood immediately below him in rank," and consolidated the social division of labor amongst the two ruling orders Roche 356. The historian summarizes the social arrangement implied by the Gallican doctrine of the "*monarchie de droit divin*": "the king was master of the temporal realm, while the Church under his protection ruled the spiritual realms. Furthermore, the Church constituted the first order of the state, and in exchange for its 'free gift', the king promised to respect its immunities and privileges. The boundaries were clearly laid down. but like everything else, they moved, and in this movement the clergy was reduced to a choice between, on the one hand, solemnly affirming principles without influence on the actions of the king and his agents and, on the other hand, acting as an agent of the state and further formalizing the relations between the 'two powers' and the practices of the faithful" 355. The accompanying ideological piece of the political structure of French Absolutism is the concept of a society of orders or estates, which lies in the identification of a social hierarchy with what it pretend to be a simple "functional" division of labor, of course one that hides exploitation. The constitution of the ideology of the société d'ordres was first studied in a systematic matter by Gearoges Duby in *Les Trois Ordres: Ou, L'imaginaire Du Féodalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). For the sake of expediency, I will use here Roche's synthetic account of the issue. Interestingly enough the concept of "ordre" which will qualify not only each social groups but society as a whole (une société d'ordres) was elaborated in the medieval universities and was grounded in the belief that there is a natural social order where "each person had a place in a particular order and thus a means of contributing to" Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* 393. The legal structure of feudal France, best described and justified in Loyseau's *Traité des ordres et des dignités* (1610) was not officially one of classes, but one of three orders,

Now let's briefly outline the dynamics of change and crisis of the absolutist state and the feudal society inasmuch as they set a context in which to understand the crisis of philosophy and its contribution to deepening the ideological crisis of the regime. I will not dwell here on the more structural conflicts of society which were linked to its inner class tensions and which both Beik and Parker have recently explained with a great amount of clarity and detail, nor will I analyze the ongoing debate amongst Marxist historians regarding the form and path of the development of a bourgeois class in early modern France.⁷⁸ I will focus, rather, on the ideological manifestations of a crisis in which the Enlightenment philosophy had some impact.

Even if the development of commercial capitalism did not have a direct impact on dismantling the ideological structure of the regime, it became, in the 18th century, the first cause of class struggle, which was articulated around food riots and rapid inflation. The recurring financial and food crisis produced by the liberalization of the price of grains (which became a matter of public debate in the 1760s) produced an increased amount of popular riots.⁷⁹ Lemarchand shows, for example, that while between 1690 and 1720 there were 182 food riots, the number more than tripled to 652 for the period spanning 1760-1789.⁸⁰ Yet the major structural development associated with the development of capitalism that we need to take into account—and which unfortunately Anderson, Beik and Parker bypassed or minimized because of their focus on the 17th and not the 18th century—is the development of a bourgeois public sphere, the social space where Enlightenment philosophy is to be located.⁸¹ I will not develop here this crucial

the clergy, the landed nobility and the “Tiers Etat”: those who pray, those who fight and those who work. Yet of course this functional social division was in place in order to mask the exploitation of Tiers-Etat, the 85% of the population by the two first higher orders. It is by no accident that the Third Estate “*was defined negatively by that from which it was excluded; not privileges to be sure (...) but blue blood, birth, and the service of God*” Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* 393. Yet the social concept of order was not just there to naturalize a social division of labor as a purely functional one, but also to legitimize it. The ideology of the *société d'ordres* was not only one of a natural organization and regularization based on privilege and birth but also one of “*ordre*” as command, that is to say, as requesting a vertical direction and as Roche noted “*a necessary submission*” of the lower estate Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* 394.

78 Regarding the tensions amongst the existing privileged classes, I refer here to the previously cited works of Beik and Parker, in particular regarding the crisis of the ideological crisis of the nobility as a class because of the increase of the venality of public offices and the development of a commercial bourgeoisie. On the identity crisis of the nobility, see David Parker “The Nobility: A Hegemonic Tour de Force” *Class and State* 136-157; and for the development of the venality of the offices see William Doyle *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-century France* (London: Routledge, 1996. Print.). For the recent debate regarding the development of a bourgeois class through early modern France see Henry Heller “The Longue Durée of the French Bourgeoisie”, *Historical Materialism* 17.1 (2009): 31-59; David Parker “Henry Heller and ‘The Longue Durée of the French Bourgeoisie’” *Historical Materialism* 18.2 (2010): 123-131 and William Beik “Response to Henry Heller” *Historical Materialism* 18.2 (2010): 117-122.

79 For a more detailed understanding of the food riots and the political economy of grains, see Steven Kaplan *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976).

80 Guy Lemarchand, “Troubles populaires au XVIIIe siècle et conscience de classe: une préface à la Revolution française”, *Annales Historiques de la Revolution française* 297 (1990): 34. Lemarchand further indicated several “waves” of disorders which correspond to the years 1709-10, 1725, 1728-31, 1748-49, 1752, 1768, 1770, 1775, 1784-85, 1788-89 (34). On food crisis, economic instability, and popular uprisings, see also E.P. Thompson’s *La guerre des blés* (Paris: Éditions de la Passion, 1998) and Jean Nicolas *La rébellion française* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

81 Parker insists that in 17th century France capitalism had a non dynamic process: “merchants became rentiers and officeholders, the population stagnated... the process of primitive accumulation, the development of capitalist relations, the expansion of the productive forces advanced slowly it at all” (“French Absolutism and the English State” 299).

development because it deserves a closer attention: I will develop the following chapter to this matter. Nonetheless it was in this new urban space where an independent intellectual sphere emerged and which for the first time allowed the challenging and critique of the two ideological pillars of the State. However, it is important to understand that the crisis was not only generated from below or from beside. The absolutist state was also a political agent in this crisis, seeing as how it was also produced from above.

The most visible crisis was that of the progressive dissolution of the “alliance of the two powers”, which granted a degree of sanctity to the monarchy. The crisis began at the beginning of the 18th century with the clergy’s increased reluctance to pay more taxes as requested by the State, (they had previously been tax-exempt) and the development of reformation movement within the ranks of the Church, like the Jansenists, which adopted a critical stance vis-à-vis the King's concentration of power. It exploded with the Jansenists crisis and the refusal of sacraments (1752-54) which led the French monarchy to a change of strategy in 1750-60 vis-à-vis the Catholic Church: "the monarchy abandoned its traditional role as arbitrator between competing corps and came down in favor of utilitarian secularization."⁸² Roche notes that after 1750 “the theory of the two powers ceased to be operational”, and that “the religious cohesion that bound the two partners dissolved”.⁸³ This was embodied in the dissolution of the Jesuit order in 1762. The Jesuits were the intelligentsia of the Church who constantly antagonized the philosophers but also actively participated in the Enlightenment sphere and in the royal edict of 1763 "which entrusted the reorganization of schools to local notables working in bureaus in which the bishop had a voice equal to that of other members" taking away from the Church its monopoly on education.⁸⁴ But the weakening of the Church-Monarchy alliance was not only the product of institutional political tensions as Merrick defended, it was also the result of the diffusion of popular literature (in particular pornographic one) and philosophical texts criticizing, satirizing and ridiculing the King, which contributed to the monarchy's “desacralization”.⁸⁵ All historians agree that secularism increased throughout the century.⁸⁶

82 Roche 360. For the Jansenist crisis and a detailed account of how it weakened the regime the stronger thesis are the ones defended by Jeffrey Merrick *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1990) and Dale Van Kley *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996). For a brief account of Jansenism and the mid-century crisis see Daniel Roche *France in the Enlightenment* 367-379; Thomas O'Connor, “Jansenism,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Ancien Régime*, ed. William Doyle (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012) 333-35; Dale Van Kley “The Jansenist Constitutional Legacy in the French Pre-revolution 1750-1789,” *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed. Keith Baker (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987) 169-201.

83 Roche 359.

84 Roche 359.

85 See Jeffrey Merrick *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*; Jens Ivo Engels “Beyond Sacral Monarchy: A new Look At the Image of the Early Modern French Monarchy” *French History* 15.2 (2001): 139-158 and Dale Van Kley *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Régime, 1750-1770* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984).

86 For the evolution of religious practices and secularization see Roger Chartier “Dechristianization and secularization” and for an account of the evolution of the perception of the King see “the Desacralization of the King” *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* 92-110 and 111-136.

The other ideological dimension which entered into crisis was the conception of a society grounded on privilege and birth instead of on merit. It manifested itself mainly as an ideological crisis of the landed nobility as a class, where as Parker and Roche mentioned, the criteria of social differentiation had to be clarified: breeding and privilege or money.⁸⁷ Yet this ideological crisis of the dominant class was deepened once again by the increased financial needs of the Absolutist State to levy more taxes and therefore its motivation to increase the number of venal offices for sale in the late 17th century and early 18th century and the design a new system of social classification, distinct from that of social orders of state, based on wealth: "The administrative monarchy developed new systems of classification to aid the collection of taxes. From 1695 on, the society was divided into classes according to the supposed resources of its subjects; the old order were temporarily forgotten".⁸⁸

In conclusion, we can say that there was not only a clear ideological crisis in France between the 1750 and 1760, but also that the very foundations of the absolutist regime were up for discussion: "in the case of the disputes over the refusal of sacraments in the 1750s, then in the course of the institutional conflicts over the liberalization of the grain trade in the 1760s and finally in the context of a campaign against the fiscal practices and arbitrary procedures of the administrative monarchy that grew through the decade preceding the Maupeou coup, French politics broke out of the absolutist mold".⁸⁹ Yet this ideological crisis of absolutism did not mean automatically revolution.

Materialism and the Explosion of the Framework of Philosophy

In *Diderot ou les affirmations fondamentales du matérialisme* (1983) Lefebvre proposed to begin the analysis of 18th century philosophy by a "social history of ideas" where he asserted:

"Au XVIIIe siècle, [les cadres de la philosophie] éclatent: les cloisonnements s'effondrent entre les sciences et la pensée, entre la pensée et la société, entre le philosophe et l'homme- donc entre le philosophe et le public. Il y eut là un phénomène idéologique beaucoup plus important qu'une "adoption" à une "société nouvelle" (...) de l'idéal de l'époque précédente."⁹⁰

While for Lefebvre the 17th century was an "élaboration formelle (abstraite) de la philosophie," a matter of specialists but "difficilement communicable, peu compréhensible, hérissée de termes techniques," the 18th century was in contrast a moment of radical reconfiguration and expansion of philosophy, an idea that Cassirer had

87 Roche 409-414.

88 Roche 398. "In its search for tax revenues, the royal administration organized society without imposing any unique criterion because its vision of the social world prevented it. At the same time, it constructed an interpretive scheme in terms of which social transformation could be deciphered. Such transformations were implicit in speculation about economic classification, which implicitly or explicitly recognized the imperialism of wealth" (Roche 399-400).

89 Baker, "Politics and Public Opinion" 219.

90 Henri Lefebvre, *Diderot, Ou, Les Affirmations Fondamentales Du Matérialisme* (Paris: L'Arche, 1983) 41.

already formulated some decades before.⁹¹ Lefebvre's framework, although a bit rough, still allows one to understand the crisis of a rearticulation of philosophy in a social and political context (as the "*histoire-situation*" model proposes). He does so around three main axes: philosophy/science, thought/society and philosopher/men. At the core of this rearticulation we find ultimately the relation of the philosopher with his or her public.

Of these three re-articulations this chapter will not deal with the first one—that of philosophy and science—although I consider it important. The new redefinition of philosophy around modern science is one of the most studied aspects of the Enlightenment. This is no accident: it is the most "internal" rearrangements of philosophy, one that happened inside the field of knowledge and only indirectly questioned the relation of philosophy with society. In my chapter on La Mettrie I will touch on this issue by recalling the emergence of experimental philosophy and also establishing the difference between philosophy and science and materialism positioning on this issue. The second articulation—that of man/philosopher—will be explored in the second section of this introduction by taking a closer look at the mutations of the social persona of the philosopher, drawing extensively from the scholarship on the social history and sociology of the *gens de lettres* for the 17th-18th period. The last one—that of thought/society—is perhaps the most important because it is the result of a structural change due to the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. I will devote then the end of my introduction to analyzing the Enlightenment and the rise of materialism through a critical appraisal of Habermas's theory.

It is useful to think of these re-articulations also as dilemmas or contradictions, that is to say as moments of definition where philosophers had to make choices regarding these central issues, as moments where the critical and political function of philosophy was at stake. It is not by accident that Lefebvre mentions these three re-articulations in a study on materialism, as materialism can be understood not as a doctrine but as a range of positions. Macherey's distinction between being a materialist and doing philosophy *en matérialiste* comes perfectly at hand to understand this point.⁹² I argue that the appearance of the so-called "materialist" philosophers in 18th century France was first a matter of *prise de position* in the emerging field, before being a matter of thesis or materialist doctrine. Practicing philosophy *en matérialiste* was taking a position in the new key divisions/articulations like the divide between the public and the private use of reason, between theory and practice, the demarcation of the legitimate or natural scope of philosophical critique, the overlap between the sphere of philosophy and the sphere of political power. The "materialist" philosophers were those who took a set of stands in this process of re-articulation, choosing to expose the contradictions of the bourgeois sphere

91 Lefebvre 40. In this sense, Cassirer was perfectly right to sense that the major redefinition of philosophy was also a redefinition of the whole intellectual field and the purposes, boundaries and hierarchies among disciplines: "Philosophy, according to this interpretation, is no special field of knowledge situated beside or above the principles of natural science, of law and government, etc., but rather the all-comprehensive medium in which such principles are formulated, developed and founded. Philosophy is no longer to be separated from science, history, jurisprudence, and politics; it is rather to be the atmosphere in which they can exist and be effective. Philosophy is not longer the isolated substance of the intellect; it presents the totality of the intellect in its true function, in the specific character of its investigations and enquiries, its methods and essential cognitive process." Ernst Cassirer *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1951) vii.

92 See the first section of the chapter on La Mettrie.

but not to resolve them. What I want to explore throughout my dissertation is whether those philosophers who were called materialist were so because they shared a common set of positions around this changes of the practice of philosophy by defending its critical, independent and practical function. I hope to do so by analyzing briefly some aspects of Dumarsais and Helvetius philosophy and more in detail La Mettrie and Diderot's one.

One of the central and most visible differences between materialist and non-materialist participants in the Enlightenment was of course the negation of the existence of any metaphysical principles and therefore of the legitimacy and truth of the basic dogmas of religion. Materialists were mainly identified as such because they were atheists; this has to do with the re-evaluation of philosophy and its relation to science. Will philosophers only accept as true ideas and concept which do not contradict science or will they accept extra-scientific explanations? If science negates God what should Enlightenment philosophers who claim to refound their discipline base on the new scientific discoveries do? There was then a new fundamental tension—and therefore a key dividing line—within the Enlightenment movement itself. Some philosophers like Leibniz will argue that the role of the new philosophy is to provide a rational theology, that is to say, a new philosophical legitimization of religion; others like Voltaire or Rousseau declared themselves “theists”; finally, materialists such as La Mettrie, Meslier, Diderot, Helvetius or D’Holbach did not openly state their atheism, but had as their goal to publicly attack the foundations of religion and critique the illegitimate social and symbolic power the Church had accumulated in the past centuries. Of course, this latter position was a dangerous one, and many of these philosophers were censored, persecuted, and imprisoned for taking such a stance on religion.

This polarization of the rising Enlightenment around the question of religion had an internal “refraction” inside the newly formed field. The polemic around philosophical atheism is not to be understood solely as one focused on religion, but rather expressing the new and developing tension between science and philosophy. What was at stake within the Enlightenment movement was the definition of philosophy as a scientific discipline, totally subordinated to the findings of modern science: would philosophy manage to totally eliminate the specter of religion, or would it create a new form of metaphysics, where science did not have a say? It was this internal tension within philosophy which led to the very coining of the word “*matérialiste*” by theologians. The attacks on materialism were in fact a reaction to a new set of scientific elaborations (in part the development of chemistry, compared anatomy, epigenetic biology) which clearly contradicted the Christian dogma and conception of the world.

My dissertation will focus more on the exploration of the positioning of materialist thinkers regarding the two other re-articulations: that of philosopher/men, which I call the social subject of philosophy; and that of thought/society, for which I will develop a critique of the postulates of the Habermasian theory of the public sphere.

2. The Crisis of the Social Subject of Philosophy: From Praxis to Function, and the Problems of “Utility” of Philosophy

One of the key transformations of philosophy in the 18th century has to do with a qualitative social displacement of philosophy and the unsettling of the established social division of labor in society and within the intellectual sphere. Philosophy was happening elsewhere (outside of the authorized institutions) and was practiced by new social

subjects (that were not the scholarly clergy). Their monopoly on and their regulation of philosophy was threatened by new figures of the *philosophe*: the *honnête-homme* gentleman in the 17th century, and a century later the social “enlightener”, as philosophy could only become “enlightening” once it had a public, or many, to enlighten on the first place. And while the latter was initiated by the previous transformation, it accomplished a qualitative change with the emergence of the bourgeois sphere in the 18th century. Any serious attempt to situate the practice of philosophy that emerged as new or oppositional in the early modern period should therefore begin with social history and the sociology of the practice philosophy.

The general evolution of the practice of philosophy I want to underline is that a transition from philosophy as a praxis, as mode of personal intellectual and moral cultivation as it was the case in aristocratic circles, which borrowed largely from the Ancient concept of philosophy as a way of life (from Stoicism, to Epicurism and Cynicism) to that of philosophy as accomplishing a social function or task: that of critique or legitimation, which opened a debate around the “uses” and “utility” of philosophy which is still open today.

Unfortunately, the early modern social history and sociology focused on the refutation the philosopher as a “bourgeois subject”. In fact, I argue that it was not a sociological subject but the configuration of a new subjectivity which was indeed “bourgeois” in the sense that it reproduced at the level of the individual the same contradictions and denials which inhabited the new bourgeois public sphere I study in my following chapter: one where the dynamics of material interests and relations of dependency and social exclusion must be publicly erased and denied in order to gain an properly symbolic or intellectual legitimacy.

The Early Modern Philosophe: a “Bourgeois” Figure?

For any scrupulous historian the task of figuring out who was doing philosophy in the early modern period in France, that is to say delineating the social subject of philosophy, encounters an obstacle: the relative non-specificity of the philosophical activity as it develops into a field, as it changes its form and practice. Most of the studies of sociology and social history of the intellectual elite analyze the social composition of the *homme des lettres* or *écrivains*, without making any specific distinction for the practice of philosophy. Still, this research and information is invaluable.⁹³ However a

93 The last three decades of sociology and social history research have done a great deal to complicate this overly transparent and homogeneous conception of the public sphere moving away from a too abstract conception of the field in an attempt to root it into concrete social and historical figures and cases. Methodologically, scholars have done so by beginning their study in the social fabric of the Enlightenment instead of in its ideas. They have produced some important works on the emergence of the literary field in a new public but restricted sphere, focusing on the status of the writer in early modern France (Viala, Jouhaud, Cavaillé) or on the materiality of the book market and its readership (Chartier, Darnton, and, more recently, Turnovsky), complicating a bit more our reading of early modern texts. The works on the transformation of *philosophy* during this period are fewer are more recent. It is interesting to note that the “literary” field has often been unconsciously approached as the emergence of the field of *literature* as a discipline, but not as something that had to do with philosophy. This has to do with the fact that the new “literary field”, was literally “literary”: it was the field of the “*hommes de lettres*”, defined by the production of written texts on a variety of subjects (science, philosophy, *belles lettres*, art). Maybe, instead of speaking of a “literary field” in the 18th century, it would be more accurate to speak and begin to theorize the emergence of a “lateralized intellectual field”, a semi-autonomous space where the source of this new intellectual capital was based on the ability to read and write, but also where the old practices (science, philosophy, fiction writing, history) and new ones (art criticism, political economy, geography) were redefined—many of which will “autonomize” in separate fields the following century. In many ways, the lack of a

greater obstacle in the approach to the historical subject of philosophy are the pre-conceptions and the misplaced ideological disputes originated around the hypothesis of the *philosophe bourgeois*. This was a trope formulated in a variety of versions by several Marxist scholars in the 1950-70s (Soboul, Goldmann, Lefebvre but also Habermas and Horkheimer), a trope which has been caricatured and refuted by the following generation of revisionist historians like Chartier, Baker, or Furet. The idea of the “bourgeois philosopher” stemmed from the Marxist understanding that the 1789 French Revolution was a “bourgeois” one that is: a triumph of the bourgeois class and a decisive step forward in the political consolidation of capitalism - a characterization which is now in discussion amongst Marxist scholars.⁹⁴ The very simplified reasoning was that if the French Revolution was the deed of the bourgeoisie, then the Enlightenment philosophers were its ideologues. Soboul argued that the Enlightenment as whole was the expression of a rising bourgeoisie who “commence à prendre conscience de sa force intellectuelle.”⁹⁵ Soboul and Marxist scholarship defined indeed two and not one theses: the first one has to do with the political or social meanings of Enlightenment philosophy (which was for them an expression of bourgeois values and a vision of the world coherent with the contradictory situation of that class), the second one that Enlightenment philosophers were, sociologically speaking “issus de la bourgeoisie, parfois de la grande bourgeoisie.”⁹⁶ One could even argue that a variety of interpretation hypotheses were articulated around this trope: from the sociological reduction of the Enlightenment intelligentsia to the rising bourgeoisie, to the fact that the enlightened philosopher represented, in the social imaginary a “bourgeois figure” because of its strive for economic independence, to finally the idea that, regardless of the class composition of the Enlightenment movement, the Enlightenment philosophy itself was that of the bourgeoisie: it was an expression of bourgeois ideology.⁹⁷ The hypotheses ranged indeed

specific interest in the philosophy from this point of view, makes today’s social history of the Enlightenment rather unbalanced. Yet, recently some scholars (Ribard, Jouhaud, Van Damme), inspired by Bourdieu’s sociology of intellectual fields and the social history of literature, have paid attention to the similar yet different dynamics occurring in the philosophical discipline. They have indicated that in the 17th and 18th centuries philosophy as social activity became destabilized, questioned, and transformed, breaking with a rather unified conception in the previous centuries. What is interesting when one turns to the specific domain of philosophy is that, in contrast to the purely “literary” one, we cannot talk so much of the *emergence* of a radically new field or practice (that of the author-writer made possible by the book market and becoming a central defining feature of the literary field), but rather of a reorganization of the philosophical activity. One of the major conclusions, or rather working hypotheses, of the sociologist being that there is a radical qualitative transformation of this practice in the slow transition from a corporation to an emerging field.

94 I have already mentioned the debate initiated by Henry Heller, in particular in *The Bourgeois Revolution in France* (New York: Berghahn, 2006) and his essay “The Longue duree of the French Bourgeoisie” the responses by Parker and Beik. See also Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2012), Florence Gauthier, *La Voie Paysanne Dans La Révolution Française* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1977). On the figure of the “bourgeois philosophe,” see Albert Soboul, Introduction *Textes choisis de l’Encyclopedie, Ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1962). 7-24.

95 Albert Soboul, “L’Encyclopédie et le mouvement encyclopédique,” *Textes choisis de l’Encyclopedie, Ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1962) 7.

96 Soboul, “L’Encyclopédie et le mouvement encyclopédique” 14.

97 See Lefebvre *Diderot ou les affirmations fondamentales du matérialisme* 36-37, 47, and Soboul, “L’Encyclopédie et le mouvement encyclopédique.” Both argued the Enlightened *philosophes* were the representatives of the bourgeois

from the bourgeois *philosopher* to the bourgeois *philosophy*, and even though what a “bourgeois philosophy” could possibly mean is still a matter of discussion today, both directions of inquiry cannot be thrown into the same bag.⁹⁸

The stronger sociological thesis of the “bourgeois philosopher” was corrected by Walter, also a Marxist scholar for it was simply inaccurate from an historical point of view. His more sophisticated account on this matter showed that it is not possible from an historical point of view to identify the rise of the new intelligentsia of the *hommes de lettres* with a particular sociological category:

"[O]n notera que les notions d'auteur, d'écrivain, de 'gens de lettres/d'esprit/ de savoir'... n'ont jamais recoupé ni un ordre, ni une classe ('condition'), ni un groupe statutaire ("corps" à titres et privilèges), ni une catégorie socio-professionnelle ('métier', 'état', 'profession utile par elle-même'). En extension, le concept d'auteur recouvre une mosaïque de statuts et de rôles."⁹⁹

Walter's assertion is aimed at counteracting “vulgar” or mechanical applications of Marxism to understand the Enlightenment, that wrongly identify the new intellectuals as members and social representatives of the rising bourgeois class (neither Lefebvre nor Soboul provided historical data to prove that the Enlightenment authors belonged to this rising bourgeois class, but historians who followed proved evidence of the opposite).¹⁰⁰ But he equally rejects its vulgar anti-Marxist corollary insisting that intelligentsia was to be localized instead in a sector of the traditional elite (nobility or clergy). Both assessments have shown to be equally incorrect.

However, the claim that the new figure of the intellectual was an allegory of the rising bourgeois figure (because of the new possibility of developing a professional trajectory and aspirations of social mobility), needs to be further complicated and problematized by an analysis of the political economy of writers and philosophers in the early modern period.¹⁰¹

Walter, like Horkheimer, wanted to distinguish his Marxist approach from what

class. Goldmann to his credit never identified the Enlightenment with the bourgeois class but rather with *bourgeois social relations*, those of exchange value (versus use value) linked to the development of commercial capitalism. The philosophers were then, despite their class origin, the almost unconscious enunciators of the ideas of universality, freedom, formal equality, etc.—pillars of the bourgeois or capitalist ideology. Lucien Goldmann, “La pensée des ‘Lumières’,” *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 22.4 (1967): 752-779. See also Horkheimer *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993).

98 Most of the critics of Marxist historiography do so, but for more interesting and nuanced view, see Keith Baker and Roger Chartier, “Dialogue sur l’espace public” *Politix* 7.26 (1994):10-12.

99 Eric Walter, “Les Auteurs et le champ littéraire,” *Histoire de l’édition française*, 4 vols. *Le Livre triomphant 1660–1830, Vol.2*, eds. Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin, (Paris: Promodis, 1984): 383-399.

100 See Eric Walter “L’Intelligentsia des Lumières” *Dix-huitième siècle* 5 (1973): 173-201; Daniel Roche, “Négoce et culture dans la France du XVIIIe siècle”, *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 25.3 (1978): 375-395; and Daniel Roche, “L’intellectuel au travail”, *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 37.3 (1982): 465-480.

101 As Lefebvre put it Diderot, was the Enlightenment figure who best embodied the ideals of the new bourgeois individual: “La rupture des rapports existants libère alors l’individu; d’un côté, il se trouve lancé dans la concurrence, et de l’autre mis en face de lui-même comme d’un problème, qu’il s’agisse de gagner sa vie quotidienne ou de se penser dans l’univers, Le voilà dans l’arène, astreint sous peine de mort à déployer ses énergies, à être rusé, déifiant, astucieux, ingénieux, inventif, créateur.” Lefebvre, *Diderot ou les affirmations fondamentales du matérialisme* 27.

could be called *sociologisme* or sociological reductionism¹⁰² The assumption of many historians and sociologists is that the ideas and philosophy of the *hommes de lettres* (taken as a whole or individually) automatically represent their own class interest, whether they are aware of it or not. Or put in other terms, that the social subject of philosophy directly determines the ideology of the philosophy he or she produces. As Walter put it: “l’illusion sociologiste déduit la nature d’une idéologie de la seule appartenance sociale des groupes qui en sont soit les producteurs soit les récepteurs par exemple l’origine roturière des Philosophes suffit à certains pour qualifier de bourgeoise la pensée des Lumières, tandis que d’autres la diront nobiliaire en vertu de son succès dans une fraction de la haute aristocratie”.¹⁰³ Walter’s point is not to deny any connection or relation between the social position of philosophers and their ideas, but rather that this relation is not directly established by an economic determination.

The Social Identity of the Enlightenment Intelligentsia

How to address then the question of the social identity of the Enlightenment intelligentsia? To be sure, the Enlightenment elite had a specific class composition, but it was diverse, not reducible as a whole to a specific nor unified social group. In what regards the author-writers, Walter notes that:

"Beaucoup plus aristocratique, le sous-groupe des écrivains voit s'accroître, au détriment des "bourgeois", le poids spécifique d'une petite ou moyenne qui, sans faire des belles-lettres une profession, écrit, anime les salons, donne le ton en matière d'invention littéraire. À la ville comme à la cour, la partie la plus influente du public comprend d'abord ce petit groupe des écrivains aimanté par un puissant tropisme nobiliaire."¹⁰⁴

102 In “The social function of philosophy” 191. Horkheimer distinguished his analysis from “another view, best represented in several branches of modern sociology, which identifies philosophy with one general social function, namely ideology. this view maintains that philosophical thought, or more correctly , thought as such, is merely the expression of a specific social situation.” Horkheimer 262. He adds later that according to this view “every pattern of thought, every philosophical or other cultural work, belongs to a specific social group with which it originates and with whose existence it is bound up. Every pattern of thought is ‘ideology’” Horkheimer 263. To this he adds: “There can be no doubt that there is some truth in this attitude. (...) But it is not enough to merely correlate these ideas with some one social group, as the sociological school does. We must penetrate deeper and develop them out of the decisive historical process from which the social groups themselves are to be explained,” that is to say: Marxist analysis cannot be reduced to sociology, which amounts to isolate a social class from its actual role in the historical process Horkheimer 263.

103 Walter, “Intelligentsia” 191. For the sociology of the Early Modern period, this “sociologisme” has very much consisted in reading—most of the times within an implicit framework—the social meaning or relevance of the literary and philosophical works of this period as manifestations or direct expressions of of the new social (class) interests of the rising author-writer figure (writing with the aim of social promotion, contestation of the ideology of the existing ruling elite to challenge etc). In contrast with many critics of the sociology of literature that are very worried about preserving the sacred autonomy of the text, I am not suggesting that these social motivations are systematically false or irrelevant. What I want to point out is that they cannot be systematically assumed, pre-established as an a-priori framework of interpretation. If they exist, it should be demonstrated, not postulated, and one should ask how this social motivation influenced the meaning of the intellectual production of the authors—as the center of our work is not the examination of judgment of the persons (the pointless and impossible *process d’intention* of the philosophers) but the social and political meaning of their intellectual production and practice that is mainly—but not only—grounded in their text production.

104 Walter, “Les auteurs” 384.

It might be useful to turn briefly to the facts themselves provided by the social history scholarship in order to deconstruct some ideological categories. But if the participation of the nobility, the first social state, is overall very significant in the new intellectual field, it is also important to note that the social composition of the *hommes de lettres* will change throughout the century—the point here being to understand both the dynamic and significance of such a sociological change. If we compare its social composition from the 17th to the 18th century: "la noblesse recule de 25 à 14%, le clergé se tasse de 50 à 32%, le Tiers laïc grimpe de 25 à 54%".¹⁰⁵ The same social evolution can be seen amongst the population of journalists. One specific intellectual endeavor, that will almost become an institution in itself, presents an anomaly with an increased participation of different sectors of the Tiers-Etat in the Enlightenment world, and that is, of course, the *Encyclopédie*, whose social and sociological enterprise has been masterfully studied by Proust.¹⁰⁶ Summarizing Proust's conclusions, Walter notes that paradoxically, "sur les 205 collaborateurs identifiables (dont les grands noms de la Philosophie) on repère 5% d'ecclésiastiques zélés, 20% de nobles où se dégagent de gros travailleurs comme Jaucourt, Tressan, Turgot, et un Tiers Etat (75%) où se comptent 22 médecins, 16 ingénieurs, 15 savants, 7 professeurs, 5 avocats..."¹⁰⁷ This evolution that can be initially perceived as a "democratization" of the access and participation in the literalized intellectual field, is confirmed when one looks at the next generation of *hommes de lettres* that specifically regrouped (or rather emerged) through the *Encyclopédie méthodique* de Panckoucke (1763-1794). The latter would recruit almost exclusively between the "Tiers Etat". Walter concluded that the "combat social" around the social exclusivity of this sphere, that is against the idea that the status of *homme de lettre* ought to be linked to a social status, was over by the end of the century: "la divulgation des savoirs n'est plus combat mais gestion. Au rebours de Le Breton, Panckoucke n'aura pas besoin de censurer ses collaborateurs; l'ère des héros fondateurs est close; avec la bénédiction de l'Etat les professionnels des Lumières amorcent la mutation capitaliste du marché".¹⁰⁸

Yet the different encyclopedic projects cannot be taken as representative of the intellectual field as a whole. Darnton's analysis of the composition *des gens de lettres*, based on the different editions of almanach *La France littéraire* from 1755 on, provides a more representative picture.¹⁰⁹ In 1784, of the 53% of the *hommes de lettres* who actually reported a state or a profession, three major social groups emerged: one condition was that of the writers who had a title, charge or office to sustain themselves (around 41%): that is to say clerics (21%), nobles (14%), or some kind of public administrators with a

105 Walter, "Les auteurs" 395.

106 See Jacques Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1962) 9-43.

107 Walter, "Les auteurs" 395.

108 Walter, "Les auteurs" 395.

109 See Robert Darnton "The facts of Literary life in Eighteenth-Century France," *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, Vol. 1: *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed. Keith Baker (Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1987) 1:261-292; and James Van Horn Melton "Readers, writers and spectators," *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001) 122-159.

charge (6%); a second condition was the one of intellectuals who held a profession linked to knowledge (around 39%, distributed more or less evenly between lawyers, professors and doctors); and finally the condition of those who depended directly from a nobleman or the king (8%), like secretaries, preceptors, librarians etc. Chartier will interpret these figures as dividing the literary world into two social conditions:

“La première, traditionnelle, voltairienne pourrait-on dire, fait coexister, à part inégale, ceux qui leur état et leur fortune mettent à l’abri du besoin et ceux qui bénéficient des positions et gratifications promises par le service des grands. La seconde, qui enregistre les évolutions du siècle, manifeste l’affirmation d’une bourgeoisie à talents qui enracine son activité d’écriture dans l’exercice d’une profession intellectuelle.”¹¹⁰

But we also need to add those who did not report any “profession” or “social status”, and of whom we can assume that it was very likely that they did not have any, and whose numbers were rising: 27% in 1757, 33% in 1767 and 47% in 1784. Historians of the intellectual elite, following Darnton, have agreed that the increase of numbers of this “low life of the enlightenment” and “professional writers” that constituted a new intellectual proletariat, (cruelly mocked and despised, as we know, by Voltaire) represent a key feature of the field in the second half of the 18th Century.¹¹¹ This population can be understood, according to Chartier, as the result of two social developments. On the one hand, there was the increasing number and diversity of publishing enterprises led by the big publishing houses, which were in need of contributors and collaborators (the freelancers of today) for the dictionaries, newspapers, encyclopedias, translations, summaries, critical and review journals; on the other were the pamphlet wars against the monarchy and the government, pamphlet wars that required a rising number of *libellistes* to write them and which created “un patronage d’un type nouveau qui voit l’enrôlement des hommes de lettres les plus démunis au service des intérêts de leur commanditaires.”¹¹² And finally another population that has been studied and needs to be super-imposed onto the latter to have a better understanding of the sociological composition of the field as we know it today: that of the Académies de Province studied by Roche, which show a similar social distribution through an identical weight of the clergy, but a higher participation of the nobility on these institutions: 40% were noblemen.¹¹³ Unfortunately, such a sociological study does not exist today regarding the royal Académies (Académie Française, Académie des Sciences, Académie des Belles-Lettres et des Inscriptions) in conjunction with the specific social composition of the participants of the *salons* and *cafés littéraires*.

110 Roger Chartier, “L’homme de lettres.” *L’homme des Lumières*, ed. M. Vovelle (Paris: Editions du Seuil 1996) 165.

111 Robert Darnton, “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature”, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 1-40.

112 Roger Chartier, “L’homme de lettres.” 168. See also Keith Baker, “Public opinion as political invention” *Inventing the French Revolution 167-200*. On the issue of the libelles see Christian Jouhaud *Mazarinades: La Fronde des mots* (Paris: Aubier, 1985) and Christian Jouhaud “Les libelles en France au XVII^e siècle : action et publication”, *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique* 90-91 (2003): 33-45.

113 Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province (Académies et Académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789)* (Paris: Éditions De L’École Des Hautes Études En Sciences Sociales, 1989).

What is the conclusion to be drawn from this exploration? The first and obvious point is that the social subject of philosophy, mingled with the *hommes de lettres*, changed through the second half of the 18th century in particular, becoming both a broader and more diverse one. This evolution has been portrayed, perhaps anachronically, as a *democratization* of philosophy. But this term is tricky because a broader social diversity amongst the philosophers did not mean automatically a broader social access to philosophy. The second point, less obvious, is that this social history alone, very centered around the book history, does not *explain* this evolution: it only traces it. This is one of its main limitations. Of the explanations often given to this evolution, we have already discarded one, that of “sociologism”, but there is a second which is equally pervasive: that there is an inherent democratizing tendency alongside the development of commercial capitalism. They are both equally mechanic in that they do not seize the dialectical relation between the political economy of the philosopher and the ideological sphere he or she has to evolve in, which in the early modern period were at odds. The other implicit explanation, the “economicist” one, claims that the democratization is a result of the expansion of the book trade and the *partial commodification* of philosophy through its increased *commercialization*, with the underlining idea that, in addition to providing access to a greater readership, the market also tended to produce horizontal and not vertical relations.¹¹⁴ While it is true that the development of the book market led to the transformation of the identity of the philosopher into a writer from that of an instructor, for several reasons this did not automatically produce a consciousness of or the desire for the possibility of earning a living through this market.¹¹⁵

Two recent works, Turnovsky’s *The Literary Market* (2010) and Andrew’s *Patrons of Enlightenment* (2006) paid close attention to the political economy of the 18th century writers and philosophers, showing that it was a rather complex one.¹¹⁶ For even though, objectively speaking, literary and philosophical production was undergoing a material commodification, the social space, i.e. the bourgeois sphere, in which those works were discussed and argued about were still dominated by the ideology and forms of sociability of the nobility. The symbolic value of intellectual works did not originate from the approval of the market; rather, literary and philosophical works had to be valorized in the new separate spaces of intellectual sociability, the salons and the

114 This rather broad analysis, formulated in particular Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Colin Jones, “The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 101.1 (1996): 13-40.

115 The emergence of the philosopher as author-writer parallels the similar phenomena happening in the “literary” field, that of the *belles lettres*. It is completely true that in the 18th century: “Être philosophe, d’une part, c’est de plus en plus publier des livres de philosophie, qui trouvent des imprimeurs et des lecteurs de moins en moins liés aux institutions enseignantes.” Ribard, “Philosophe ou écrivain” 358. This process of de-corporatization is also a de-professionalization, that is accomplished through a “*litteralisation*” of philosophy (as Jouhaud and Ribard have showed): the philosopher gets progressively distanced and separated from the educational/teaching function, which becomes the secondary and not the fundamental criteria, and more closely associated with the emerging book market and the activity of publication. The new space where philosophy will develop is no longer that of education, but that of writing and conversation. Le *philosophe* is now defined more and more by his ability to publish and by his engagement in the emerging literary field. He is now more defined by his specific style of writing and his talent in this area.

116 Geoffrey Turnovsky, *The Literary Market: Authorship and Modernity in the Old Regime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010) and Edward Andrew, *Patrons of Enlightenment* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2006).

academies. And this is a characteristic which the intellectual field will maintain.

The situation was therefore a contradictory one, as the forms of sociability of the writers and philosophers were somehow at odds with the fast development of the book market. But the commercial enterprising of publishing was not in the authors' but rather in the publishers' hands. And there was not even a legal framework in which the *droit d'auteur* could have even been conceived.¹¹⁷ The philosopher was trapped between two forms of social dependency: the market and aristocratic patronage. This is not to say that the ideological and political sphere were a fetter to the development of the new material, capitalist relations, but instead that it was in this mismatch between the logic of capital and the forms of valorization of the new elite that what we called later the modern "symbolic power" emerged, to be later re-appropriated by the dominant bourgeois class.

The development of a publishing market cannot be read mechanically as the basis for an automatic impulse for self-promotion, as leading "naturally" to a new form of socio-economic formation based on the proclamation of independence (i.e. the petit-bourgeois figure of *l'homme qui vit de sa plume*), for it was happening in a society still heavily dominated by the ideology of privilege and which restricted political participation to a small elite. This "external" contradiction of the field was reflected in the philosophy and social attitude of many of the Enlightenment philosophers. As Andrew noted, "most of thinkers of the eighteenth century who preached intellectual independence depended upon patrons".¹¹⁸ And this became itself a matter of reflection amongst philosophers: Duclos's *Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle* (1751), D'Alembert's *Essai sur les Gens de Lettres et les Grands* (1753) or Diderot's *Essai sur la vie de Sénèque* (1778) are all different attempts to grapple with this issue.

Andrew shows the political economy of philosophy had a role and influence also in the representations the Enlightenment philosophers had in their own profession or activity. And I think it is there, at the level of representation or allegory of how philosophers perceived their social position and goals, that one can read the impact of the bourgeois or capitalist social relations. The first aspect that deserves our attention is the particular form in which Enlightenment philosophers conceived their intellectual autonomy. Turnovsky pointed out that we cannot assume that for the 18th century philosophers books were simply commodities, as they did not obtain a substantial revenue from them. Publication was rather "an effort to unite the two ideals of autonomy and social integration in such a way as to render them indistinguishable or, at least, non-contradictory," that of the assertion of intellectual independence but also social integration through patronage and credibility.¹¹⁹ In this sense, and because of the codes of

117 Turnovsky reminds us that "the connection of the privilege and intellectual property was an accidental and arbitrary one" (80), as it was not around the printing privilege that the notion of intellectual property began to be articulated but rather in the world of theater. On the issue of 18th century conceptions of intellectual authorship, see Raymond Birn "The Profits of Ideas"; Roger Chartier, "Figures of the Author," *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994) 25-60; and Carla Hesse, "Enlightenment epistemology and the laws of authorship in revolutionary France, 1777-1793" *Law and the Order of Culture*, ed. Robert Post (Berkeley: University of California, 1991) 109-137.

118 Edward Andrew, "The Senecan Moment: Patronage and Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 65.2 (2004): 277.

119 Turnovsky 99. The scholar further points out that credibility and authority were established by "the writers integration into high society through personal connections and a mastery of the behavioral and linguistic codes of le monde." Turnovsky 94.

sociability of the Enlightenment, there was a pressure amongst 18-century philosophers to contain their desire for economic promotion.¹²⁰

In early modern France, “the ideal of independent thought was fabricated in conditions of royal or aristocratic patronage”, and not of commercial success; at least this is the narrative clearly defended by Voltaire in the article “*gens de lettres*” in the *Encyclopédie*.¹²¹ Even though, objectively speaking, the market offered an alternative source of material stability for the writer, and a new space for its works to acquire value (exchange value), this was not the kind of valorization the writer was after. Rather, *symbolic value*, the kind of authentic and distinctive value philosophers aimed to accumulate through their writing and publishing, was itself antithetical to the rules of the market. The ideal of intellectual autonomy was framed by what Bourdieu defined as “*l'économie des biens symboliques*”, which ought to set different and “autonomous” criteria of valorization, different from those of the market or any existing direct material determination.¹²² Versus the impersonal market, that could only make quantitative exchange-value judgments, philosophers needed to be sure of the social quality of their works, ensuring they got read and appreciated in particular circles, and spaces. They had to establish a qualitative relation with their readership, as well as interactive one, in order to produce *symbolic* value judgments. As Bourdieu reminded the consolidation of symbolic value or capital in the 19th century was built upon the denial of the material and social conditions of intellectual production:

"ce n'est qu'au prix d'une rupture tendant à refouler dans le monde inférieur de l'économie l'aspect économique des actes et des rapports de production proprement symboliques que les différents univers de production symbolique ont pu se constituer en tant que microcosmes clos et séparés, où s'accomplissent des actions de part en part symboliques, pures et désintéressées (...), fondées sur le refus ou le refoulement de la part de travail productif qu'elles impliquent."¹²³

Understanding the dominant framework to establish the intellectual ideal of intellectual independence in early modern France requires paying closer attention both to the particular political economy of the symbolic sphere and to the discourse that mediated and interpreted this contradictory situation. It implies above all abandoning our conception of what intellectual autonomy could have been. Bourdieu pointed out that there is not a single model of intellectual or artistic autonomy, as “the same drive to autonomy” is “capable of producing opposed position-takings according to the nature of the powers they contest”.¹²⁴ He also added that “the degree of autonomy of the field...

120 According to Turnovsky: “The cultural logic of *honnêteté* required, however, that *gens de lettres* project their integration into groups defined by concentration not expansion, and that they offer their writings neither as vehicles of individual brilliances nor as the effects of their distance from readers, but as the emblems of their self-effacing participation in the collective venture of polite society.” Turnovsky 51.

121 Andrew, *Patrons of Enlightenment* 51.

122 See Pierre Bourdieu, “Le marché des biens symboliques” *L'année sociologique* 22 (1971): 49-126; and *L'Economie Des Biens Symboliques*. Paris: CNRS, 1994.

123 Pierre Bourdieu, *Mediations Pascaliennes* 31.

124 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996)

varies considerably according to periods and national traditions. It is related to the degree of symbolic capital which has been accumulated over the course of time by the action of successive generations”.¹²⁵ When philosophy then chose to cut all of its ties with the traditional and monopolistic intellectual authority of the Church, it needed to rebuild a form of capital of its own from zero. Since the 17th century it initiated a complicated path of “primitive accumulation” by negotiating a partial and complicated alliances with the State and aristocratic patronage; that is, they manage a kind of recognition of their distinct value through the intense socialization with the aristocratic elite. In this process philosophy had an added difficulty in relation to the worlds of letters and science: as is does not offer a *direct* utility or immediate service to the monarchy, it did not obviously serve to promote their glory and virtue and therefore it did not have, initially, a prominent place in the academies.

As for the model of intellectual independence in early modern France, Andrew pointed that “writers were torn between dependence on aristocratic patrons and the demands of the commercial market.”¹²⁶ And what is interesting is that they did not openly chose to ally or succumb to any of these contradictory forces in the political economy, their strategy was to deny both of them: “the status of writers rose in the last half of the eighteenth century partly through denial; writers denied their professionalization within a commercial press culture and also denied their dependence on royal and aristocratic patrons.”¹²⁷ The best example of this denial is for Andrew D’Alembert’s *Essai sur la société des gens de lettres et des grands*.

Writers' autonomy was ultimately, for most of them that of an attempted conquest of an economic dependence, by sacrificing a political one, increased role of royal patronage. The philosophers who benefited from royal support maintained their silence about this sacrifice. Early modern authors tended to avoid not only the subject of their economic dependence on patronage, but also the possibility of establishing their independence through the gains of their work because they sought to avoid a the public promotion of a subjectivity animated by the production of commercial gain. Instead what was promoted is the ideal of the intellectual vocation at the price of the sacrifice of hopes of fortune in exchange of glory.

If we go back now to the “ridiculous” ideal of Marxist scholars that presented the early modern philosophy as a representation of a bourgeois ideal, we can say the Enlightenment philosopher was not the precursor to but rather both the negative image of it. The bourgeois political figure functions in the public sphere by obscuring the true origins of its domination, that is the economic foundations of its political power which is a class power. The early modern intellectual figure built its prestige and distinction through the constant and explicit denial of the economic and political dependency which framed its intellectual production. They both shared the need to disguise through denial and illusion the true origins of the kind of authorities they exercised in the public sphere, that of political legitimacy (ensured by the public defense of meritocracy and the

220.

125 Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* 220-221.

126 Andrew, *Patrons of Enlightenment* 48.

127 Andrew, *Patrons of Enlightenment* 50.

parliamentary system) and that of intellectual recognition (produced by the establishment and regular sanctioning of societies of peers). The form of their value judgments in the public sphere then shared the formalism which characterizes bourgeois relations and exchange value. But there is however a cruel and determinant difference between them: the intellectual will never be a bourgeois even if he or she behaves like one. Their material relation to the world, which they both hide, is completely different: the bourgeois hides his or her structural enrichment and domination and the intellectual his or her structural dependency and thirst for recognition.

Honnête-homme or Libertin: the Antinomies of Philosophical Praxis in 17th Century France

As I said before, both Walter and Chartier are dealing with the *homme de lettres*, without paying any specific attention to philosophy. Admittedly to do so would be a challenge, as philosophical activity was being “deprofessionalized” throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, as it was not anymore tied to an institution. Yet the true challenge to doing a social history of philosophy in the early modern period is not just one of producing more precise historical and sociological data but also of grasping how the changing political economy of the field transformed the practice and content of early modern philosophy.

What is obvious is that philosophy is no longer the single business of clerics. But by losing its structuring around an institution it also loses its institutionalized material means of existence. Beginning in the 17th century, philosophy begins to be an activity of some sectors of the nobility, and later, in the 18th century, it opens up to an even wider social scope. In one of his later lectures at the Collège de France, Bourdieu summarized this transition as the transformation of a *corporation* into a *field*, even though he did not dwell unfortunately of the important implications of this change to approach the new philosophical production and discourse:

"L'univers philosophique, qui était grosso modo un corps, s'est transformé progressivement en un champ, c'est-à-dire en un univers dans lequel il y a des pôles, des positions opposées, des positions antagonistes; il y a toujours un accord sur les terrains de désaccord, mais on n'est plus entre soi, la question même de l'appartenance fait problème."¹²⁸

My hypothesis is that when philosophical practice changes from an institutionalized discipline to a field, its representation also changes from philosophy as an embodied social *praxis*—that is something that socially transforms the subject by ensuring its social identity (either its corporatist or oppositional identity)—to something articulated around a disembodied skill which has a social function for society as a whole, and no longer for its particular practitioner. The Enlightenment was, or at least this is what I claim, a moment of public redefinition of the social function of philosophy and its distinctive elements—a discussion which until this point had never been up for debate in the bourgeois public sphere, —but which did not always leading to a consensual resolution.

128 Pierre Bourdieu, “Le fonctionnement du champ intellectuel.” *Le champ littéraire*. Spec. issue of *Regards Sociologiques* 17-18 (1999): 19.

And because sociology tells us *who* was doing philosophy or might be doing it, but it does not tell us *how* philosophy was done and what was the social representation and meaning of it, to test this hypothesis one needs to look at the philosophical and literary texts to see if its possible to unearth or trace this evolution from a praxis to a function of philosophy.

It seems to me that throughout the 17th century the social praxis of philosophy as it is appropriated by the nobility becomes a mode of the social existence of the noble or gentleman. This displacement of the social location of philosophy was first formulated by Levi in his pioneering book *Philosophy as a Social Expression* (1962) which devoted a whole chapter to characterizing modern philosophy as the “age of the gentleman” exemplified in the figure of Descartes.¹²⁹ Levi’s account is indeed a very broad sketch of a social history of philosophy, that unfortunately lacks the necessary documentary proof that should be provided by both historical and sociological data and rigorous analysis of philosophical texts. Yet, despite these weaknesses, the scope of his approach allows him to show that this aristocratic development was paralleled by an intellectual and *institutional* revolution. This was the “scientific revolution”, which occurred mainly outside of the universities and increased the split of philosophical activity into two separate but overlapping social spaces, embodied by two different social subjects: on the one hand the university cleric, on the other the noble *déclassé* or in crisis with his social function. Within this social process, Levi sees the emergence of a new social motivation and form for philosophical inquiry:

"Separation from the university is perhaps only the most striking sociological characteristic of philosophy in the age of the gentleman, but there are others which equally well reinforce the concept of leisure and idleness, of abstraction from the busy world of politic, productivity, and active engagement that characterizes a philosophy which is primarily epistemological in its orientation and turns away both the metaphysical horizon which controls human life and the moral concerns which reflects its problematic institutional activity to a more narrow concentration on the structure and the operations of mind."¹³⁰

The institutional displacement of philosophy leads to a different framing of its goals, freed from the institutional weight of tradition and the vertical organization of the discipline in the university. Philosophy turns towards epistemological questions (what are the roads to knowing the truth), as well as moral ones (what is the best way to conduct one’s life?). The philosophical interests of the enlightened aristocrat or the *libertin* were different, of course, from the cleric’s. Philosophy is also given a new method, based on the idea and practice of self-reflection, seeking foundation of thought in oneself, (this is the case in Descartes’s *Méditations Métaphysiques* 1641) and projecting an ideal intellectual autonomy (outside of any institution, freed from any social constraint).

This appropriation of philosophy by the a section of the nobility, which many historians see epitomized in the figure of Descartes, was of course a pre-condition for the emergence of the public sphere. But, as Jacob noted, by re-founding philosophy’s new

129 Albert William Levi, “Modern Philosophy: The Age of the Gentleman, Descartes,” *Philosophy As Social Expression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 163-230.

130 Levi, *Philosophy As Social Expression* 166.

metaphysics on individual reason, mediation and retrospection, "by appealing to selves and wills Descartes is now on dangerous ground in relation to the needs of public order", as "such a self-willed person might not bend his will or reason to the state".¹³¹ Jacob reads there not only a contradiction but the first formulation of the division of private and public use of reason that will structure the bourgeois public sphere. Descartes' position was clear: instead of encouraging a challenge to the State "the Cartesian method aims solely at ordering the individual's life", a position that she qualified as "radical individualism"¹³².

This radical individualism of 17th century position found, however, two opposite social expressions, neither unique. And this is where the social history of philosophy becomes interesting as it is not a teleological narrative of evolution but one of a series of *political* choices. The Cartesian choice of accepting the established order was not the only one: to the philosopher as *honnête homme* responded the philosopher as *libertin*. In his essay "Who Were the Philosophes?" Gumbrecht traced a history of the social representation of the figure of the philosopher, looking at philosophical texts, intellectual polemics and memoirs, starting from the late 17th century to the end of the 18th century.¹³³ He is interested in tracing an evolution of the concept of philosophy, until its reconfiguration as "the basic structure of the Enlightenment" and embodied in the person of the philosopher, as a new social and intellectual subject.¹³⁴ Gumbrecht is working back in time to reconstitute the origins of the mid 18th century figure of the *philosophe*, which he saw as the result of a deep transformation of the practice of philosophy, or at least of the literary representation and public projection of what it ought to be, initiated the previous century.¹³⁵ Between 1670 and 1730, philosophy, at least its representation, even if not its practice was aristocratic, playing a role in "regulating aristocratic's affectivity" by appealing this subject's *amour-propre* and offering him or her (the noble) an alternative (and distinctive) form of sociability, different from the courtly, but that is still distinctly aristocratic: "To be a philosophe became the role of the upright person who, because of sincérité, maintained a certain distance from 'good society', and cultivated self-reflection and those feelings of self-esteem that depend on the effect they have on the effect they have on others".¹³⁶

131 Margaret C Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 45.

132 Jacob, *Scientific Culture* 45-46.

133 See also the homonymous piece by John Lough, "Who Were the Philosophes?" *Studies in Eighteenth-Century French Literature: Presented to Robert Niklaus*, ed. Robert Niklaus, John Fox, Mark H. Waddicor, and Derek A. Watts etc., (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1975) 139-50.

134 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Who Were the Philosophes?", *Making Sense in Life and Literature*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press) 133.

135 One of the weaknesses of Gumbrecht's endeavor is that he develops this intellectual history without relying on any elements of sociology or social history. The fact that he does not contrast the representations created by literary and philosophical texts with the account we have of the social reality of the field (to better situate the authors in it) can be considered a methodological problem. Still, he provides one of the most interesting accounts of the evolution of the representation of this change of philosophy, connecting an often-assumed social subject with a social practice and its literary representation. I think his narrative does not contradict but rather fills a gap in social history.

136 Gumbrecht 136.

Gumbrecht based his argument on the analysis of Molières' plays (*Le Misanthrope*, 1666), La Rochefoucault's *Maximes* (1678), definitions from institutional dictionaries (the Académie, Richelet and Furetière's ones), and personal *mémoires* (Saint-Simon's and Marais's), through which he traces this figure of the *philosophe* as a "free-thinking aristocrat", sometimes a *misanthrope*, sometimes a *libertin*: "to be a philosophe outside of society was obviously a new attitude, which on the one hand was experienced as a break with social conventions, as lacking a sense of duty and even madness. But on the other hand, the position of the philosophe outside of aristocratic society was also seen as the condition and expression of his superiority".¹³⁷ In the late 17th century there was an increasing interest in philosophy by some sectors of the nobility who are disenchanted with the courtly world and the traditional social and political function assigned to their blood status (many times because they are more and more unable to perform it). For them, philosophy was a social practice both of distinction and interiorized rebellion.

Interestingly Gumbrecht did the opposite of Jacob: while the latter focuses on the Cartesian model of the *honnête homme* or *philosophe de cour*, Gumbrecht took for the 17th century implicitly a marginal figure of the philosopher and projects it as the norm: he does not mention the university cleric, nor of the *philosophe-courtsan*, but the oppositional and marginal figure of the *libertin*; and he does so because he was working backwards to find the ideological antecessor of the philosopher as enlightener. His view of 17th-century philosophy is not that of Descartes, Pascal, or even that of Arnaud and Nicole, who are still today the only celebrated figures of 17th-century French philosophy, but rather that of the libertine figures which have been wiped out of history: Bayle, Gassendi, Cyrano de Bergerac, La Motte Le Vayer, Saint-Evremond. The paradox is that the existence of this practice of philosophy where the philosopher was as an outsider of society, was duplicated in their philosophy by an exteriority to the traditional criteria of truth (and led most of the time at least to a public profession of Skepticism, or what or Epicureanism), they achieved the construction of a doubly *external* point of critique, external to the social norms, (the Catholic Church, its morality and the State), and also to intellectual norms (against the authority of Aristotle, the authority of the Catholic reading of the Bible, the authoritative submission of philosophy to theology). The philosophical generation that followed these "pariahs" tried to institutionalize this exteriority of space by creating an "autonomous" intellectual sphere of debate and critique.

How to reconcile the existence of these two opposite perspectives of the social practice of philosophy? We can say that the literary-philosophical field is constituted by a contradictory movement and not a univocal one, There was of course an hegemonic centripetal movement of gravitation towards the top of society, as Viala, Jouhaud, Turnovsky and others have showed. One where writers were being integrated "into the networks and values of social elites," leading also to a "literary" transformation of elite identity" which is socially diverse.¹³⁸ But there is also a centrifugal one, stepping away from this social and intellectual concentration around courtly practices, and articulated around the secretive and conspiring practice of libertine philosophy. It is not that the libertine was simply developing an a-social subjectivity. He or she was taking an

137 Gumbrecht 137.

138 Turnovsky 45, 46.

oppositional stance to the courtly aristocratic ethos, the mingling of the intellectual and political in a spectacle of the self, and did so mainly by reclaiming a different practice of philosophy as a coherent or holistic way of life, derived from the three main schools of the Hellenistic period (Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism), which were themselves already critiques of the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of philosophy. And these two social practices had opposite logics: while the practice of the *honnête homme* or *philosophe de cours* is the performance of his or her allegiance and civility in the public space of the court, it is a logic of spectacle which splits the private from the public persona, the libertine lives philosophy inspired by the Ancient ideals of “philosophy as a way of life”.¹³⁹ He is trying to reconcile this opposition between the private and public, which is also a division between the epistemological or scientific preoccupation and the moral ones, or between the moral theory and the moral practice. This is why the separation of libertins between *libertins de mœurs* and *libertins d'esprit*, developed by Pintard, does not make sense:¹⁴⁰ The whole point of the libertine practice of philosophy is that the intellectual subversion always *implicitly* contained or hinted at the suspicion not only a moral equivalent, being it a libertinage in its private life, including or particularly in the sexual one, or one of political and religious beliefs. And this practice of philosophy could only be done in private and secret spaces, therefore signified with implicit and codified allusion in their texts, away from the desire of public spectacle of the self, as there was no public social space to perform explicitly such a practice.

This social separation of a new practice of philosophy from the traditional university will also have another key implication outlined by Gumbrecht: “only through a distance from traditional social norms and on the basis of the self-reflection it made possible was the philosophe able to formulate his enlightening function.”¹⁴¹ Only after philosophical discourse was able to ground itself socially outside of the Catholic university was it possible to think a philosophy that would question and challenge the theological dogma from a different and separate standpoint, a different intellectual ground: that of philosophy based on the new science.

Yet if through his or her social practice the *libertin* can be considered the precursor of the “enlightened philosopher”, it is more accurate to consider this figure to antecessor to the “matérialiste”, as it signified the practice of philosophy which was at the edges of public representation and acceptance, and also questioning the division public/private. As Cavaillé has pointed out, “*libertin*” and “*libertinage*” were polemical terms, derived from the Latin “*liberti*” which originally referred to the “*affranchis*”.¹⁴²

139 To better understand this conception in Ancient Philosophy of philosophy as a “spiritual exercise”, see Pierre Hadot, *Exercices Spirituels Et Philosophie Antique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1981) and *La citadelle intérieure: Introduction aux Pensées de Marc Aurèle* (Paris: Ed. Fayard, 1992).

140 See René Pintard, *Le Libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle* (Genève: Slatkine, 1983). See also Didier Foucault, “L’histoire des ‘libertins’ reste à faire,” *Les Dossiers du Grihl*, Libertinage, athéisme, irrégion (2010), Web. 01 December 2013; Stéphane Van Damme, “Libertinage de mœurs / libertinage érudit. Le travail de la distinction”, *Les Dossiers du Grihl*, Les dossiers de Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, Libertinage, athéisme, irrégion (2011) Web. 1 August 2014.

141 Gumbrecht 138.

142 As Cavaillé explained: “Le premier sens latin du *libertinus*, l’esclave affranchi ou plutôt son fils (diminutif de *libertus*), vite passé dans les langues vernaculaires, reste largement prégnant dans les usages postérieurs des termes, contrairement à ce qui a pu être soutenu. Le *libertin* est d’abord celui qui fait un mauvais usage de sa liberté, qui reste

The term was used to stigmatize the position and attitude of some intellectual and social practices considered as “l’exercice d’une liberté excessive, erronée, périlleuse, susceptible d’être identifiée dans n’importe quel domaine (religieux, moral, politique, *belles-lettres*, etc.)”.¹⁴³ The term *libertin* most of the time singled out the atheism or “irreligion” as well as the “*irrégularité morale*” of these philosophers. It marks the practice of philosophy not only outside the traditional codes of noble sociability but also of religious belief, challenging implicitly the two ideological pillars of the regime.¹⁴⁴

The “Enlightened” Philosopher and the Universality of Philosophical Judgement

Yet the decisive transformation which led to the emergence of the “enlightened philosophe” in the period of the 1730-1750s had to do with the emergence of a public sphere and the progressive redefinition of philosophy in its relation with society. Philosophy was no longer only a social praxis, that of the *honnête-homme* or the *libertin*. As it penetrated the social spaces of the new urban elite, its nature changed and its specific role in the public sphere was up for discussion. Gumbrecht borrows from the Habermasian sociological account of the rise of the public bourgeois sphere to explain this major change in philosophy:

“If in the course of the 1740s the philosophe as a socially secluded misanthrope and bookworm with no knowledge of life had been reinterpreted as an engaged enlightener, then it was only in the two subsequent decades that this new understanding of the word and the role permeated the educated to a greater extent (...) This was not just a result of the persuasiveness of Enlightenment argumentation and self-representation, which organized and articulated itself through an increasing number of magazines, books, societies for a “bourgeois” public, but was also favored by a crisis in the system of the ancien régime, as was expressed, among other things, by Damien’s attempt to assassinate Louis XV, by France’s humiliation in the Seven Year’ War, in a series of sensational judicial scandals, in the expulsion of the Jesuits from the kingdom, and in the

esclave (de ses passions, de la chair, du vice, de l’imagination, etc.) en prétendant à l’affranchissement. En effet, les mots « libertin » et « libertinage » désignent en premier lieu, pour la stigmatiser (même si une autodésignation positive a pu exister au XVIe siècle et, en tout cas, est attestée pour l’époque médiévale), la revendication de libertés indues : la liberté de conscience d’abord, la liberté de pensée (la revendication de la *libertas philosophandi* a pu être perçue au XVIIe siècle comme typique des « philosophes libertins »), la liberté de mœurs (taxée de licence, de débauche, etc.), sans oublier la liberté politique, dimension complètement occultée par une historiographie qui n’a vu dans « ses » libertins que des champions de l’absolutisme, et qu’il faut entièrement réexaminer, comme nous y invite J. Barthes, mais aussi l’ensemble de la documentation concernant la Hollande et l’Angleterre et en fin de compte la France elle-même.” Cavaillé, “Libérer le libertinage” 66. See Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, “L’histoire des ‘libertins’ reste à faire.” *Les Dossiers du Grihl*, Libertinage, athéisme, irréligion (2010). Web. 01 December 2013; and Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, “Libérer le libertinage Une catégorie à l’épreuve des sources,” *Annales HSS*, 64.1 (2009): 45-80.

143 Cavaillé, “L’histoire des ‘libertins’” 1.

144 According to Cavaillé the category of “libertin”: “exprime justement l’idée que, dans le discours normatif, auquel le terme appartient d’abord indiscutablement, la critique et dérision de la religion, voire le simple défaut de religion, le manque de dévotion, sont inséparables de la transgression des lois morales, et d’abord en constituent en elles-mêmes une forme. « Libertinage » dit que non seulement l’irréligion conduit à la licence (et que, réciproquement, la débauche est pente glissante vers l’irréligion), mais aussi que le défaut de croyance et d’assiduité religieuse ruine l’ordre moral et que la licence morale est en soi détachement de Dieu et destruction de la foi.” Cavaillé, “L’histoire des ‘libertins’” 3.

power struggle between crown and parliament.”¹⁴⁵

The emergence of this public sphere is for Gumbrecht a central step in a longer transformation of the history of the Enlightenment as a concept. It will further unfold after the Revolution, but is here contextualized in a deepening of the political crisis of the *Ancien Régime* in the middle of the century. This concept of public sphere needs to be analyzed in greater detail.¹⁴⁶

During the course of the 18th century, the redefinition of philosophy's two new and competing criteria were borrowed by philosophers in order to reshape the philosophical discourse to distinguish it from scholasticism: a new practice of literary or philological analysis of texts, inspired by Spinoza (the philosopher as a reader of texts and the world, as having a closer relation to meaning) and the expertise in the new experimental physics coming from England (the philosopher as a modern scientist unveiling the hidden functioning and mechanism of the world). Both criteria were combined in the formulation of the distinctiveness of Enlightenment philosophy, but they also were sometimes at odds, as they would become two competing paradigms of truth and authority.

What is certain is that, by 1750, philosophy is placed, by some leading intellectuals (Voltaire, Diderot, La Mettrie), at the center of the intellectual public life. D’Alembert was maybe the most explicit in portraying his century as one of historical revenge and triumph of philosophy: “la philosophie, qui forme le goût dominant de notre siècle, semble, par les progrès qu'elle fait parmi nous, vouloir réparer le temps qu'elle a perdu, et se venger de l'espèce de mépris que lui avaient marqué nos pères.”¹⁴⁷ But Voltaire was also quite explicit in his article “Gens de Lettres” in the *Encyclopedie*: “Aujourd’hui cette critique est moins nécessaire, et l’esprit philosophique lui a succédé: c’est cet esprit philosophique qui semble constituer le caractère des gens de lettres ; et quand il se joint au bon goût, il forme un littérateur accompli.”¹⁴⁸ Philosophers managed to establish a universal scope of their discourse and authority by portraying philosophy as a universal practice of critique with no particular object. Philosophy was not to be the revelation or consolidation of truths, the consolidation of content, but a method of inquiry, which is nurtured by all sciences and disciplines. This view of the enlightenment philosopher as a practitioner of many arts and sciences, in contrast with the university scholar attached to a textual corpus and doctrine, is exemplified, again, in the article “Gens de Lettres”:

“On ne donne point ce nom à un homme qui, avec peu de connaissances, ne

145 Gumbrecht 143.

146 “As a fundamental Enlightenment concept, the history of the philosophe begins by dissociating an interactive role characteristic of seventeenth-century court society from its still “feudal” origins and ends by setting the stage for the incorporation into bourgeois society as a professional role whose institutional foundations in France were created by the Empire. It is between these two types of society that the conceptual history of the philosophe makes the history of the Enlightenment comprehensible: from its constitution as a subject of the Enlightenment in which reflection and social action converge, it feed into the canonization of the philosophes as the elite of the ancien régime up to the normative status of the canon of their writings during the revolutionary years and finally up to its transposition into a powerfully legitimizing horizon of a past detached from the present.” Gumbrecht 134.

147 D’Alembert, *Discours Préliminaire de l’Encyclopedie* 116.

148 Voltaire, “Gens de Lettres” *Encyclopedie*.

cultive qu'un seul genre. Celui qui, n'ayant lu que des romans, ne fera que des romans; celui qui, sans aucune littérature, aura composé au hasard quelques pièces de théâtre ; qui, dépourvu de science, aura fait quelques sermons, ne sera pas compté parmi les gens de lettres. Ce titre a, de nos jours, encore plus d'étendue que le mot *grammairien* n'en avait chez les Grecs et chez les Latins. Les Grecs se contentaient de leur langue, les Romains n'apprenaient que le grec ; aujourd'hui l'homme de lettres ajoute souvent à l'étude du grec et du latin celle de l'italien, de l'espagnol, et surtout de l'anglais, La carrière de l'histoire est cent fois plus immense qu'elle ne l'était pour les anciens, et l'histoire naturelle s'est accrue à proportion de celle des peuples. On n'exige pas qu'un homme de lettres approfondisse toutes ces matières : la science universelle n'est plus à la portée de l'homme ; mais les véritables gens de lettres se mettent en état de porter leurs pas dans ces différents terrains, s'ils ne peuvent les cultiver tous.”¹⁴⁹

As Chartier pointed out, Voltaire “a converti la critique philologique en esprit philosophique”.¹⁵⁰ The *Encyclopédie* did not only forward a consolidated and consensual feature of the “new philosophy” centered around critique, it also attempted to shape the whole new intellectual field as a philosophical one, establishing the preeminence of philosophy over the other disciplines or practices. The “despecialization” of philosophy allowed it, as a universal form of critique with no pre-established content, to take a position on public affairs which are of concern for society as whole:

“Celui qui n'est plus seulement un homme de cabinet, voué à l'écriture, devient le gardien vigilant d'une conception de l'homme qui mérite combat et abnégation, lorsqu'elle est bafouée par les pouvoirs en place. La relation directe qu'il entretient avec la vérité et le maniement d'un savoir qui n'est jamais enfermé dans les lisières étroites d'une spécialisation l'autorise à prendre parti dans les affaires de la cité”.¹⁵¹

The constitution of the modern figure of the intellectual in France in the 18th century, a figure which Goulemot has defined as a “producteur autonome de modèles politiques et sociaux,” and who is qualified “apte ... à juger, sans autres référence que lui-même, de la validité des formes sociales ou des modes de penser existants,” was accomplished through the double move of the transformation of philosophy into a universal method of critique of existing discourses and the assertion of philosophy as the master or overarching discipline, with a supposed “natural right” to oversee other disciplines and sciences.¹⁵²

Turnovsky has shown how this new claim of a universal and social utility of philosophy is concomitant with a the constitution of a new social identity of the

149 Voltaire, “Gens de Lettres”.

150 Chartier, “L'homme de lettres” 160.

151 Chartier, “L'homme de lettres” 162.

152 Jean-Marie Goulemot and Pascal Ory, *Dernières Questions Aux Intellectuels: Et Quatre Essais Pour Y Répondre* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1990) 61.

philosopher. The process of constituting a public intellectual sphere in which there was the intense socialization between the men of letters and aristocrats, which initially was a sort of “aristocratization” of letters, with *société* understood in the seventeenth century meaning as (...) the pleasure of leisured interactions and the exclusivity of elite gatherings”.¹⁵³ Throughout the 18th century the philosopher’s practice still kept references to the *honnêteté* and continued the trend of a “gradual mondaine assimilation of writers,” but there was a qualitative break: the increased social and public character of their activity transformed their social identity and the concept of philosophy.¹⁵⁴ Looking at Duclos and D’Alembert’s influential essays regarding the status of the *hommes de lettres*, Turnovsky detected both a continuity and an inversion in the meaning of their social attitude. If the 18th century intellectual still seeks to please in high society, “he downplays social agility in favor of a consistency figured as the writer’s steadfast commitment to ‘tell the truth’ no matter what,” putting the instructional function of philosophy and its dedication to utility above pleasing and seeking social acceptance.¹⁵⁵ The Enlightenment figure of the *philosophe* is therefore different from the *bel esprit*, as he “by contrast, will do what he can to make the truths that he tells as palatable as possible to such a group, but he will not distort or obfuscate them in the cause of amusing its members or saving them from discomfort or boredom.”¹⁵⁶ If the philosopher is social, “sociability is not an end in itself, at best, it is a means to an end” and this is the greatest change in relationship to the previous century where the philosopher was either a *mondain* (subordinating intellectual activity to courtly socialization) or a *libertin* (who acquired an intellectual independence at the price of rejecting courtly elite relations).¹⁵⁷ The new philosopher’s social character was to be his new care for society as a whole, and his public commitment to be “useful” for society.

The transformation of philosophical discourse into a universal discourse of critique, a form with no a priori content which began to explore the new public form of philosophy, came also at a price: that of becoming, in the end, an empty universality. The intellectual sphere was constituted first through a process of reciprocal exchange of qualities in the spaces of literary sociability like the *salons*, where the writers and philosophers gave symbolic prestige to the nobles, and the aristocrats, in return, ceded or recognized some social status to the former ones. However this pattern of social interaction began to crack when philosophical practice started to gain a legitimacy of its own through its internal reshaping as a universal practice of critique and by interrogating the social utility of philosophy. Philosopher’s universal critique claimed to have no social origins or boundaries; it praised itself for formulating an objective and rational point of view on the world, which was not that of a particular social sector. Philosophy aspired to be an intellectual activity analogous to exchange value in the symbolic and intellectual sphere: the objective measure of all things, the rule of public opinion. In this effort it was

153 Turnovsky 45.

154 Turnovsky 82.

155 Turnovsky 84.

156 Turnovsky 85.

157 Turnovsky 85.

confronted with two contradictions: the risk of losing its social quality and becoming a formal skill that one that could be taught or could produce and reproduce, for which one could be remunerated, a skill that could be bought and sold, (i.e. commodified) in the market; and the fact that there was not a common interest of society as a whole, but conflicting interests, and opposing views of what humanity's true interest was.

In the French Enlightenment Philosophy became social in the sense that it reflected upon its relation to society as a whole, its social utility, but also in the sense that it became rearticulated as a discourse of universal critique, which could be applied to any object, which had no a priori social restrictions for its exercise but the participation in the public sphere, and was not tied to any particular institution or social code. Gumbrecht noted that the first attempts to define philosophy started with Voltaire's publication of his *Lettres anglaises* in 1734 and with the publication of the anonymous *Nouvelles libertés de penser* in 1743. What I want to show is that since its early formulations, the vision of the philosopher as a social enlightener was not a point of complete agreement between the Enlightenment participants.

Dumarsais' text "Le philosophe", which was first published in the *Nouvelles libertés de pensée* and later, in a heavily edited form, in the 13th volume of the *Encyclopédie* in 1763, is a measure of this internal tension in the French enlightenment, a tension that would explode with the persecution of materialist philosophy. Gumbrecht reads in Dumarsais's text, as well as in further definitions in Diderot, D'Alembert, and the reflections in the memoirs of the marquis d'Argens a "convergence of the concept of 'philosophe' with reflection and social action."¹⁵⁸ I would argue that more than a convergence, there was an initial compromise that in fact hid a growing divergence.

The *Encyclopédie's* version of Dumarsais "Le philosophe"—the text's second version, the one heavily edited by Voltaire—was probably the most widely read text delineating the new social vision of philosophy. It emphasized the social role of the *philosophe* as an intellectual that "ne se croit point en exil dans ce monde; il ne croit point être en pays ennemi", that is to say a figure who participates in the public sphere without challenging the political legitimacy of the state. He is "un honnête homme qui veut plaire et se rendre utile."¹⁵⁹ The philosopher is now redefined as the "enlightener" who brings a new knowledge to the literate world, and also as someone that practices philosophy in a different way. Philosophy is now a form of *critique* of other discourses (philosophical and theological), and it is also the expression of a wider interest in other intellectual spheres. This philological practice of *philosophical reading* of the world and texts, one associated with the dissident libertine subjectivity that no longer believes in the

158 Gumbrecht 141. In D'Argenson's diary "between 1739 and 1756 confirm the decisive structural shift in the meaning norm of philosophe from the image of a stoic to the subject of Enlightenment." Gumbrecht 141. Nonetheless it would be to contextualize in particular the source of D'Argenson, who was a social and political player, not just a mere observer in the field.

159 The relevant section reads: "Mais ce n'est pas l'esprit seul que le philosophe cultive. Il porte plus loin ses attentions et ses soins. L'homme n'est point un monstre qui ne doit vivre que dans les abîmes de la mer ou dans le fond d'une forêt ; les seules commodités de la vie lui rendent le commerce des autres nécessaire, et, dans quelque état qu'il se puisse trouver, ses besoins et son bien-être l'engagent à vivre en société. Notre philosophe ne se croit point en exil dans ce monde ; il ne croit point être en pays ennemi ; il veut jouir en sage économe des biens que la nature lui offre ; il veut trouver des plaisirs avec les autres, et, pour en trouver, il faut en faire aux autres : ainsi il cherche à convenir à ceux avec qui le hasard ou son choix le font vivre, et il trouve en même temps ce qui lui convient ; c'est un honnête homme qui veut plaire et se rendre utile." Dumarsais/ Voltaire "Philosophe," *Encyclopédie*.

“official” interpretation of things, needs to be traced back to Spinoza (*Tractatus theologico-politicus* 1670) and Bayle (*Dictionnaire critique* 1697), and also to the “libertin” or clandestine current (especially Gassendi). Yet it was in the mid eighteenth century that Voltaire (again the author of this appropriation) in his article “Gens de lettres” for the *Encyclopédie*, will attempt to transform philosophy into a useful critique of values and discourses:

“Cette raison approfondie et épurée que plusieurs ont répandue dans leurs écrits et dans leurs conversations, a contribué beaucoup à instruire et à polir la nation: leur critique ne s'est plus consumée sur des mots grecs et latins; mais appuyée d'une saine philosophie, elle a détruit tous les préjugés dont la société étoit infectée; prédictions des astrologues, divinations des magiciens, sortilèges de toute espece, faux prodiges, faux merveilleux, usages superstitieux; elle a relegué dans les écoles mille disputes puériles qui étoient autrefois dangereuses et qu'ils ont rendues méprisables: par - là ils ont en effet servi l'état.”¹⁶⁰

However Voltaire’s censorship of the text did eliminate two important features of Dumarsais’s initial clandestine formulation: its open opposition to religion and contempt for theological debates, and his active role in civil society as an intellectual-citizen.

3. A first Materialist Conception of the Enlightened Philosopher: DuMarsais’s “Le Philosophe”

DuMarsais is maybe, with La Mettrie, one of the first materialist thinkers in early modern France, in the sense that, as I show in my chapter on the history of materialism, “materialist” philosophy was born out of the transformation of the ideals which were previously articulated in clandestine circles but that became transformed as they entered the public space.¹⁶¹ It is true that DuMarsais did not develop as much of a holistic materialist conception of philosophy, as La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvetius or D’Holbach did; nonetheless, I consider his work to be important, as it proposed a first, maybe unconscious, articulation of the materialist position as he contributed to the public reformulation of clandestine epicurean philosophy.¹⁶²

DuMarsais original text of “Le philosophe” (i.e. before the various censorships imposed by Voltaire), was published anonymously and clandestinely, in the book *Nouvelles libertés de penser* (1743), supposedly in Amsterdam but really printed in Paris.¹⁶³ This key essay collection was not only labeled by the *Mémoires de Trévoux* as

160 “Gens de lettres”, *Encyclopédie*.

161 For an account of these libertine or clandestine materialist philosophers like Boulainvillier, Miraboud, Fréret or Maillet, see Olivier Bloch *Le matérialisme du XVIIIe siècle et la littérature clandestine* (Paris: Vrin, 1982).

162 See Alain Niderst “Sur l’oeuvre de Dumarsais,” *Anales de literatura española* 3 (1984): 349-364 ; and for a more updated account Gianluca Mori “Du Marsais philosophe clandestin: textes et attributions,” *La philosophie clandestine à l’âge classique*, ed. Anthony McKenna and Alain Mothu (Paris: Voltaire Foundation, 1997) 169-92.

163 The text was re-published in two more versions later in the century, in the *Encyclopédie* (1763) and later as an appendix in Voltaire’s *Les lois de Minos* (1773), in both cases the text was cut by Voltaire in several key places. On the multiple editions and modifications of Dumarsais’s text and its interpretations, see Herbert Dieckmann, “‘Le philosophe’: Texts and Interpretation,” (Saint-Louis: Washington University, 1948); and Daniel Brewer, “The subject

“irreligious” and “materialist”, but its publication, led to the arrest of several *colporteurs* and also of its publisher Nicolas Guillaume.¹⁶⁴ I see DuMarsais’s text as a transition from the 17th century clandestine libertine to the 18th century materialist philosophy, which formulates a set of problems regarding the social function of philosophy.

DuMarsais’s “Le Philosophe” has been mentioned several times by scholarship as being the first text where the metaphor of the “man as a machine” appeared, a metaphor which has been constructed to be the “distinctive” sign of materialism because of its supposed determinist meaning. The philosopher formulated this image to qualify all humans and also the philosopher himself: “le philosophe est une machine humaine comme un autre homme; mais c’est une machine qui par sa constitution mécanique réfléchit sur ses mouvements”.¹⁶⁵ His appropriation of this metaphor has less to do with a response to Descartes than an radicalization of Spinoza’s positions in order to formulate a new definition of the philosopher. Indeed Dumarsais’ text begins with a harsh observation: “il n’y a rien qui coûte moins à acquérir aujourd’hui que le titre de philosophe,” and proposes defining a new figure of the philosopher which is not the university clerk, the one who carries “une vie obscure et retirée,” had “quelques dehors de sagesse”, “un peu de lecture;” and the mondaine figure of the aristocrat amateur who thinks it is enough to write “quelques observations sur l’esprit et le coeur humain.”¹⁶⁶ Dumarsais’s new definition of the philosopher as a public Enlightener which influenced La Mettrie and Diderot was to tackle the philosophers position towards religion and towards the people.

The originality of Dumarsais proposal and his importance for the emergence of as materialist philosophe is to be found precisely in the passages Voltaire took out of the text in order to be published in the *Encyclopédie* two decades later:

“Ainsi, la raison exige de lui qu’il connaisse, qu’il étudie et qu’il travaille à acquérir les qualités sociables. Il est étonnant que les hommes s’attachent si peu à tout ce qui est de *pratique*, et qu’ils s’échauffent si fort sur de vaines *spéculations*. Voyez les désordres que tant de différentes hérésies ont causés! Elles ont toujours roulé sur des points de théorie: tantôt il s’est agi du nombre des personnes de la trinité et de leur émanation ; tantôt du nombre des sacrements et de leur vertu ; tantôt de la nature et de la force de la grâce ; que de guerres, que de troubles pour des chimères! Le peuple philosophe est sujet aux mêmes visions: que de disputes frivoles dans les écoles, que de livres sur de vaines questions! Un mot les déciderait, on ferait voir qu’elles sont indissolubles.”¹⁶⁷

of Enlightenment: constructing philosophers, writing intellectuals,” *The Enlightenment Past. Reconstructing Eighteenth Century French Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008). For an analysis of Voltaire’s edition of the text see Nicholas Cronk “Voltaire éditeur du *Philosophe* de Dumarsais,” *La Lettre Clandestine* 16 (2008): 174–186.

164 On the fate of the *Nouvelles libertés* and its publication see Gianluca Mori “Du manuscrit à l’imprimé: les *Nouvelles Libertés des Penser*,” *La Lettre Clandestine* 2 (1999): 129-134.

165 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 103.

166 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 103

167 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 109.

Two issues are quickly tackled in this short excerpt which belong to a longer “censored” section. The first one has to do with a virulent critique of religion, the second with the surprising formulation “*le peuple philosophe*”.

The most obvious point of inflection between the moderate and radical Enlightenment was philosophy’s attitude towards religion. Voltaire and D’Alembert, while insisting on the radical separation of philosophy from religion, were both very careful in all their texts not to directly attack the foundation of religion, and they narrowed their critique to its excesses, arguing for the need of toleration of different metaphysical and religious positions, including atheism. They wanted a peaceful coexistence of religion and philosophy. Dumarsais not only mocks religious discourse as a false “speculation”, affirming at the very beginning of the text that for the philosopher “la religion n’est qu’une passion humaine comme l’amour, fille de l’admiration, de la crainte et de l’espérance,” that is irrational (upon which Voltaire and D’Alembert agree), but he turns religion into a dangerous heresy for society, that is an irrational discourse which can only produce disastrous things.¹⁶⁸ For Voltaire and D’Alembert religion should be relentlessly criticized for its hegemonic attempt to subordinate and rule philosophy, but it did not need be destroyed for Enlightenment philosophy to accomplish its mission; it was seen only as a different opinion which had to be tolerated. Voltaire denounced the religious cleric as an *imposteur*, or even a *faux-monnayeur* of philosophy, but not because of its social or political function. What he wanted to ensure, is the hegemony of philosophy over theology:

"Ils font tous les jours imprimer des fatras de théologie philosophique, des dictionnaires philosopho-théologiques; et leurs vieux arguments traînés dans les rues, il les appellent démonstrations; et leurs sottises rebattues, ils les nomment lemmes et corollaires, comme les faux-monnayeurs appliquent une feuille d'argent sur un écu de plomb."¹⁶⁹

D’Alembert and Voltaire’s writings push for a philosophy completely independent from religion, but not for a philosophical critique of religion, nor did they consider that philosophers should logically be atheist, as Dumarsais proposed.¹⁷⁰ What is unacceptable in religion is not its status a social discourse of political domination (as Spinoza first pointed it in his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*), but its pretended authority over philosophy. Against the University’s attempts to delegitimize the new philosophy, Voltaire and D’Alembert wanted to establish a new *partage des savoirs*, where the monopoly of rational discourse and intellectual authority would fall in their hands, but where philosophy and religion can coexist. The proposal of this new corporatist *partage* (*ceux qui pensent/ceux qui prient*) was very clear, especially in D’Alembert’s *Elements de philosophie* (1759):

“Puisque la philosophie embrasse tout ce qui est du ressort de la raison, et que la raison étend plus ou moins son empire sur tous les objets de nos

168 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 103.

169 Voltaire, “Philosophe,” *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* 38 vol. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968-) 36: 434-447.

170 See Miran Bozovic “The philosophy of Du Marsais’s *Le Philosophe*”, *Filozofski Vestnik* 29.2 (2008): 61-76. As Bozovic argued, in DuMarsais the philosopher is presented as a “speculative atheist who has clearly already finished examining the question of the existing of God and has reached a satisfactory answer.” Bozovic 68.

connaissances naturelles, il s'ensuit qu'on ne doit exclure des élémens de philosophie qu'un seul genre de connaissances celles qui tiennent à la religion révélée. ... "Mais si la philosophie doit s'abstenir de porter une vue sacrilège sur les objets de la révélation, elle peut et elle doit même discuter les motifs de notre croyance."¹⁷¹

For D'Alembert and Voltaire, the role of the Enlightenment is then not to *eliminate* religion but to *contain* its excesses, in particular its sectarian tendency towards intolerance which creates social instability. In fact Voltaire thought religion had a role to play in controlling the people. Religion's sin was that pretended to be a public censure of acceptable discourse. Ideally religion should content itself with formulating judgments on its now partial area of expertise (religion) and abandon its universal ambitions, as the latter now were now to fall into the hands of the philosopher

In "Le Philosophe" Dumarsais did not criticize religion on the mere grounds that it was irrational and pure superstition, not did he consider religious dogma a mere "opinion" that could be simply tolerated in the public sphere with no consequences. Inheriting Spinoza's critique of religion as a particular kind of *social* discourse serving concrete *political* goals, Dumarsais developed a critique of the social function of religion which concluded that between philosophy and religion there can be no possible compromise, but rather only an ideological war, because religion and philosophy are two discourses with opposed political goals: domination and emancipation. This critique of the function of religious discourse was a commonplace in a set of libertine or clandestine literature. Before Dumarsais, Bayle and Fontenelle developed the narrative of religion as a *fable utile* for political power. In *De l'origine des fables* (1684) Fontenelle confronted the Platonic idea that fable (and thus religion) were allegories of the truth, that they did have after all, a scientific value as they represented a symbolic interpretation of the world. Fontenelle concluded: "ne cherchons donc autre chose dans les Fables que l'Histoire des erreurs de l'esprit humain."¹⁷²

It only became a distinctive feature of materialism when it became a matter of dispute in the public sphere, and not a topic of conversation in secret networks. For the materialist Enlightenment the role of the philosopher must be to openly combat religion, not to create a separate and more objective kind of knowledge. Philosophy was not to become safe harbor from religion, a purely speculative space. Dumarsais warns that those who "en sont demeurés à cette seule spéculation," the critique of religion, have not understood the true scope of philosophical critique: "on doit avoir une idée plus vaste et plus juste du philosophe".¹⁷³

The philosopher is of course he or she who can access the knowledge of the principles of knowledge (*connaissance des principes*), which DuMarsais derives in Lockean first moments from experience and the senses.¹⁷⁴ However his or her key

171 Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, *Elements de philosophie*, *Oeuvres* 2:23-24.

172 Fontenelle, *De l'origine des fables*, *Oeuvres* (Bastien) 5: 372.

173 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 103.

174 This passage can also be read, as Bozovic suggests as an interpretation of Spinoza's appendix to the first book of the *Ethics*: "Behind Du Marsais distinction between knowledge and ignorance of the causes that determine our actions it is not hard to recognize the classical Spinozist theme: on the one side we have a sage who reflects on determinism and on the others the ignorant mistakenly believing themselves to be free." Bozovic 65.

intervention is not to produce a particular content or formulation of what is right, but a holistic explanation of the different discourse in society: “la plupart des hommes sont si fort livrés à leurs opinions qu’ils ne prennent pas seulement la peine de pénétrer celle des autres. Le philosophe comprend le sentiment qu’il rejette avec la tête étendue et la même netteté qu’il entend celui qu’il adopte”.¹⁷⁵ The materialist philosopher has to explain, or at least attempt to understand, how the other social discourses work. This is why the critique of religious discourse is just the tip of the iceberg.

The second feature of Dumarsais' materialist program for philosophy has to do with the subordination of the philosophers' activity to social purposes, which is another distinction from purely speculative philosophy. Civil society is referred as the “*seule divinité*” for the *philosophe*, redefining the meaning of intellectual *probité*, and the appearance of the rather exceptional expression of “*peuple philosophe*”, which is the only occurrence of such a formulation before the Revolution. For Dumarsais both the criteria of truth and those of the social behavior of the *philosophe* should be dictated by the “société civile”:

“La société civile est, pour ainsi dire, la seule divinité qu’il reconnaisse sur la terre ; il l’encense, il l’honore par la probité, par une attention exacte à ses devoirs et par un désir sincère de n’en être pas un membre inutile ou embarrassant. Les sentiments de probité entrent autant dans la constitution mécanique du philosophe que les lumières de l’esprit. Plus vous trouverez de raison dans un homme, plus vous trouverez en lui de probité.”¹⁷⁶

One of the features of the materialist position would be precisely to develop an imaginary point of view which considers knowledge and discourse “from the outside”, that is to say through an exterior approach which questions its social function. The Lockean assertion that “la source de nos connaissances est entièrement en dehors de nous” was to evolve with DuMarsais not towards a rational psychology (like Hume or Condillac) but onto a reflexive mechanism or device.¹⁷⁷ The “philosopher as a machine” metaphor went in this direction of complicating the Lockean paradigm: “le philosophe est une machine humaine comme un autre homme; mais c’est une machine qui par sa constitution mécanique réfléchit sur ses mouvements”.¹⁷⁸ An unresolved problem was implicitly posed in this text: how to combine the materialist position that all ideas come from science and experience and the affirmation that the distinctive trait of the philosopher is to have an exteriority to his or her own functioning? How can the philosophical machine wind up itself? How can the philosopher acquire this ambioned objectivity, this capacity to reflect on the origins and determinations of its own intellectual movements? DuMarsais only implicitly hinted in his text at this new external ground to establish philosophical truth, which used to be occupied by God and its secularized Enlightenment version, mathematics: civil society or the public sphere and

175 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 108.

176 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 110.

177 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 105.

178 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 103.

the process of exchange.

This materialist trope of the exteriority of knowledge to subjective intentions, and of the need to adopt an exterior or social point of view on discourses to really understand their true nature (“de-subjectivizing” or “de-intentionalizing” them in many ways), was first articulated by Spinoza, who argued that the written text had a relative autonomy from its producer, that through reading and circulation it acquired a new meaning. To the Spinozist practice of critical reading, DuMarsais added a critical dimension: that this practice is a social and public one, and that the necessary counterpoint to the philosopher’s rational arguments, derived from sensation, was the confrontation of his or her ideas to public debate, but also and more importantly, to a social practice.

It was to respond to this question of how the new philosopher managed to establish a criterion of truth that is not set by a priori or metaphysical standards, but that develops somehow organically or imminently from the material world, that DuMarsais re-examined the definition of probity. The development of this issue in the text tackled the social and moral integrity of the philosopher: that is to say, its social practice. In the 17th and early 18th century the philosopher used to be confined to an inescapable dilemma: either he or she renounced participation in society as an intellectual as well as the ability to socially a social definition of its practice and had to ground reason in an ideal principle which was individually and mysteriously appropriated (and here enter all the debates around the “*homme de génie*”); she or he had to define its practice within the existing social norms, that of acquiescing to religion and law, rationalizing and absorbing inside the field of philosophy what was indeed historically constructed, with no possible counterpoint. The philosopher was split into becoming again a new sort of metaphysics (Newtonism and Leibnizianism were two available models for that) or an “ideologue,” that is an apologist of the existing social ideology. What DuMarsais began to outline was the possibility of a materialist Enlightenment, one that could be at the same time truly “public”, that is with a social content beyond a formal universality, and truly critical, defying the rules instead of acceding to the rules established in the political sphere.

Probity, as the necessary social quality of the intellectual, was defined before DuMarsais in a rather conservative way as the invaluable quality of following the law and respecting religion.¹⁷⁹ And this same definition was kept in the article “Probité” of the *Encyclopédie*, whose author is unknown, which states: “ce n'est que sous les auspices de la religion que les droits les plus sacrés de la société peuvent être en assurance & qu'ils sont respectés.”¹⁸⁰ This was then the dominant definition of what a philosopher should do

179 The 1692 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* gives the following definition: “PROBITÉ. s. f. Intégrité de vie, de mœurs; Vertu qui fait, qui constituë l'homme de bien. Probité connue, approuvée, incorruptible. homme de probité, de grande probité. c'est un homme sans foy, sans probité” (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 1692, 2:328). The next edition of 1762 presents a slight change: “PROBITÉ. s.f. Droiture de coeur & d'esprit; intégrité de vie & de mœurs. La probité est proprement la vertu qui constitue l'honnête homme. Probité éprouvée, incorruptible. Homme de probité, de grande probité. C'est un homme sans foi, sans probité. Un homme d'une probité reconnue. Cela est contre la probité.” *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 1762, 2:474.

180 “Probité,” *Encyclopédie* 13:401-402. The definition follows as such: “Un homme qui a secoué le joug de la religion, ne trouve nulle part de motif assez puissant pour le rendre fidele aux devoirs de la probité. Qu'est - ce qui lui tiendra lieu de religion? L'intérêt, sans doute, car c'est le grand mobile de la conduite des gens du monde; peut - être un intérêt d'honneur, mais toujours un intérêt humain, qui n'a ni Dieu pour objet, ni l'autre vie pour fin. On a beau vanter sa probité, si elle n'est pour - ainsi - dire étayée de la religion, les droits de la société courent alors un grand risque. Je conviens que mon intérêt peut me réduire à garder certains dehors qui en imposent, parce qu'en ne les gardant pas je risquerois bien plus qu'il ne m'en coûteroit à les garder; probité par conséquent toute défectueuse & peu durable, que

socially, of what were the rules and boundaries of his or her public use of reason. But in the *Encyclopédie* a danger is clearly outlined: that is the citizen or philosopher would pursue a particular *interest*, and not only *virtue*. This would be the beginning of a new political and philosophical problem which dominated the English and later French 18th century: how to reconcile the sum of individual interest with the general one.

DuMarsais did not escape the dilemma by refusing to consider any probity or social virtue to the philosopher, nor he did not argue cynically for a pure individualism, and the implicit legitimation of the sole quest personal interests. He attempted to redefine probity or what he called “civil virtues”, in order to propose a new social attitude for the philosopher which escaped the conundrum:

“Notre sage qui, en n'espérant ni ne craignant rien après la mort, semble prendre un motif de plus d'être honnête homme pendant la vie, y gagne de la consistance, pour ainsi dire, et de la vivacité dans le motif qui le fait agir; motif d'autant plus fort qu'il est purement humain et naturel. Ce motif est la propre satisfaction qu'il trouve à être content de lui-même en suivant les règles de la probité; motif que le superstitieux n'a qu'imparfaitement : car tout ce qu'il y a de bien en lui, il doit l'attribuer à la grâce. À ce motif se rapporte encore un autre motif bien puissant, c'est le propre intérêt du sage, et un intérêt présent et réel.

Séparez pour un moment le philosophe de l'honnête homme. Que lui restet-il? La société civile, son unique Dieu, l'abandonne, le voilà privé des plus douces satisfactions de la vie; le voilà banni sans retour du commerce des honnêtes gens. Ainsi, il lui importe bien plus qu'au reste des hommes de disposer tous ses ressorts à ne produire que des effets conformes à l'idée de l'honnête homme. Ne craignez pas que, parce que personne n'a les yeux sur lui, il s'abandonne à une action contraire à la probité! Non, cette action n'est point conforme à la disposition mécanique du sage; il est pétri, pour ainsi dire, avec le levain de l'ordre et de la règle; il est rempli des idées du bien de la société civile ; il en connaît les principes bien mieux que les autres hommes. Le crime trouverait en lui trop d'opposition, il y aurait trop d'idées naturelles et trop d'idées acquises à détruire. Sa faculté d'agir est, pour ainsi dire, comme une corde d'instrument de musique montée sur un certain ton; elle n'en saurait produire un contraire.”¹⁸¹

In this passage, also absent from the *Encyclopédie's* version of the text, DuMarsais secularized the concept of probity, traditionally bound to the existence of a God, as the philosopher's allegiance to society was founded on his materialist belief that there is nothing after death. The philosopher was not a special kind of human being, as he enjoyed satisfaction in working for society (“il est rempli des idées du bien de la société civile”) and fulfilling his social duties. The philosopher was almost “mechanically” determined to care of humanity by a constant exercise of his or her rational faculties, not by a different physical constitution. As for the interests which motivated the philosopher, DuMarsais avoided the double trap of asserting that the philosopher was either totally

celle à qui la religion ne prête pas son appui.” “Probité”, *Encyclopédie*.

181 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 113-114.

uninterested in material welfare, enjoying poverty or economic dependence or either the philosopher has a particular (economic) interest of its own. His solution is clearly stated in the following sentence: “le vrai philosophe n’est point tourmenté par l’ambition, mais il veut avoir les douces commodités de la vie”.¹⁸²

Nonetheless, the most radical and innovative rearticulation of the philosopher’s relation to society, and what was branded later as a mark of materialism, was to be found in two singular expressions “peuple philosophe” and “peuple philosophique” which were also cleaned up by Voltaire revision. This synthetic expression brought together what previously was considered incompatible: the people and the philosopher. This opposition had been conceptualized by Spinoza and *libertin* circles as one of two kinds of knowledges and forms of cognitions, and not of social groups or classes. The Enlightenment was set up to be at least an “apopular” (separated from the people) when not openly anti-popular (full of contempt for the people) intellectual movement. However an interesting underground force shakes this division throughout the text. While in the beginning of the pamphlet the people and the philosopher are two clearly opposite forms of knowledge—and here DuMarsais verbalizes his Spinozist lineage—the appearance of the formula “peuple philosophique” and later “peuple philosophe” unsettle this division of knowledge.¹⁸³

The fact that DuMarsais chose “*peuple*” and not “*société*” is important. Certainly it hints at the fact that philosophers could be considered an autonomous social group, as a society of their own, referring to Bayle’s utopian vision of a viable “*société d’ahtées*.”¹⁸⁴ DuMarsais wants us to think of the philosophers “like a people”, of course a people of their own, distinguished from the other forms of people, from the *peuple populaire*, the ignorant one. By using such a formula DuMarsais is not only resignifying one part of the equation (the philosopher which could be thought with the here socio-political category of people) he is also resignifying that of the people: it would be possible for a people to become philosopher or philosophical, as the philosopher is a “*machine humaine comme une autre*.” In fact the formula of “*peuple philosophe*” transcends the Spinozist framework of treating “people” and “philosopher” as solely epistemological categories. First because later in the text the roles are reversed, the philosopher appears also as a fallible and imperfect machine, as equally the victim of prejudices, equally to the people: “j’aurais envie de finir par quelques autres préjugés ordinaires au peuple philosophe”.¹⁸⁵ The *peuple philosophe* is also *peuple* somehow, so the people could be also be like the philosopher, at least when they share prejudices, superstition and passionate thinking. The line between the philosophers and the people is not totally clear, nor is reason infallible. Then the question arises: if the difference between them (*peuple/philosophe*)

182 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 117.

183 “Le philosophe forme ses principes sur une infinité d’observations particulières; le peuple adopte le principe sans penser aux observations qui l’on produit: il croit que la maxime existe pour ainsi dire par elle-même; mais le philosophe prend la maxime dès sa source; il en examine l’origine, il en connaît la propre valeur, et n’en fait l’usage qui lui convient.” Dumarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 104. DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 109, 119.

184 See Isabelle Delpla, “Bayle : pensées diverses sur l’athéisme ou le paradoxe de l’athée citoyen” *Figures du théologico-politique*, ed. Emmanuel Cattin, Laurent Jaffro and Alain Petit (Paris: Vrin, 1999) 117-147.

185 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 118.

was no longer one of knowledge and modes of thinking, as this difference can switch or permute, accidentally, there must be a more essential criteria to distinguish them. At the end of the text then, the philosopher was opposed to the “ignorant” (and not anymore the people) meaning “ceux qui n’ont pas eu le loisir de la méditation” and this changed the whole equation.¹⁸⁶ As the people were not necessarily ignorant by nature, but simply because of a given division of labor in society. And the philosopher was not born with a high quality reason, he or she just developed a different use of reason, which is also a social one. In DuMarsais we already find a strong thesis which Helvetius and further materialists would develop, and that is that the social division of knowledge or *the partage des savoirs* is in fact the indirect result of the division of labor. The public use of reason should also be thought as embedded in the social reality of labor and leisure, and for a people to become a philosophical people it would take to rethink how leisure time is allocated and who has access to an education. Philosophers and people are not just epistemological categories: they are also social and political ones.

186 DuMarsais, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* 118.

Chapter 2: Materialism and Anti-Materialism in the Emerging Public Sphere.

1. The Contradictions of the Emerging Public Sphere as a Bourgeois Sphere

Opening up the Possibilities of the Public Sphere Paradigm

In an effort to locate the Enlightenment intellectual movement in its social reality, Habermas theorized the Enlightenment from a sociological point of view, as the rise of a bourgeois public sphere, noting this change as a *structural* transformation. Since Habermas's influential theorization in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), this framework has been taken as a reference for the subsequent scholarship on the issue, even if it has then been critiqued or its nuances developed.¹⁸⁷ I would like to first explore the implications and shortcomings of the concept of public sphere as it has been used, proposing to pay a special attention to the political contradictions immanent to this sphere, that I locate, as did Habermas, in its capitalist or bourgeois nature. Yet although Habermas mentions most of these contradictions, he does not develop them because he is more interested in legitimizing a particular normative model for the functioning of the field embodied in the figure of Kant. Unfortunately subsequent scholars who borrowed Habermas's theorization of the public sphere to think through the Enlightenment have chosen to dwell more on the "public" or "normative" character of the sphere and not on its incipient bourgeois one, isolating the discourses from the social space from which they emerged. As Zammito pointed out in his critical review of the delayed but enthusiastic reception of Habermas's work in the American academia "the decisive feature of the second life of the public sphere was the general evacuation of faith not only from the Marxist notion of bourgeois revolution, but also from the larger theoretical frame of class - and with it, social explanation".¹⁸⁸

In this section I will take issue with a widespread conception of the early modern public sphere, which not only disregards its implicit contradictions derived from its bourgeois character, as noted by Zammito, but also implicitly equates the development of capitalism with the emergence of an apolitical sphere. The latter conception is grounded on the assimilation of economic development with an increased exchange and communication, and therefore increased freedom and consensus. One trend of scholarship, which was interested in the constitutions of publics and forms of sociability, presupposed the intellectual field as is as autonomous, whose publicness is read, according to Melton as "unrelated to the exercise of state authority".¹⁸⁹ That is to say: an

187 For an excellent introduction on the debates and scholarship regarding the public sphere see Craig Calhoun "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere", *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT 1996) 1-48; and more recently James Van Horn Melton, "What is the public sphere?" *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT 2001) 1-16.

188 John H. Zammito, "The Second Life of the Public Sphere," *Changing Perceptions of the Public Sphere*, ed. Christian Emden and David R. Midgley (New York: Berghahn, 2012) 96.

189 James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* 4.

intellectual sphere completely separated or protected from the influences of political power.¹⁹⁰ Another trend of scholarship seems at least initially to pay a closer and even exclusive attention to political debates and categories, after Furet's revisionist credo comes, as I mentioned earlier in the introduction, at the price of severing the political sphere from any social or economic dynamics; that is, it empties political and ideological debates from any real power implications and remains at a mere linguistic construction. The Enlightenment is then the moment of “political invention” or the creations of an autonomous political “imaginary,” like Baker and, more recently, Maza, have proposed.¹⁹¹

Melton, like Habermas, is tried to think about the conditions of possibility of true “rational” and “critical” philosophy, the kind of new philosophy that, according to him, appeared in the Enlightenment and that needs to be brought back. This philosophy is understood within and explained by the rise of this new “bourgeois public sphere”. The starting point of their interest in the 18th century public sphere is an assumption of its philosophical outcome: Kant’s “synthesising” efforts of the achievement of Enlightenment philosophy as the proclamation of the independence of reason and its powers of critique. It seems that the methodological danger here is to start from a particular conception of philosophy whose social grounds need to be subsequently uprooted and explained, instead of departing from the social reality of 18th century Europe and be confronted with the multiplicity of competing philosophies and the broader confusion or crisis of philosophy it presents.

Although Habermas indeed departs from the assumption that Kant is the natural synthesis or result of the Enlightenment in order to investigate and modelize the social transformation that made it possible, I am more interested in my approach in arriving at the core intellectual and political battles within the Enlightenment field as it emerged in all its currents and possibilities, without adopting the historical vantage point of knowing which version of the Enlightenment triumphed.¹⁹² My interest in materialism, the “underdog” of the Enlightenment, and not in Kant or its equivalent French figures (Voltaire, D’Alembert or Condorcet), is ultimately aimed at unveiling some internal political contradictions of the intellectual field which began to be discussed and theorized at the time by the philosophers themselves. From a methodological point of view it is not

190 Later in the chapter Melton affirms that “the literary sphere, at least in the beginning, was fundamentally apolitical.” Melton, *The Rise of the Public* 7. This apolitical view of the sphere is also a feature of some of the scholars who reduced the new bourgeois sphere to new forms of sociability like Goodman, Gordon, but also Lilti.

191 See Keith Baker “*Inventing the French Revolution*” and Sarah Maza *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003); and, for the idea that class is a language interpretation or invention, see Gareth Stedman-Jones *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983). Maza argues “the central thesis of this book is that the French bourgeoisie did not exist”, the word bourgeois had not social referent, it just “served ... to define negatively France’s deepest social, cultural, and political ideals.” Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie* 5. For Maza the linguistic analysis that “no group calling itself bourgeois ever emerged in France” is grounds enough to conclude that the bourgeoisie as a class did not exist, assuming that language is a faithful, transparent and reliable reflection of social reality. The central belief of Maza is indeed “classes only exist if they are aware of their own existence, a knowledge which is inseparable from the ability to articulate an identity” and “the existence of social groups, while rooted in the material world, is shaped by language and more specifically by narrative.” Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie* 6.

192 Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993) 102-117.

an approach which aims at restoring a “true” or new model of philosophy, but instead at revealing some fundamental contradictions of the practice of public philosophy in the final phase of the *Ancien Régime*.

For this purpose I would like first to depart from Habermas’s original analysis in order to go in a different direction: to try to understand the contradictions of this emerging bourgeois space and how they radically transformed philosophical activity, bringing to the surface a whole new set of issues for philosophy (the implications of its public status, of its circulation as a commodity and of its social “enlightenment” ideal). I will also question his choice of establishing Kant as a normative model or reference point for this new public form of philosophy and show that there were other alternatives, which were closed off by the thermidorian end to the Revolution. In the course of this dissertation I hope I will be able to show not only the importance of the materialist current in shaping the border and functioning of this field, but also that the delineation of a “materialist” positioning is not based around the promotion of matter (as the Christian apologist pointed out and which is a mere symptom of a deeper conception) but around a common concern regarding the new delimitation of the private and public sphere, expressed in a contradiction between the theory and the practice of philosophy.

Is the Bourgeois Public Sphere an Apolitical Space?

Many historians have criticized Habermas’s historical account of the emergence of the public sphere because of its historical inaccuracy and tendency towards generalization.¹⁹³ Yet, as Hohendahl pointed out, Habermas was aware that he was sketching an idealized model of the sphere that “never existed in pure form” but that was “necessary for describing diachronic changes”.¹⁹⁴ What I find valuable in Habermas is his historical modelization (despite some of its inaccuracies), because it provides a theoretical framework which allow us to develop a critical reflection on the rise of a bourgeois public sphere, as well as its contradictions and implications for early modern philosophy.

For Habermas this “structural” transformation is the product of the confluence of two other equally profound changes: on the one hand, the rise of the modern nation state, accompanied by the rise of a new model of representation, (the “publicness of representation,” as Habermas put it, which was embodied in the monarch himself, but whose totalizing presence at the symbolic and political level that became by the 18th century “disintegrated in a process of polarization” and later split into private and public elements);¹⁹⁵ on the other, the development of capitalism through the expansion of trade and transportation technology, and also the advances in book printing, the growing book market, and the development of the press; that is to say, the commercialization of culture and the beginning of its commodification. Both factors are, of course, intertwined: the

193 See Jon Cowans “Habermas and French History: The Public Sphere and the Problem of Political Legitimacy,” *French History* 13.2 (1999): 134:60.

194 Peter Hohendahl and Marc Silberman, “Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture: Habermas and His Critics,” *New German Critique* 16 (1979) 92.

195 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 7, 11-14.

fast development of early commercial capitalism led to the rise of a new kind of state, based on taxation and forced a progressive separation of the domain of the king and that of the “public” or nation.¹⁹⁶ Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries the nation ceases to be embodied in the person of the King, but it is not yet clearly associated with the people; that will happen through the French Revolution. It is indeed a period of transition and struggle between social classes (aristocracy and bourgeoisie) to see which one will impose its new paradigm of political representation. The result of this economic and political process was the emergence of a separate civil society “as the corollary of a depersonalized state authority,” therefore making way for a new “sphere of public authority” a change that Habermas rightly qualifies as a structural one.¹⁹⁷

However, Habermas never stated that this sphere was an “apolitical” one; he only pointed out that this new sphere was spatially and formally “separate” from state authority. In fact, he argued that the public sphere eventually had “a functional element in the political reality” as it “posed the issue of *pouvoir* as such”, that is, it offered the possibility of a public debate on the origins and modalities of political power.¹⁹⁸

According to Habermas, the “pure” or “original” function of the public sphere is that “public debate was supposed to transform voluntas into a ratio that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all”.¹⁹⁹ But this function got “perverted” (in his view) when after the revolution this political sphere became institutionalized and subordinated to the bourgeois State through its recognition of and by bourgeois law. The institutionalization of the intellectual and political sphere constituted a qualitative change. The public sphere became a veiled mechanism of domination, the Parliament being the clearest expression of this institutionalization. In place of its original critical and emancipatory function, the public sphere has a whole became the very medium by which the political and ideological rule of the bourgeoisie was ensured and sublimated.

Despite having an idealized vision of what the original public sphere was, a vision which I will discuss later, Habermas presented a problematic reduction of the political function of the Enlightenment by assuming that there was a single and unitarian movement in the Enlightenment. There is undoubtedly in his work a dose of teleology as the intellectual sphere appears as subsumed and guided by a unidirectional force: that of rational bourgeois progress. His account is also problematic because it assumes also that there was only one form of politicization and political function for the sphere, that of reaching a consensus for the public good through rational debate, setting as a necessity what was in fact the result of a complex political struggle.

Some of the most recent and interesting works on the development of the English public sphere have tackled the question of its political nature, thus providing a very different account of the public sphere politics as the works of Shapiro, Lake and Pinkus

196 Habermas 17-19.

197 Habermas 19.

198 Habermas 82-83.

199 Habermas 83.

have managed to show.²⁰⁰ Even if in accepting she was dealing with rather an ephemeral public sphere (that will be institutionalized after the Glorious Revolution), Shapiro noted that this public sphere was highly dominated by political issues as it was "centered on bitterly disputed questions of what fundamental political and religious establishment the nation should be".²⁰¹ Contrasting with Habermas's conception of a "rational", consensual, and tolerant sphere, she adds:

"Much of the Protestant-Catholic polemical exchange and the intra-Protestant debate cannot easily be characterized as rational debate and discussion. These disputes were highly polemical, frequently pursued in abusive, even hysterical language and often motivated by and engendering fear: fear of revolution, treason, regicide, papist and Jesuitical plots ... much of the discussion was aimed not at the accommodation but at the extirpation of the opposition."²⁰²

Even if the sphere emerged beside the political State, this process was neither peaceful nor calm. As the study of the English experience shows, "the two periods which, in terms of the quantity of communication experienced, might most appropriately be labeled as experiencing public spheres are the very periods in which high levels of communication either led to a breakdown of civil society or to great fears it would break down".²⁰³

Lake and Pincus, also rejecting the vision of a non-conflictual pre-civil war English public sphere (1640-1670), distinguished it (which they qualify as transitional) from the "ancient public sphere," where political and religious issues were discussed and note that the distinctive feature in "bourgeois public sphere" in England after the revolution is the public discussion over political economy issues. Pincus disagrees with the assertion that the public sphere was simply a "realm for general discussion;" he argues that it was "a much more specific realm in which discussion about political economy was added to the ancient public sphere," and says that the main innovation of the bourgeois sphere (which he locates in the coffee houses) was the rise of a discussion over political economy issues where the state was discussed as a household economy increasingly controlled by capital.²⁰⁴

200 See in particular Steven Pincus and Peter Lake, "Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies*, 45.2 (2006): 270-292; and "The State Civil Society in Early Modern England: capitalism Causation, and Habermas's Bourgeois Public Sphere," *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, Ed. Lake Peter and Steven Pincus (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007) 213-231.

201 Barbara Shapiro, *Political Communication and Political Culture in England, 1558 - 1688* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2012) 283.

202 Shapiro 283.

203 Shapiro 286. Shapiro adds: "The first period [1640s] resulted in the destruction of the institutional forms of government, armed conflict and an eruption of dissident religious and political activities from groups that had not formerly participated in the political life. The second period [1678-1682], while not as destructive to the institutional fabric, exhibited high levels of uncivil, irrational political discourse and hysterical accusations of treasonous plots." Shapiro, *Political Communication* 286.

204 Pincus, "The State Civil Society" 213. Pincus and Lake propose to "recover political economy neither as an irreducible cause of social and political change nor as a category easily subsumed in the political or religious, but as an autonomous area of contestation in its own right. Political economy, in our account, can be understood in terms of socially anchored ideological conflict." Pincus and Lake, "Rethinking the Public Sphere" 273. For this analysis see

And even if the issue of political economy can seem a bit restrictive characteristic with which to characterize the bourgeois sphere, the general criteria Lake and Pincus propose is useful for analyzing the French sphere: the main feature of the bourgeois public sphere does not lie in increased communication in general, nor even in the formulation of any kind of public opinion judgments; rather, they look more concretely at the content and form of this communication and public opinion. The bourgeois sphere was characterized by the public discussion of matters which affect “the common good” and which were, before the monopoly of the private sphere, decisions of the ruling class.²⁰⁵ This resulted in an increased number of citizens who had a part in public affairs.²⁰⁶

What Lake and Pincus implicitly suggested in their article, through their parallel between the English and the French case, is that while the former saw a longer development of the public sphere interrupted and transformed by the revolution (producing first a transitional and later a properly bourgeois public sphere), in France the public debate over “common good” issues, whether it was religious policy or political economy, was fettered until its explosion in the mid 18th century with the Jansenist crisis of that over the liberalization of the price of grains.²⁰⁷

The Intellectual Sphere As A Field of Forces: the State, the Church and the Market

To assert, however, that the early modern intellectual sphere was political is not sufficient, as one must more precisely characterize the meaning and contradictory character of this politicization, which in my view does not dwell only in the *content* of its discussions, as these are mere symptoms of the tensions at play, but also—as it was the case of philosophy—by the social function it sought to play, the kind of public spaces it sought to inhabit, and the format in which it interacted with its public.

One of the key features of this new intellectual sphere is that it was not only formally separate from the state, but also from the Catholic Church and its corollary institutions. Habermas seems to forget this. Regarding the Church—and this was very clear in all the philosophical production of the Enlightenment—the new public sphere competed for legitimacy with the old and very well established institution which had the monopoly of symbolic power and the means of self-financing as the clergy was in France a privileged order, which owned a great deal of land, levied special taxes, etc..

Steven Pincus "Coffee Politicians Does Create": Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture" *The Journal of Modern History* 67.4 (1995): 807-834; "The Making of a Great Power? Universal Monarchy, Political Economy, and the Transformation of English Political Culture," *European Legacy* 5.4 (August 2000): 531-45; and "Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism: Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth," *American Historical Review* 103.3 (June 1998): 705-36.

205 Pincus and Lake, "Rethinking the Public Sphere" 276.

206 "The quantitative expansion of the public sphere in England's early modern period necessarily meant that an increasingly wide array of people was brought within the nexus of political communication. This quantitative shift meant that people below the level of the landed elite gained access to various forms of political information, both because they wanted that access and because political factions had much to gain from mobilizing them." Pincus and Lake "Rethinking the Public Sphere" 290.

207 Pincus and Lake, "Rethinking the Public Sphere" 283-286.

It is necessary to refine or even correct Habermas's historical analysis in the following sense: albeit being formally separate from the absolutist state, the new sphere is from the beginning marked by a social contradiction and the need of a political definition: it emerges out of new commercial and technical developments. But it does not do so in a fully formed bourgeois society (as there is no bourgeois state). The new "civil society" of the developing cities, the locus of this sphere, appeared almost as an "outgrowth" outside of the framework of the established political structures of Absolutism (the court, the parliaments and the Church), and therefore had to constantly define itself politically: either in allegiance to, in peaceful coexistence with, or in open opposition to the monarchical political regime.

I want to suggest that the public sphere, squeezed by and between the influence of the absolutist state, the forces of the market, and the attempts of the Church to regain political prestige is therefore better thought, to borrow Bourdieu's concept, as a field of forces than as a mere "sphere," which gives the illusion of an established autonomy. For Bourdieu, the main defining feature of the field are the relations of forces that structure it and the creation and interplay of its inner institutions:

"Quand je parle de champ intellectuel, je sais très bien que je vais trouver des 'particules' (faisons pour un moment comme s'il s'agissait d'un champ physique) qui sont sous l'empire de forces d'attractions, de répulsion, etc., comme dans un champ magnétique. Parler de champ, c'est accorder la primauté à ce système de relations objectives sur les particules elles-mêmes".²⁰⁸

Some of the works of sociology of literature have had the tendency to look at this interplay of institutions and struggles of powers mainly through the lens of the author-figure, and his or her assumed intention of self-promotion and career building. While this emphasis might be true in some cases, it presents a double problem: first, because it pays too much attention to the career-building and social promotion aspect, it does not allow an objective account of all of the structuring forces of the field, but even more importantly it leaves aside the role of institutions and the real social and political power relations structuring the field, which go beyond the intentions and actions of any individual author.

Bourdieu refined his understanding of how these forces structure the field, moving from a theory of *refraction* or *reinterpretation* of political debates and economic pressures through the field's inner logic to a theory of inversion between the material and the symbolic.²⁰⁹ According to the later Bourdieu "l'ordre littéraire (...) se présente comme un ordre économique renversé".²¹⁰ While there is always an inner tension among

208 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *Réponses: Pour une anthropologie réflexive* (Paris: Seuil, 1992) 82.

209 The first formulation of the theory of refraction in 1966: "Toute influence et toute contrainte exercées par une instance extérieure au champ intellectuel est toujours réfractée par la structure du champ intellectuel: c'est ainsi par exemple que le rapport qu'un intellectuel entretient avec la classe d'origine ou d'appartenance est médiatisé par la position qu'il occupe dans le champ intellectuel et en fonction de laquelle il se sent autorisé à revendiquer cette appartenance (avec le choix qu'elle implique) ou incliné à la répudier et à la dissimuler honteusement. Ainsi les déterminismes ne deviennent détermination spécifiquement intellectuelle qu'en se réinterprétant, selon la logique spécifique du champ intellectuel, dans un projet créateur." Pierre Bourdieu, "Champ intellectuel et projet créateur," *Les Temps Modernes* 246 (1966) 905.

210 Pierre Bourdieu, "Le champ littéraire," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 89 (1991) 5.

different criterias of valorization and hierarchy (whether they are heteronomous or autonomous), the greater the autonomy, the more the field is organized according to autonomous factors, that is to say the denial of an external determination (economic motives or political goals).²¹¹ As we saw with Turnovsky and Andrew, the emergent and contradictory nature of the political economy of the *hommes des lettres* forced most writers to perform a sort of public disavowal of their forms of economic and social dependency, and to engage in an active construction of their fictional social identity within the parameters of formal equality.

The social and political forces and conflicts (here the conflicts between Jesuits and Jansenists, between the Church and the State, between the *Parlement* and the monarchy, and also between the new intelligentsia and the Church) are therefore mediated or *refracted* in the field as Bourdieu proposed. These social, economic and political forces did structure since its emergence the new intellectual field and acted upon the scope of critique available to individual writers and philosophers. The more the field became in some moments or regarding some issues “autonomous” from these external social forces, the more these forces were mediated, like it was the case with the debates around style and language in the French academy. Also, the less the intellectual sphere was autonomous, the lesser mobility there was for authors to transcend the social forces determining them and develop a career.

The French 18th century intellectual sphere was not an impermeable one, isolated from political struggles, it was a new place for political conflict with different rules than the ones that existed before, many of them coalesced around the scandal of “materialism”. The polarization of the public sphere around the political and social effect of philosophy also exposed to the open the real rules governing *publication*, that is what could be said and how in the public space. All of the “secret” political tensions of the absolutist power which operated before in a private sphere continued to do so in the bourgeois sphere, but this time with the possibility of being revealed in the open, exposed and criticized. That was the task “materialist” philosophers such as Diderot, La Mettrie and Helvétius embraced.

A materialist analysis of the field will not tend to reduce it to a flat surface directly determined by political and economic forces but will rather tend to understand the nature of this new intellectual sphere, and of the philosophical project that emerged within it. The very nature of symbolic power is to operate by other rules than the economic and symbolic one, it is preconized, precisely, upon a separation from these other two spheres, and the emergence of another kind of power or capital. It is necessary then to replace the discussion around the autonomy of the field, as Bourdieu as suggested many times, within the framework of the production of symbolic capital as a distinctive one. This means thinking both the material conditions that make this new power possible, and also its tensions and limitations. This also means to understand the autonomy of the intellectual field as one which is permanently threatened precisely because it does not have a material basis of its own upon which to enforce its power, but instead depends on the border material organization of society, which is to some extent heteronomous. Yet,

211 “Le degré d’autonomie du champ peut se mesurer à l’importance de l’effet de retraduction ou de refraction que sa logique spécifique impose aux influences ou aux commandes externes.” Bourdieu, “Champ littéraire” 7.

this does not mean that the rise of the market automatically creates an autonomous space, without questioning the true nature and the deep contradiction of this autonomy. The bourgeois intellectual field is therefore in its own way inhabited by the same contradictions that inhabit capitalist economy and society, but they get articulated there in a singular form, proper to its logic.

The Political Economy of the Bourgeois Sphere and its Partial and Threatened Autonomy

If the emerging public sphere is to be called “bourgeois” in sociological terms it is not because it was massively populated by full bourgeois social subjects, but rather because it was structured increasingly by new kinds of *social relations*: capitalist ones, based on exchange value and profit. But this characterization still remains too general. Two main transformations of the urban space will mark early modern intellectual life: on the one hand, the weakening of the existing social hierarchies based upon *ordres* or states and the privilege set by birth, a change that redefined who was allowed to participate in the new public sphere; and, on the other hand, the development of a rising book market on the other hand which will redefine the intellectual function as one based upon writing and publishing (vs. teaching), raising for the first time the possibility for an individual of making at least a career (if not a living) out of his or her intellectual production.

As Habermas pointed out, the urban public sphere was a space of sociological transformation as it was mainly the encounter of a nobility transformed by new bourgeois relations in a separate sphere from the court and the King.²¹²

“The public sphere in the world of letters (*literarische Öffentlichkeit*) was not, of course, autochthonously bourgeois; it preserved a certain continuity with the publicity involved in the representation enacted at the prince's court. The bourgeois avant-garde of the educated middle class learned the art of critical-rational public debate through its contact with the “elegant world”. This courtly noble society, to the extent that the modern state apparatus became independent from the monarch's personal sphere, naturally separated itself, in turn, more and more from the court and became its counterpoise in the town. The “town” was the life center of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated especially an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the salons, and the *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies). The heirs of the humanistic-aristocratic society, in their encounter with bourgeois intellectuals (through sociable discussions that quickly developed into public criticism), built a bridge between the remains of a collapsing form of publicity (the courtly one) and the precursor of a new one: the bourgeois

212 A very similar explanation was provided by Habermas two years later: “Finally, the feudal estates were transformed as well: the nobility became the organs of public authority, parliament and the legal institutions; while those occupied in trades and professions, insofar as they had already established urban corporations and territorial organizations, developed into a sphere of bourgeois society which would stand apart from the state as a genuine area of private autonomy.” Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” Trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 3 (1974) 51.

public sphere.”²¹³

This new bourgeoisie sphere was not bourgeois in an autochthonous way, says Habermas, mainly because the main trend in this space was the dissolution of any autochthonous social identity. This tendency towards dissolution does not mean, however, in any way the constitution of a society of “equals” materially and politically speaking, but the progressive attenuation of the importance of social qualities of the *société d’ordres* of the Old Regime within this sphere.

Regarding the emergence of the book market, I already mentioned in the previous section how it challenged the boundaries of what philosophy was and contributed to the opening of the new category of *gens de lettres* with an increased diversity of social origins. I hope to show here the material basis for the relative autonomy of the public sphere. As there has to be a social basis of some kind to back the proclamation of an autonomy of this sphere, for the simple public use of critical reason is not grounds for any kind of autonomy.

For Habermas this autonomy is clearly an effect of the development of the market economy and the rise of a new bourgeoisie:

“The public sphere as a functional element in the political realm was given the normative status of self-articulation of civil society with the state authority corresponding to its needs. The social precondition for this 'developed' bourgeois public sphere was a market that, tending to be liberalized, made affairs in the sphere of social reproduction as much as possible a matter of private people left to themselves and so finally completed the privatization of civil society ... With the expansion and liberation of this sphere of the market, commodity owners gained private autonomy; the positive meaning of 'private' emerged precisely in reference to the concept of free power of control over property that functioned in capitalist fashion.”²¹⁴

So, in Habermas’s theory, the assumption of the “progressive” and autonomous nature of this public sphere springs out of the free capitalist market (that of the cultural goods, printing, transportation) as it lays out the material basis to consolidate independence from the State and its mercantilist and restrictive policy.

In this particular aspect, his account is more based upon a presupposition on the nature of early modern capitalism than upon a socio-historical account of its public sphere. Habermas assigned to this historical economic process a subjective intention, (or what Baker will denounce as a teleological force): that of the expression of the class interests of a rising bourgeoisie, which he sees as a truly federative and emancipatory force by subsuming the different conflicts immanent in the rising “civil society”.²¹⁵

213 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 29-30.

214 Habermas 74.

215 This is a feature of Habermas’s method, as he not only wants to describe the process from a removed point of view, but he want a also to understand what was at stake in the formation of the public sphere. There is in his work, as many critics have noted, an inherent “tension between the normative and the historical-empirical” dimensions. Peter Hohendahl, “The Theory of the Public Sphere Revisited,” *Sites of discourse, public and private spheres, legal culture: papers from a conference held at the Technical University of Dresden*, December 2001, ed. Uwe Böker and Julie A. Hibbard (Amsterdam : Rodopi, 2002) 17.

It is true that, whereas it has been difficult to criticize the overall historical account (this one has been taken

However, as I have shown in the former chapter, the early and uneven development of commercial capitalism did not translate immediately and automatically into a consumer society where writers could make a living of their work. It did not constitute an easily accessible means for material autonomy for all writers, thinkers, artists and scientists, who still heavily relied on personal fortunes, and different sorts of patronage—not to mention the participants of the Enlightenment who, even if a minority, belonged to the church (like the Abbé de Prades, Abbé de Mably, Raynal or Condillac).

It is true that the rising book market, and in particular the development of the press, was an important emancipatory factor in relation to social mobility of the writer, providing a basis of economic independence for the field's successful players, threatening the traditional bonds of patronage, and allowing authors to consider leaving these relationships due to the success of their own works.²¹⁶ Walter points out that, from a sociological point of view, between 1720 and 1780 "le champ littéraire développe son autonomie en s'appuyant sur la vitalité des réseaux où s'accélère le métissage entre élites nobles et bourgeoisies".²¹⁷ However, more recent historians, like Turnovsky, have tended though to add more nuance to this rising autonomy of the writer per the still prevailing ideological pressure of *honnête* and necessary modesty of the writer.²¹⁸

and updated), his normative dimension (which he brings out with Kant) has raised many objections on different fronts. Yet, before adding another one, I would like to concede a point to Habermas, in his methodology. Hohendahl is right to point out, responding to Habermas's critics, that a purely historical (even materialist historical) approach of the rising public sphere, which would erase from history the normative dimension of the philosophical project (its supposed aspirations for autonomy and rational functioning), will not be accurate to describe the sphere. The intellectual public sphere is not only a social and historical transformation, it has also an inner tension towards an increase autonomy, an inner life difficult to objectivize.

For Habermas, the normative conception of philosophy (the rise of a rational and universal imperative or ground for agreement) is to be understood as the product of a concrete historical transformation of social reality and a reorganization of intellectual space (the appearance of salons, cafés, academies, and new forms and spaces for the public separated from the Church and the university) it is difficult to separate the historical from the normative analysis in his work and to always follow his order of reasoning. By "normative" aspect of the public sphere in Habermas I mean the aspiration of the participants of the sphere to regulate its functioning through discursive and rational practices. As Hohendahl summarized, this aspect of the sphere can be understood as consisting "of discoursing private persons who critically negate political norms of the state and its monopoly on interpretation. The object of discourse is, on the one hand, questions of literature and art, and, on the other, the theory and practice of absolutistic domination. Public opinion institutionalized itself with the goal of replacing decisionistic secret politics with a form of domination that is legitimated by means of rational consensus among participating citizens." Hohendahl, "Critical theory" 92-93. Contrary to the subsequent Habermasian scholars, the "original" Habermasian theory of the bourgeois public sphere presents, as some critics noted, an intricate connection between its normative and its social or historical dimension, this being one of the difficulties but also the richness of his argumentation. As Hohendahl pointed out, "it is precisely this tension between the historical analysis of the public sphere on the one hand and a normative reading of the public sphere on the other, that has kept the *Strukturwandel* alive and controversial. Without the normative element, as much as it was criticized by many generations of readers, the book would no longer be part of the present debate. One might put it this way: without the flaw, the book would have been considered as an outdated historical narrative because it lacks refinement and differentiation of its historical categories." Hohendahl, "The Theory of the Public Sphere Revisited" 16.

216 For an analysis of the development of the press as a medium of politicization, see Jack Censer *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1994); Jack Censer and Jeremy D. Popkin, *Press and Politics in Pre-revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987) and Jack Censer "France 1750-1789," *Press, Politics, and the Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760-1820*, ed. Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.) 159- 181.

217 Walter, "Les auteurs" 391.

218 Turnovsky, *The Literary Market* 56-57.

Nonetheless, the new economic logic of commercial capitalism that developed in the urban public sphere was that of publishing for profit. While it was not concerned with guarantying the material autonomy for the Enlightenment participants, but of being a profitable business for publishers and printers who “owned” the writers works, this commercial logic of profit did have an unsettling, and perhaps unexpected, effect for the Absolutist regime: it neutralized the public authorities' ability to control the book market, and it quickly outmoded its system of censorship. And it is maybe there that one can situate the liberating opening it provided for a more subversive Enlightenment philosophy.

The political economy of censorship belonged indeed to a pre-capitalist model, a mercantilist one based on the State control of production and trade within national borders. In this regard, the rise of an early capitalist economy of book printing and distribution was the strongest force to oppose an interventionist State authority which operated through patent regulations, censorship and the *police des livres*.²¹⁹ The regulation framework of the monarchical regime was based on a corporatist functioning, one of the monopoly and control of production (through *lettres patentes* delivered by the King) and circulation opposed to the logic of capital, which wants freedom to invest, produce, and accumulate. As Rigogne as showed, even though the number of printed books rose immensely, the French printing industry got progressively consolidated by the successive interventions of the Direction of the Book Trade created in 1699 into “fewer, larger, better-equipped, and busier printing shops”.²²⁰ Printer quotas were set in 1669, 1686, 1704, 1739 and 1759, which made the number of printing shops drop throughout the century. This system was designed to protect the interests of the particular guild of book-printing but foremost to control the intellectual life with a system of *privilèges* and permissions for publication. The assumption was that through the control of production and the material producers of intellectual commodities, their actual content could be also controlled. This proved not to work.

In this sense, the quickly development of the press industry in a capitalist model soon managed to exceed the control mechanisms of the government and created a fairly unregulated market of goods. In the 18th century, the number of published books grew exponentially: “200 à 400 ouvrages par an vers 1700, plus de 500 entre 1750 et 1763, plus d'un millier passé 1780.”²²¹ And the state was unable to efficiently respond to regulate this outgrowth of the market. In the face of clear anarchy it tried to increase the top-down regulations with the creation of the *Code de la librairie* for Paris in 1725,

219 Daniel Roche “La censure”, *Histoire de l'édition française*. 4 vols, ed. Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier and Jean-Pierre Vivet (Paris: Promodis, 1982-1986) 2: 83. See also Daniel Roche “La police du livre”, *Histoire de l'édition française*. 4 vols., ed. Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier and Jean-Pierre Vivet (Paris: Promodis, 1982-1986) 2: 84-91.

220 Thierry Rigogne, “Who were the Booksellers and Printers of Eighteenth-Century France,” *Into Print: Limits and Legacies of the Enlightenment: Essays in Honor of Robert Darnton*, eds. George Charles Walton and Robert Darnton (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2011) 56. See Also Thierry Rigogne, *Between State and Market: Printing and Bookselling in Eighteenth-century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007).

221 See also Henri Jean-Martin, “Une croissance séculaire,” *Histoire de l'édition française*, 4 vols, Ed. Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier and Jean-Pierre Vivet (Paris: Promodis, 1982-1986) 2: 95-103.

which in 1744 was extended to the rest of the kingdom.²²² However, the real change in policy was a change that disavowed the logic of the former policies, that is to say the assumption of *pre-emptive* state control, and shifted the State intervention towards the singling out, after publication, of dangerous and unacceptable works: and this was the introduction of the *permission tacite*. As Jean-Martin noted:

"[cette] nouvelle forme de permission, [était] contraire à l'esprit de toute loi: la permission tacite, conçue d'abord comme une permission accordée à un libraire français pour faire pénétrer en France un ouvrage théoriquement imprimé à l'étranger - mais dont chacun savait bien qu'il sortait des presses français sous le couvert d'une adresse étrangère ou fantaisiste."²²³

As Birn points out in his recent book *Royal Censorship of Books in Eighteenth-century France*, in spite of the increased efforts to suppress illegal printing and book trade, between 1750 and 1789, it seemed that 2 out of 3 books circulating in France did not obtain the preliminary royal approval: either they were printed abroad, either there were produced in the kingdom clandestinely or they were issued with a "tacit permission".²²⁴ In this sense we can say that the market was a emancipatory force, as it created a crisis of political authority of the monarchy under Louis XV. To this reality of the political economy of book production was added the sometimes counter-productive function of the condemnation and banning of books, as it was also a way of publicizing them and, paradoxically, expanding the public sphere of its potential readership.

The Academies as Mediation Between Intellectual Public Sphere and the Absolutist State

I do not pretend to provide here an extensive overview and analysis of all the institutions structuring the early modern intellectual field and its political dynamics. I would like to compensate a rather biased view of the field which has reduced the public sphere to the space of the *salon*, most of the time wishing to find there an idealized and democratic space or one governed by the aristocratic codes of sociability, but in all cases and highly intellectualized and depoliticized sphere structured around the art of writing and conversation. This myopic portrait of the Enlightenment literary and philosophical field has minimized a central and complicated space: the Academic system and the various forms of royal patronage which were central to the philosophical world.

One cannot help but think that the emphasis and focus on the salons is again a product of the projected vision of the Enlightenment as a purely rational and esthetic intellectual movement, one marked by the art of writing and conversation (in opposition to the teaching or lecturing practice) in a neutral space where a virtual or fictional equality governed intellectual relations.²²⁵

222 Henri-Jean Martin, "La Direction des lettres," *Histoire de l'édition française*, 4 vols, ed. Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier and Jean-Pierre Vivet (Paris: Promodis, 1982-1986) 2:70.

223 Martin, "La Direction des lettres" 70.

224 Raymond Birn, *Royal Censorship of Books in Eighteenth-century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2012) 28.

225 In *The Republic of letters* (1994) Goodman put the salons at the center of the public sphere and the practice of philosophy and contests the idea that they were social spaces structured around the courtly practices of *civilité* and *politesse*. See Dena Goodman "Polite Conversation and Enlightened Discourse", *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural*

This kind of scholarship, coming mainly from the humanities, has overlooked the extent to which the intellectual field had been structured by, in the French case, the Absolutist State. It has done so to the point where one could ask if the criticism and scholarship produced on these areas did not inherit the same “blind spot” that was at the core of the crisis of philosophy: its relationship with royal power and the fantasy of “enlightened despotism”.

The social history of science, however, has not had this tendency to deny the obvious and has paid a closer attention to the Academies and royal patronage as these were decisive for the development of modern science.²²⁶ The rise of the academies corresponded to a crisis of the universities and their inability to foster and incorporate scientific change. The “Academies movement” began in Italy in the 16th century, later spread to England and finally France and the rest of Europe.²²⁷ As Hammerstein noted, universities in the 18th century became more and more obsolete in regards the development of scientific research, and this was particularly true for France:

"In France in the eighteenth century, the university ceased to have any

History of the French Enlightenment (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 111-134. The research sparked by Goodman's work on the nature and role of the Enlightenment *salons* has been full of controversy, especially regarding the kind of sociability developed in these social spaces: while some have tended to see the origin of a truly egalitarian exchange (regardless of class and gender, or minimizing it), like Gordon, other scholars have portrayed this vision mythical and delusional insisting on the social hierarchies, like Lilti. See Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994) and Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde Des Salons: Sociabilité Et Mondanité À Paris Au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005). Yet the main problem is a broader, methodological one: the elision of the two major structural social forces influencing and shaping the field: the rising book market and the absolutist state.

226 Indeed the reconstruction of the social history of philosophy is somehow doomed to draw both on the social history of “literature” and the social history of “science.” Neither the “new science” nor the “new philosophy” had room in the traditional university, and Bacon was perhaps the first to clearly expose the limitations of the existing institutions of higher learning as an obstacle for the advancement of new science: “Again, in the manners and customs of the schools, universities, colleges and similar institutions, which are intended to house scholars and cultivate learning, everything is found to be inimical to the progress of the sciences. For the readings and exercises are so designed that it would hardly occur to anyone to think or consider anything out of the ordinary. And if perhaps someone should have the courage to use his liberty of judgment, he would be taking the task on himself alone; he will get no useful help from his colleagues. And if he puts up with this too, he will find that in pursuing his career, his industry and largeness of view will be no small obstacle to him. For men's studies in such places are confined and imprisoned in the writing of certain authors; anyone who disagrees with them is instantly attacked as a troublemaker and revolutionary.” Francis Bacon, *The New Organon* 75-76. Bacon's case against the universities has been confirmed and relayed by many of the social historians of science, in particular by Westfall, who concluded that “the the universities were the principal centers of opposition for the new conceptions of nature which modern science constructed.” Richard Westfall, *The Construction of Modern Science: Mechanics and Mechanism* (Cambridge University Press, 1971) 105. It is true that the organization of universities as corporations, based on the principle of privilege and monopoly of higher learning and focused on delivering of degrees was an objective obstacle to the development of independent scientific inquiry particularly because of its vertical organization. Burke 33-34. Even in the early modern period, the university maintained its original function it had had since its foundation in the Middle Ages, aiming “first to provide professional education in the fields of theology, law, and medicine, and, second, to present and analyze the newly acquired corpus of Greek philosophical texts (in particular, those of Aristotle).” John Gascoigne, “Reappraisal of the role of the universities in the scientific revolution,” *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, Ed. David Lindberg (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 254.

227 "One major development with general European implications had its origin in Italy, where several special conditions contributed to the breakdown of the medieval monopoly of the universities as practically the only seats of advanced teaching and research. As the many independent, self-governing city-states became rich and wealthy by their own industry, international trade and banking, they produced a new class of prosperous citizens who were literate, culturally alert, and conscious of the value of higher education." Pedersen 480.

marked influence in the intellectual life of French society and the course of enlightened discussion there. The faculties of arts, under the influence of the Jesuitical Counter-Reformation, had been reduced to being nothing more than diploma-granting institutions. The collèges- all conducted by the church or the Orders- took seriously their propaedeutic task but they became ossified and did not make room for the developing scientific disciplines. Enlightened discussions took place only in the salons and the academics which sprang up everywhere."²²⁸

The spreading of this institutional development had important consequences, as the academies were increasingly challenging the monopoly of the Church over knowledge as they were consolidating themselves as key institutions in the new field.²²⁹ The role of the absolutist authorities in the constitution of the symbolic spaces of knowledge, science, and art production was though a distinctive characteristic of the French case in Enlightenment Europe. In comparison with Germany and England, who saw the development of a bourgeois public sphere more independent from the monarchy and the State, the French intelligentsia (both artistic and scientific) of the 17th century relied heavily on the absolutist state to acquire some independence from the Church. In England, the scientific and literary spheres were created through the constitution of the dissenting academies linked with the religious and theological dissent and resulting in independent and self-financed initiatives. In Germany the university was transformed by the State in order to be able to foster scientific and intellectual development, hosting most of the Enlightenment movement within its walls, while philosophy very quickly became a matter of private enterprise.²³⁰

The French case had a different evolution. If initially in 17th Century France the academies developed like they had in England, autonomously, on a basis of free association, as private societies of writers or scientists (there were 71 in total by the end of the century, of which 56 were literary, they were quickly institutionalized throughout the second half of the century under the patronage of the monarchy.²³¹ This is why the

228 Notker Hammerstein, "The Enlightenment," *A History of the University in Europe*, Vol. 2: *Universities in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*, ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 631. This very unilateral vision of the negative role of the university in negatively shaping the scientific field has been contested by more contemporary historians (like Gascoigne, Porter or Pedersen) but they all acknowledge that the universities ceased to the center of intellectual life even in philosophy and were transformed into a pole which structured the new sphere, being increasingly displaced by the development of a new kind of institution of knowledge: the Academy. As Pedersen noted: "No university faculty would have been able to compete with the Academy in such a wide field; yet the "academic" or learned world in general profited by the academy movement in more ways than one." Olaf Pedersen, "Tradition and innovation," *A History of the University in Europe*, Vol. 2: *Universities in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*, ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 485.

229 Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge* 44.

230 Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: from Gutenberg and Diderot*, (Cambridge, UK; Polity Malden, MA : Blackwell, 2000) 44-46. In the same vein, Hochstrasser noted that: "even to pose the question of whether philosophy in the university and collegiate world was part of the public or the private sphere quickly isolates the uneasy transitional nature of higher education during this period: on the one hand, control by the state or government becomes ever more pressing as the century progresses; on the other, the bulk of teaching in philosophy in Germany still takes place in the unregulated form of private enterprise in the house of the professor, who often provides bed and board for his students as well". Tim J. Hochstrasser, "The Institutionalisation of Philosophy in Continental Europe," *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, 2 vols., ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge University Press, 2008) 77.

231 Alain Viala, *Naissance De l'Écrivain: sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Editions De Minuit,

idea of a European “academic movement” is not quite accurate, as the social and political nature of the academies were quite different from one country to another.

The role of the State was not limited, in its shaping of the French public sphere, to the development of the Academy, although it was in that aspect where its presence was most visible. It was also evident in the role of the crown in funding the French press and providing a readership.²³² For example the creation of the first independent scientific journal in France in 1665, the *Journal des savants* published weekly by the lawyer Denis de Sallo, the French parliament *councillor*, and was very quickly rivaled by the first publications by the *Académie des sciences*, the *Mémoires* (scientific papers) and the *Histoires*, annual reports of the meetings and works of the académie, beginning in 1666.²³³

In 1635 Richelieu created the *Académie Française*, which was originally was circle of friends who meet weekly around Valentin Conrart. Thirty years later Colbert created the *Académie royales des inscriptions et Belles Lettres* (1663), the *Académie royale des sciences* (1666) and the *Académie royale de musique* (1669). The creation of the royal academies was therefore the process of institutionalization of a previously existent informal academic movement or network which flourished in France in the 1620s. In the case of philosophy, the independent academic movement was dominated by anti-aristotelianism and Cartesian or Gassendian philosophy and an increased turn towards experimental science, as was the case with the *académie* around the Dupuy brothers, that of Mersenne or Montmor.²³⁴ This was a philosophy that had neither room nor recognition within the walls of the Catholic university, still dominated by scholasticism, even though, in a contradictory fashion, Cartesian philosophy began to

1985) 29.

232 David Avrom Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 12-13. Bell argued that “the expanding reading “public” of the eighteenth century was not a public of merchants and industrialists, of outsiders to the sphere of government. It was a public of officeholders, financiers, idle rentiers, nobles, and, of course, lawyers—precisely the same groups that participated in the “politics of privilege.” Bell 12. He further pointed out that “the monarchy itself—rather than the capitalist interests described by Habermas—first sponsored a national press in France, with the institution of the *Gazette de France*, followed by the *Mercure* and the *Journal des Savants*. Under Louis XIV, the monarchy bound members of ruling elites around France into large, and increasingly bureaucratized, patronage networks.” Bell 13. Royal and religious institutions were also the one who purchased the most books and fostered the development of a literary market: “local market size was driven less by population than by the presence of institutions. At the onset of the age of bureaucracy, administration of all types, old and new, extended their reach, grew larger, and became more efficient, in particular by relying on print to standardize and circulate forms, memoranda, decisions, or announcements. Successful printers secured contracts with large institutions such as intendances, parlements, bishoprics, universities, and any of the urban institutions that ordered a dizzying variety of printing jobs.” Thierry Rigogne, “Who were the Booksellers and Printers of Eighteenth-Century France,” *Into Print: Limits and Legacies of the Enlightenment: Essays in Honor of Robert Darnton*, eds. George Charles Walton and Robert Darnton (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2011) 56-57.

233 Olaf Pedersen, “Tradition and innovation,” *A History of the University in Europe*, Vol. 2: *Universities in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*, Ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 484.

234 Simone Mazauric, “Le mouvement academique en France,” *Savoir Et Philosophie À Paris Dans La Première Moitié Du XVIIe Siècle* (Paris: Publications De La Sorbonne, 1997) 33-54. Since the 16th century there had been an attempt by the French State to create its own institutions of royal patronage; in order to mediate in the midst of the Religious War and acquire a symbolic presence of its own as a conciliatory force, François 1er began to create state institutions like the Collège Royal in 1530 (later the Collège de France).

penetrate the university by the end of the 17th century.²³⁵ Perhaps the most notable contribution of Cartesianism was, as Gascoigne noted, to “weaken the universities' respect for textual authorities generally and made them more open to the findings of experiment and observation.”²³⁶

In 1699 and following the revocation of the *Edits de Nantes* (1685) the structure of the Academies became more centralized: “the president is appointed by the king, it was placed under one of his ministers and obliged to perform a number of official duties, such as examining new technical inventions and reporting on their usefulness,” also “the number of members was limited by statute and they all had to have academic qualifications”: they were all salaried and divided into four categories (10 *honoraires*, 20 *pensionnaires*, 20 *associés*, and 20 *élèves*).²³⁷ The institutionalization of the academic movement by the monarchy turned a rather polymorphous and diverse informal academic network into a more regulated, more specialized but also completely subordinated to absolutist power institutional system, where “l’Etat affirmant son autonomie, utilise [l’académie] et la fait servir à ses propres fins.”²³⁸

In *Naissance de l'écrivain* (1985) Viala showed how this institutionalization of the sciences and *belles lettres* created an ambiguous and “duplicitous” situation contributing but also undermining the emergence of the public sphere. On the one hand, the monarchy had initially a decisive impact in giving a social status to writers and scientists, and more largely in recognizing the symbolic legitimacy of a new field of knowledge, and in the case of philosophy of a radical and new philosophy inspired by the rise of experimental philosophy in England. Through the Academies, the state provided a material base for this subordinated autonomous field by giving pensions to the academicians, that is to say by substitution a public form of patronage, (the *mécénat*) to the traditional prevailing clientelism which tied writers and philosophers to particular noble protectors. Royal patronage made and unmade many individuals' careers, as Jouhaud and Schapira have showed with the cases of Jean Chapelain and Valentin Conrart respectively.²³⁹ This is not to say that it became the only or even dominant form

235 As Gascoigne explained, in theory, the university opposed initially Cartesianism, “in practice, the tendency of university teachers to attempt, where possible, to reconcile the old and new made the transition from Aristotelian scholasticism to Cartesianism less of a clearly marked watershed than the fundamental incompatibility of the two systems might suggest.” John Gascoigne, “Reappraisal of the role of the universities in the scientific revolution,” *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, Ed. David Lindberg (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 215. The majority of teachers, neo-Cartesians, made a compromise between Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophy, and in the overall the penetration of Cartesianism was still confined to the part of natural philosophy, which was a semi-autonomous part of the study of philosophy, leaving the metaphysics and therefore the theology initially untouched. Gascoigne 216-218. And as Brockliss pointed out “Cartesianism was just as much a science of causes based upon a series of principles; the principles had simply changed. The professors of the early eighteenth century, therefore, continued to profess the same belief as their Aristotelian predecessors on the relative relationship of empiricism and deduction”. Brockliss, “Aristotle, Descartes, and the New Science,” *Annals of Science* 38 (1981) 62-63.

236 Gascoigne, “Reappraisal of the role of universities” 219.

237 Pedersen 484.

238 Mazauric, “Le mouvement academique” 36.

239 See Christian Jouhaud, *Les Pouvoirs de la littérature: histoire d'un paradoxe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); and Nicolas Schapira, *Un Professionnel des lettres au XVIIe siècle: Valentin Conrart, une histoire sociale* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2003).

of patronage, as for example the Duc de Choiseul or the holders of salons were still important patrons, but it became an option sought out by many philosophers. However at the same time the royal patronage supported the Academies by participating in them, it also sought to set the political boundaries of the new public sphere, trying to breach the formal separation of the space of the court and the urban space of the bourgeois sphere through these veiled mechanisms of control.

The Academies were there to play this contradictory role of “mediation” between the political power and the public sphere. But this mediation was neither a neutral one nor a balanced equilibrium. In order to maintain such a paradoxical role, the academies had to draw clearly legible lines that could not be crossed, making sure that all intellectual and artistic activity under royal patronage conformed to the necessary allegiance to the monarchy, contributed to the glory of the French nation and fostered *éloge* to the person of the King. In such a place, the political autonomy of the writers, scientists and philosophers, was, to put it mildly, threatened. The case of the expulsion of the Abbé de Saint Pierre of the Académie in 1718, after the publication of his *Discours sur la polysynodie* (1718), was a clear sign of this political delimitation. His *Discours* was perceived as a work which overtly questioned the single authority of the monarch, as it insisted on the idea that the King should benefit from a plurality of counsel and advice in order to properly rule and implement justice, thereby implicitly questioning the theory of absolutism consolidated under Louis the XIV.²⁴⁰

The Academies were early participants in the Enlightenment, trying to give a shape to the proliferation of letters and sciences. Since their creation, as Heilbron noted, the academies wanted to be the institutions of the “reconnaissance officielle de [la] compétence,” and of the constitution of “a sorte the monopole de jugement,” a monopoly intending to rival, principally, that of the Church. Their functioning to produce symbolic value was homologous to that of the Church.²⁴¹ The Academic system became quickly in the 17th century a source of autonomous ruling (definition of taste, forms of sociability and use of language, definition of scientific standards and others forms of objectivity) and praised itself as being composed of selected specialists, although it had since its beginning a clear ideological and political bias. However, while in the 17th century the role of academies seems clear, when it comes to the following century that saw a qualitative development of the public sphere with the rise of printing and publication and

240 See Moussa Traoré, *One Story of Academia: Race Lines and the Rhetoric of Distinction through the Académie Française* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010) 136-137; and Gustave De Molinari, *L'abbé De Saint-Pierre, ... Sa Vie Et Ses Oeuvres* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1857).

241 Johan Heilbron, *Naissance de la sociologie* (Marseille: Agone, 2006) 9. Further, in her study of the relations between philosophy and its other at the beginning of the 18th century (a moment when the Académies were trying to establish their legitimacy), Ribard noted the use of the references to and dialogue with the philosophy of the “Ecole”, that is Scholasticism and the University, with the double intention to legitimize the philosophy produced in the Académie, but also to supersede or subsume the university as the locus of production of the legitimate philosophy: “la légitimation de l’institution académique passe ici par une présentation de sa supériorité sur l’institution universitaire en matière de production du savoir, mais aussi, ce qui est peut-être plus intéressant, par une présentation qui fait d’elle la rivale de cette institution universitaire, et donc comme son équivalent dans la géographie intellectuelle. Le lieu de vérité se construit donc par décentrement, désignation d’un nouveau centre (l’Académie) qui réplique la solidité du premier (l’Ecole).” Dinah Ribard, “Philosophie et non-philosophie: Fontenelle et Descartes,” *Revue Fontenelle* 2 (2005) 63.

new spaces of discussion, the analysis of their role almost disappears from the sociological and historical studies of literature and philosophy.

We know that for certain that, throughout the 18th century, the academic network continued to develop, in particular through the creation of *académies provinciales*: 10 *académies* were founded between 1652 in 1715, twenty more between 1715 and 1760, most of them scientific societies constituted more by amateurs than professionals.²⁴² The question we ought to ask, therefore, is what was the role of the Academies' system in the 18th century in shaping the field, and in particular the practice of philosophy? How did this "duplicité" that Viala detected in the 17th and the reciprocal determinations between the writers and power Jouhaud explored evolve following century?

There has been a tendency in the historiography of the Academies to present this institutional mediation between the *hommes the lettres* and philosophers and the Absolutist state as one where *tout le monde trouve son compte*, thus naturalizing this new role of the State of the emerging intellectual sphere without problematizing its consequences.²⁴³ By contrast to these approaches, my hypothesis here is that the Academy was the political blind spot, but an absolutely necessary one for the consolidation of philosophy particularly as an autonomous symbolic force, as a legitimate scientific *discipline* in the second half of the 18th century. And that in order to achieve such an institutional recognition it has to evacuate what became to be identified as "materialism", which was the defense of critical, independent and non-institutional practice of philosophy.

2 . Realities and Challenges of the "Public Use of Reason"

The Rational Sphere: a Self-Idealized Conception of the Bourgeois Sphere

The new bourgeois sphere has been portrayed by Habermas as one of increasing communication, governed by a rational functioning, a sphere constituted by the "the public of private people making use of their reason" and therefore an autonomous one.²⁴⁴

242 For a study of the provincial académies see Daniel Roche, *Le Siècle des Lumières en province: Académies Et académiciens provinciaux 1680-1789* (Paris: Éditions De L'École Des Hautes Études En Sciences Sociales, 1989).

243 See for example Henri-Jean Martin: "Le succès des académies parisiennes tient de toute évidence à la rencontre des aspirations du monde des lettres, des sciences et de l'érudition avec les desseins de l'Etat. Elles sont un lie de la rencontre sur un pied d'égalité membres de la noblesse et de l'Eglise, écrivains, érudits et savants patentés et mettent du même coup au service de la Monarchie une sphère autonome du savoir et de la culture. Le système académique permet aux intellectuels de prendre conscience de leur appartenance à une classe dirigeante culturelle. Ce sont eux qui définissent désormais les critères du talent et détiennent les clefs de la République des lettres. Mais en échange de la reconnaissance de leurs mérites, d'un salaire, d'une pension, de facilité dans leur travail, ils perdent du même coup leur liberté." Martin, "La Direction des lettres" 68.

244 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 51. The defining characteristics of the public sphere, following Melton's brief summary are: 1) the consideration of reason as the only arbiter, not the authority or social identity of the speaker/writer, the claim of a disregard of the social status, the fact that the membership of the public sphere not "formally" based on status; 2) the idea that nothing is immune to criticism: it can be applied to anything: world of letters, also religious beliefs and actions of the government, the public sphere is "inherently oppositional in it thrust;" 3) the bourgeois public sphere as hostile to secrecy. Publicity as a cardinal defining principle. Melton *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* 8-9.

A set of arguments questioning such an autonomy have already been outlined by many scholars.²⁴⁵ Yet if it is true that social and political determination did operate in the bourgeois intellectual sphere, it is not less true that the sphere did produce an idealized conception of its own functioning as a purely rational one, based on the model of an anonymous tribunal of reason or “public opinion”. This is a significant ideological change compared to the previous paradigms of intellectual authority, which were based on a pre-established and unquestioned authority, but one which was tangible, embodied somewhere in society (the Christian dogma and the Catholic Church). Several scholars have developed this Habermasian insight and studied the emergence, consolidation and characteristics of this new phenomenon called “public opinion”, which came to define and structure the public sphere. In fact, public opinion became a new form of authority or symbolic sanctioning which distinguished the bourgeois sphere from pre-capitalist modes of symbolic power and competed with them.

The new “public opinion” was competing for legitimacy with the previously existing sources of authorities, as the peaceful coexistence of competing paradigms of authority was untenable in the long term. It had in its germs the potentiality of undermining all kinds of authorities, and as Ozouf signaled, “quand l’opinion publique a conquis sa royauté, plus de place pour l’autorité royale.”²⁴⁶ It managed to displace the established symbolic authorities by changing the rules of the game, not by proposing a new source of legitimacy. It reduced the previously existent symbolic systems to discourses of *specificity* (the expression of a particular social, economic or religious perspective) and exposed their reductive character, while public opinion presented itself as a universal form of judgment, immediately available to anyone, regardless of their intentions or the position from which he or she was speaking. As Ozouf pointed out: “pour que l’opinion publique apparaisse comme autorité suprême, il faut que le monde se voit vidé des autres autorités héritées,” and this was precisely the gesture that characterized the rise of this anonymous tribunal, that it emptied and disregarded the components that structured the pre-existing forms of value (privilege, status, birth and sacrality) by negating their relevance in the public sphere.²⁴⁷

The concept of public opinion often conceptualized as a tribunal of reason, as “un imaginaire de l’autorité” was based on free rational consent, and one that cannot be not located in any particular place.²⁴⁸ As Ozouf noted, it was because this tribunal could not be located anywhere in society, because it was totally disembodied, that it could claim a

245 The autonomy of the intellectual, which is one as I showed more postulated than proven, is not only free from the political power, but from any social determination coming from the existing social reality. This idealistic or unhistorical conception of the sphere as impermeable to class, the feudal rules of sociability, to gender norms, or economic pressures has been criticized. See in particular Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992) 109-142; Peter Hohendahl and Marc Silberman “Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture.” For a critique of the idealistic functioning of the Parisian salons see Antoine Lilti “The kingdom of politesse: salons and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth Century Paris” *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1 (2009).

246 Mona Ozouf, “Le concept d’opinion publique au XVIIIe siècle,” *Sociologie de la communication* 1.1 (1997) 356.

247 Ozouf 356.

248 Ozouf 355. See also Keith Baker, “Public opinion as political invention,” *Inventing the French Revolution* 167-200.

new form of universal validity, or value: “l’opinion publique est une tribunal impersonnel et anonyme: dans les veredits qu’elle rend chacun peut entendre la voix de tous, et donc la voix de personne; et croire ne la tenir finalement que de soi.”²⁴⁹ This emerging form of symbolic authority had the challenge of finding, as Baker pointed out, “a form of political practice that would acknowledge the new authority of ‘the public’,” that is to say the mechanism to exercise its authority, but while “avoiding the conflicts and instabilities of a politics of contestation, on the other.”²⁵⁰ It is not that the public sphere was then apolitical, but rather that its political nature consisted in establishing a new form of regulation or “police” which excluded the *direct* discussion of social and political matters.

It is not an accident if such an anonymous and disembodied form of authority or value developed in such a sphere which was the locus of early mass consumption and commercial exchange. The tribunal of opinion can be seen, in many regards, as the first but displaced conceptualization of exchange value. For where indeed was this new intellectual public sphere located if not in the burgeoning spaces of commodity production and centers of exchange which were the early modern cities?

It is absolutely true that this new tribunal cannot be colluded into a sociological category (the bourgeoisie) or a political one (the rising national identity), but neither is it the correlations are wrong per se. Public opinion as the voice of an impersonal reason expresses, in the end, the properly *bourgeois* logic of the public sphere as a sphere of consumption. To this extent it is true that public opinion was an invention, as Baker noted, but it was also the expression of the new functioning of symbolic value under the rising capitalist society.²⁵¹ Even more than an invention, its was, as Gordon pointed out, a “self idealization,” or what I would call the production of a particular ideology of consensus and critique, based on “idealized images of social interaction,”²⁵² always reaching consensus as the privileged and desirable form of unity. He linked this idealized impersonal sociability and rationality of the “public opinion” to the method of internal or immanent critique (of texts and society), one that does not know or is not allowed to

249 Ozouf 357.

250 Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* 186.

251 For Baker “public opinion” should be better understood as a “*classless*” phenomena, not tied to any specific social subject or force but rather “as a political invention appearing in the context of a crisis of absolute authority in which actors within an absolutist political system appealed to a “public” beyond as a way of reformulating institutional claims that could no longer be negotiated within the traditional political language.” Baker *Inventing the French Revolution* 192. As he had previously argued: “Many studies of the idea of public opinion assume the existence of some corresponding social referent as a residual fact of common life in any society—a kind of perpetual noise in the system which must in some way be taken account of, whether or not its existence is formally acknowledged by political actors or explicitly designated under the rubric of ‘public opinion’. Others see it as a specific phenomenon of modern societies, brought into being by long term changes in literacy, by the growth of capitalism and the commercial expansion of the press, by the bureaucratic transformation of particularistic social orders into more integrated national (and now international) communities. Without denying the importance of these latter developments, I wish to insist on the significance of the public opinion as a political invention, rather than as a sociological function. The term “opinion publique” was not entirely unknown before the last decades of the Old Regime. But in the course of these decades, it suddenly emerged as a central rhetorical figure in a new kind of politics. Suddenly it designated a new source of authority, the supreme tribunal to which absolute monarchy, no less than its critics, was compelled to appeal.” Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* 168.

252 Gordon, “Philosophy” 898.

consider its own limits and determinations.²⁵³

"[I]t is important to observe that the notion of 'immanent critique' is based in the false assumption that modern societies have only one possible normative basis of self-justification. It thus entails that the diverse cultural history of Western societies be reduced to a single pattern of universal history, the history of the rise of the ideal of public opinion and of the institutions that sustain this ideal."²⁵⁴

While I agree with Gordon's description of the French Enlightenment as an auto-idealized one, I think he was wrong to consider this rule of functioning as hegemonic in the French Enlightenment.²⁵⁵ He foreclosed the possibility to identify within the French Enlightenment the critical voice of materialism which questioned this conception.

Against the view of a rational and communicative sphere, in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944) Adorno and Horkheimer opposed the idea that the public sphere was dominated by the rule of exchange value which is that of equivalence, as "it makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities."²⁵⁶ Theirs was a view of an intellectual field dominated by an ineluctable and liquidating force of abstraction, of which "public opinion" is the best example, a tribunal or reason that was soon to become that of "the standard of calculability and utility" (as we are not talking of any use of reason, but a particular one) which threw "suspicion" to anything that did not conform to it.²⁵⁷

Of this new paradigm of public opinion what needs to be highlighted is not its universal and abstract rationality, but its modus operandi: the normative use of reason which is the product of a private exchange both creates and relies on a rational abstract authority which seems to emanate from all individual opinions, an equalizing force which negates the existing social hierarchies and political forces as a condition for the participation in the rational game, but a force that in return cannot be found anywhere, as it lacks social and political qualities and appears to speak from everywhere and at the same time.

In fact the notion of "public opinion" as the ideological emanation of the urban sphere of consumption veils a contradictory social reality of the enlightenment. The

253 Gordon explains that the ideological production of the early modern field is always to portray exchange as positive, peaceful and consensual, a conception reflected in the belief of so many political economists of the time that commerce will produce virtue and sociability. Through the concept of public opinion as a new measure of rationality what is really implied, according to the historia, is that "modern societies were portrayed as those in which a general communicative sphere had emerged through the dissolution of old barriers to interaction. The exchange of ideas through commerce and the press was held to unify a people into an "enlightened" and "civilized" totality while also depoliticizing this totality by defining its unity as a function of private "sociability" rather than direct political action." Gordon, "Philosophy" 898.

254 Gordon 885.

255 A fact that Gordon deplores as he prefers what he characterizes as the "English" model, which he embodies in Hume to the French one, represented by Rousseau and his conception of the general will. He sees the French Enlightenment obsessively relying "on the possibility of unity rather than on institutional mechanics" like its English counterpart. Gordon, "Philosophy" 891.

256 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002) 4.

257 Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 3.

anonymous tribunal of reason established the fiction of formally equivalent discourses while its producers were in reality, were not equal. This was in fact a truly “bourgeois” invention as it perfectly expressed the necessary logic of capitalism to separate the economic from the political domain. It has the merit of giving the illusion of a subjective participation in the creation of a public form of value which seemed to be produced out of “free” and “equivalent” exchanges and opinions, to stem out of individual and subjective judgments: that is symbolic value. Condillac’s own definition of value, in his *Essai sur le commerce et le gouvernement, considérés relativement l’un à l’autre* (1776), is interesting in this regard. He who was not a political economist but a member of the new literary and philosophical intelligentsia affirmed developed a new theory of value based on the denial of an ultimately “objective” value of things. In this sense he opposed the Physiocrats but also the emerging liberal school by arguing that the value of things was founded not only upon their actual abundance or utility but upon “l’opinion que nous ayons de leur rareté et de leur abondance.”²⁵⁸

The Philosopher, The Scholar and the Citizen: the Public Use of Reason

Habermas presented the functioning of the world of letters as that of sphere of *private* individuals who make a public use of their reason. The critic focused on Kant’s description of the Enlightenment as it was German philosopher who he viewed as perhaps the player who was able to most clearly delineate and define the “sociological conditions” for the public use of reason, thereby presenting the most “theoretically” developed form of the bourgeois sphere, or as Bourdieu would had put it, the logic of the field.²⁵⁹ Habermas insisted that the public character of the public sphere was defined by the overall function of the intellectual sphere in early modern society, with a paradox in its core: while the intellectual field should be thought as “as an element of the political realm”, the process of private individuals engaging in “rational-critical public debate”, and thus the constitution of a “public opinion” was to be “interpreted itself as un political”.

Through Kant, Habermas establishes an analogy in the functioning of the intellectual sphere and the political one, and implies that Kant’s configuration of a public sphere of “scholars” is to be thought as analogous as his definition of a political sphere as “citizens”. Certainly the delineation of the political public sphere, separate from the persona of the King and the Court became the place where the individual’s voice was closely linked to its economic status, and therefore restricted to the “property-owning private people” Habermas singled out. This early definition of citizenship in Kant was

258 Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur le commerce et le gouvernement* (Paris: Letellier, 1795) 9.

259 “The idea of the bourgeois public sphere attained its theoretically fully developed form with Kant’s elaboration of the principle of publicity in his philosophy of right and philosophy of history.” Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 102. Baker was right to affirm that “Habermas brings us close here to a teleological conception in relation to which opposing notions of the public must be seen to be ultimately reconcilable as representing different aspects of the developing bourgeois public sphere,” and to insist that he Physiocrats and Rousseau (both examined by Habermas) “belong to radically different political discourses” and that “they grounded quite different assumptions about the nature of social and political order and implied competing conceptions of the public sphere” - unfortunately, Baker never gave any significant attention to the materialist current. Keith Baker, “Defining the public sphere in eighteenth-century France”. *Habermas and the public sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992) 193.

also shared by Diderot and D'Holbach.²⁶⁰ The political sphere is ruled according to Habermas's reading of Kant is tasked with ensuring social peace (and not revolt) in a society increasingly dominated by market forces:

“These [sociological conditions] depended altogether on social relationships among freely competing commodity owners, falling within the sphere that was the preserve of their private autonomy. Only property-owning private people were admitted to a public engaged in critical political debate, for their autonomy was rooted in the sphere of commodity exchange and hence was joined to the interest in its preservation as a private sphere.”²⁶¹

The public sphere was inherently marked by a form of individuation based upon the emergence of the *commodity owner* figure. And if it is true that this sociological characterization does not correspond to an actual historical description of the Enlightenment participants, it is true that this was part of the idealized or self-representation of the field by its dominant figures.

However, it seems to me that Habermas's analogy between Kant's definitions of the political and the intellectual sphere is not totally correct, as there is not direct homology that will allow us to say that only property owners can participate in the intellectual sphere, neither by Kant's definition nor by the historical account of the Enlightenment itself. Kant's definition of the scholar in *What is Enlightenment?* (1784) is not based upon any direct social qualification, nor about a particular set of topics or restrictions for public critique. On the contrary, he or she has the “right” to have a scholarly opinion on virtually any matter, the issue is that this opinion is qualified as a “scholarly one”; which means it cannot be put in practice. The contradiction of the intellectual sphere for Kant then is that between the scholar and the citizen, which are presented as two different modes of intervening in the public sphere, with separate logics:

“[B]y the public use of one's own reason I understand that use which someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*. What I call the private use of reason is that which one may make of it in a certain *civil* post or office with which he is entrusted. Now, for many affairs conducted in the interest of a commonwealth a certain mechanism is necessary, by means of which some members of the commonwealth must behave merely passively, so as to be directed by the government, through an artful unanimity, to public ends (or at least prevented from destroying such ends). Here it is, certainly, impermissible to argue; instead, one must obey. But insofar as this part of the machine

260 “He who has the right to vote in this legislation is called a *citizen* (*citoyen*, i.e., *citizen of a state*, not of a town, *bourgeois*). The quality requisite to this, apart from the *natural* one (of not being a child or a woman), is only that of *being one's own master* (*sui iuris*), hence having some *property* (and any art, craft, fine art, or science can be counted as property) that supports him - that is, if he must acquire from others in order to live, he does so only by *alienating* what *is his* and not by giving others permission to make use of his powers - and hence [the requisite quality is] that, in the strict sense of the word, he *serves* no one other than the commonwealth. Here craftsmen and large (or small) landowners are all equal, namely each is entitled to only one vote.” Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying: That Might be Correct in Theory, But Is Of No Use in Practice” *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 295.

261 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 109-110.

also regards himself as a member of a whole commonwealth, even of the society of citizens of the world, and so in his capacity of a scholar who by his writings addresses a public in the proper sense of the word, he can certainly argue without thereby harming the affairs assigned to him in part as a passive member. Thus it would be ruinous if an officer, receiving an order from his superiors, wanted while on duty to engage openly in subtle reasoning about its appropriateness' or utility; he must obey. But he cannot fairly be prevented, as a scholar, from making remarks about errors in the military service and from putting these before his public for appraisal. A citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed upon him; an impertinent censure of such levies when he is to pay them may even be punished as a scandal (which could occasion general insubordination). But the same citizen does not act against the duty of a citizen when, as a scholar, he publicly expresses his thoughts about the inappropriateness or even injustice of such decrees.”²⁶²

When speaking as a citizen, political authority cannot be contested, neither in theory nor in practice. When speaking as a scholar or “man of learning” then all aspects of public life may be examined. However, the problem is that the scholar and the citizen are two forms of subjectivation or intervention in the public sphere embodied in the same person, and while one can alternate different sorts of interventions in different spaces of this public sphere (the university and the academy, the parliament and the streets), they are not at all equivalent. One could say that the same way the sphere of consumption and circulation is overdetermined by the sphere of production, the possibilities of intervention as a scholar are curtailed and determined, in the last instance, by the status as citizen. The scholar can criticize the established political order as much as he wants as long as his obedience, his political practice, is not in agreement with his or her philosophical ideas but his or her recognition of the established political authority and economic order. Therefore the scholar in the intellectual field is a corollary in the political field of the property-owner citizen only in an indirect way: not by dictating the content of its position but by defining its *form* to a purely rhetorical, formal or scholarly form of critique.

Some critics of the Kantian version of the Enlightenment presented by Habermas have pointed out the fundamental political problems of such an intellectual sphere, as it seems to be one based upon a veiled social exclusion, and further an alienating one, as only “formal” positions can be taken. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, Negt and Kluge question the reduction of the intellectual public sphere to a “model republic of scholars” and the political consequences of that.²⁶³

“The inner violence of these principles, including the principle of public sphere is rooted in the fact that the main struggle must be waged against all particularities. Everything that resists the universalizing tendency of commodity production must be sacrificed to the general, to the principle. This is the source of the compulsive way in which criteria such as

262 Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 18-19.

263 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1993) 9.

definitions, subsumptions, and categorizations are used to circumscribe the public sphere. In this way, Kant excludes from politics and the public sphere all those sections of the population that do not participate in the bourgeois politics because they cannot afford to.”²⁶⁴

There is indeed not a formal but a concrete exclusion, *de facto*, of the majority of the people from the public sphere. Yet what is more problematic in Kant’s way of closing up the Enlightenment movement, is that it be considered, fundamentally, as scholarly movement. By the time Kant began to write on the Enlightenment, philosophy was back into a part of re-institutionalization, and the political independence of the intellectual sphere was rapidly disappearing in Germany as well as France. Yet I would question the appropriateness of choosing Kant, a university professor his entire career, as the epitome of the “enlightened” *philosophe*.

Kluge and Negt also insisted in another form of exclusion, an exclusion by *alienation* generated by the separation of theory and practice, creating the empty *formalism* characteristic of bourgeois law and political functioning²⁶⁵. By cutting philosophy off from any practical experience, pro-Kantian philosopher alienated the whole space as it became a purely abstract one, with no relation to human social life: “There is no empirical experience that fulfills this concept of public sphere; it is intended as the intercourse that takes place among lovers of truth.”²⁶⁶

In fact, as a philosopher may only speak about philosophical business, but can never act according to what one thinks. And Kant’s illuminating apostrophe was far from being accepted by all philosophers, particularly by materialists: “*Argue* as much as you will and about whatever you will, *but obey!*”²⁶⁷ The separation between a public and a private use of reason leads to a contradiction between a theoretical (or speculative) and a practical use of reason. It should be forbidden to the philosopher, according to Kant, to act morally and politically accordingly to his reason, to apply his own theory. Practice has to do with a “private” use of reason, which is by definition not a political one, but one defined, as we saw, by social and economic interests. The practitioners of philosophy should then think publicly according to the rule of reason, but act privately according to their class status. This dislocation of the scholar and the citizen which was produced by the bourgeois field is what materialist philosophers contested, as they wanted to see a continuity and an expansion, not a limitation, of their political capacities as citizens when they intervened as philosophers.

264 Negt, *Public Sphere* 10.

265 “In the intellectual tradition of the bourgeois domination of nature, the interest in a legal synopsis of ‘appeasement’ in the sense of domination and pacification is the foundation of formalism, of the intellectual show of force vis-a-vis the object, and of the mechanism of exclusion. This tendency lies at the base of the production mechanism of the bourgeois sphere as a whole. The reversal of this would mean precisely an understanding of conflict and the organizing of the experience that results from it as the integration mechanism of a public sphere that would encompass, sublimate, and in no case exclude all members of society.” Negt, *Public Sphere* 11.

266 Negt, *Public Sphere* 11.

267 Kant, *Practical Philosophy* 18.

3. Materialism and Anti-Materialism in the Emerging Bourgeois Public Sphere

The Publication of De L'Esprit and the Public Scandal of Materialism

The publication of *De l'Esprit* in July 1758 led unpredictably to what became one of the deepest ideological crises for the French early modern political regime. The story of how Helvetius' first philosophical book came to obtain (even if only for a very short period of time) the royal privilege for printing is still mysterious. It seems that he organized a bit of a scheme involving his friend Leroy (who knew some censors) and his publisher Durand in order to fool Tercier, the royal censor assigned to check his manuscript, and thus convince him of the acceptability of his work.²⁶⁸ It is quite likely that Tercier barely read the manuscript—he later insisted that he was overworked—and quickly approved it with very minor changes in March 1758, which allowed the book to obtain the *privilège* of legal printing in May of that year. The first copies came out of Durand's presses in Paris on July 27th 1758, and set off what would become a kind of firestorm

The elements which sparked said fire were that the book had been legally authorized, given its content sustaining several radical theses branded as materialists (the sensuous nature of the soul, the reduction of vices and virtues to modulations of pain and pleasure, religious morality as an obstacle to human happiness, the unfounded principles of political authority, of monarchical power etc.), as none of them was completely new. What was new was Helvetius' style and his way of addressing his reader in such a bold, direct and pedagogical style. It was, first of all, the modality of its publication, that it appeared with Royal approval and not clandestinely (as it was the case with all of La Mettrie's and the first works by Diderot) and the way it constructed its address to the reader which drew attention to the book.

I would like to linger on the second aspect which has been almost ignored by the scholarship, which has to do with the pedagogical, direct and lucid style of Helvetius' address to the reader, which seeks to enlarge its public beyond the strictly speaking philosophical sphere, hoping to reach all of the literate public regardless of their philosophical expertise. This too was a new feature of materialist philosophy beginning in the 1760s and represents a break with the clandestine codes and practices of address and signification, which never completely or immediately revealed the position of the authors or the true targets of the polemical and political critiques. In his preface, Helvetius appeals to a different kind of readership and above all put the reader in a position of judge regarding matters of public morals and and government: “Je ne demande qu'un grâce à mon lecteur, c'est de m'entendre avant que de me condamner; c'est de suivre l'enchaînement qui lie ensemble toutes mes idées; d'être mon juge et non ma partie. Cette demande n'est pas l'effet d'une sottise confiance; j'ai trop souvent trouvé mauvais le soir, ce que j'avais cru bon le matin, pour avoir une haute opinion de mes lumières.”²⁶⁹ In many ways, the elements of this address are not original, what is shocking is their synthesis, as they belong from different philosophical cultures. Helvetius

268 David Warner Smith, *Helvétius: A Study in Persecution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982) 18-25.

269 Claude Hadrien Helvétius. *De L'esprit* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1968) 68.

brought together, in a simple way, two different elements which used to constitute different readerships: the Cartesian ideal a universal reader could, follow the “enchaînement” of ideas, making the philosophical exercise potentially accessible to anyone; and the Spinozist model of a critical reader, which was developed by the libertine clandestine tradition, where there reader should not believe the text but instead learn question it, in order to formulate his or her own opinion. Here the text aims to be both universally read and understood, as it does not pretend to hide anything between the lines but sets all the arguments out in the open, and at the same time it incites a critical attitude. It constructs, at least in the fictional experience of reading, a universal critical disposition towards philosophy and the matters at stake.

In the preface we find also the portrayal of the philosopher’s commitment to social utility we saw with Dumarsais: “Dans tout ce que j’ai dit, je n’ai cherché que le vrai, non pas uniquement pour l’honneur de le dire, mais parce que le vrai est utile aux hommes.”²⁷⁰

In reality, what his preface contained was the proposal of a democratic functioning of the public sphere including, in its political dimension, a shared space where everything could be said, discussed, contradicted and corrected, where all voices were heard and where different and mutating majorities could be successively constituted and dissolved:

“Si la connaissance d’une telle vérité peut avoir quelques inconvénients dans un tel instant; cet instant passé, cette même vérité redevient utile à tous les siècles et à toutes les nations.

Tel est enfin le sort des choses humaines: il n’en est aucune qui ne puisse devenir dangereuse dans de certains moments; mais ce n’est qu’à cette condition qu’on en jouit. Malheur à qui voudrait, par ce motif, en priver l’humanité.

Au moment même qu’on interdirait la connaissance de certaines vérités, il ne serait plus permis d’en dire aucune. Mille gens puissants et souvent même mal intentionnés, sous prétexte qu’il est quelquefois sage de taire la vérité, la banniraient entièrement de l’univers. Aussi le public éclairé qui seul en connaît tout le prix la demande sans cesse: il ne craint point de s’exposer à des maux incertains, pour jouir des avantages réels qu’elle procure. Entre les qualités des hommes, celle qu’il estime le plus est cette élévation d’âme qui se refuse au mensonge. Il sait combien il est utile de tout penser et de tout dire; et que les erreurs même cessent d’être dangereuses, lorsqu’il est permis de les contredire. Alors elles sont bientôt reconnues pour erreurs; elles se déposent bientôt d’elles-mêmes dans les abîmes de l’oubli, et les vérités seules surnagent sur la vaste étendue des siècles.”²⁷¹

As many scholars have pointed out the *affaire* of *De l’Esprit* was also a stake in larger political struggle. The publication of book became a crystallizing point of the opposition between the King and the *Parlement* of Paris, one started around the

270 Helvétius, *De l’Esprit* 68.

271 Helvétius, *De l’Esprit* 69-70.

Jansenist dispute and the quarrel of sacraments. Once the book was out, and despite the quick revocation of the privilege on August 10th by an “Arrêt du Conseil du Roi” which condemned the work, the Parliament of Paris seized the opportunity to pronounce its own condemnation of the work in January of 1759. As Smith pointed out, the fuss around Helvétius’s work became a locus of a struggle that was not directly connected to its content or to the philosophical movement of the Enlightenment. The Parliament of Paris, had already established a “para-legal” practice since 1746 (when banning La Mettrie’s and Diderot’s first works) of exercising a censorship of its own, implying that the King was too weak to confront the *philosophes* and the real responsables of political dissent in the country. It hoped that with the *affaire De L’Esprit* it could make the royal censor answerable to the parliamentary court, thus increasing the Parliament’s political authority.²⁷² Joly de Fleury did indeed prepare an unusually long speech of 25 pages attacking not only Helvetius’ works but another set of “livres contre l’Etat, la Religion, et les bonnes moeurs”, whose authors or “prétendus philosophes” were “toujours amis de la Religion Naturelle, du Matérialisme, du Déisme ou de l’Athéisme.”²⁷³

However, this political tension around Jansenism and the role of the *parlements* in the absolutist regime does not completely explain the reason why *that* particular book made everything explode. Scholars have tended to undermine Helvetius’ contribution to materialist philosophy and looked outside of his work to explain the scandal. However, the rivalry between the monarchy and the *Parlement* is insufficient to explain why, as Smith noted, the book “was condemned by almost every competent and religious body—The Archbishop of Paris (November 1758), the Pope (January 1759), the *Parlement* (February 1759), the Sorbonne (April 1759).”²⁷⁴ Helvétius was obliged to publicly retract three times “twice to the Jesuits in August 1758, and once to the *Parlement* in January 1759.”²⁷⁵ He feared for his safety and left the country for two years, and even though he was not imprisoned—probably because his aristocratic background family connections with the Queen—he was forced into silence for the rest of his life, allowing only the release of *De l’Homme* (1772) posthumously. It does not seem that any other work, except maybe the *Encyclopédie* and later Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), sparked so many virulent attacks and written responses as *De l’Esprit* did, not only by inspiring political and religious authorities to write longwinded pieces of condemnation, but also by forcing many journalists and professional christian pamphleteers of some sort, like Gabriel Gauchat, the Père Hayer (a Theology and Philosophy professor and a well-known Catholic apologist) and the Jansenist Chaumeix to drop or quickly finish other apologetic pamphlets they were working on in order to devote their mental energies to refute Helvetius’ piece, and with him the new “Matérialisme” which seemed to be acquiring a growing popularity.²⁷⁶

272 Smith, *Helvétius* 29-30.

273 *Arrêts de la Cour de Parlement, portant condamnation de plusieurs Livres et autres Ouvrages imprimés, des 23 janvier et 6 février, 1759*, 25, 20.

274 Smith, *Helvétius* 2.

275 Smith, *Helvétius* 2.

276 Smith, *Helvétius* 64-91.

What I want to explore here is how the *affaire* was a moment of a complex dynamic of condemnation and popularization of “Materialism”. The latter became a philosophical current perceived as a serious political threat by religious and civil authorities, but at the same time, all the fuss around it suddenly provided an unprecedented interest and publicity for what previously was a rather marginal philosophical position. Smith has sustained the argument that *De l’Esprit* “contained no fundamentally original notions,” that its philosophical base was no different from Condillac’s *Traite des Sensations* (1754) but only developed some of the “anti religious potentialities” of the radical empiricist positions opened up by Locke.²⁷⁷ And while it is true that Helvetius’ ideas were not absolutely original, the truth is that he became associated by the censoring powers, and not by chance, with two other “dangerous” and “Materialist” thinkers: La Mettrie and Diderot. In the following pages I will consider first how the reception of *De l’Esprit* was the moment of the public establishment of a materialist doctrine and threat by its adversaries, and, secondly, I will focus on Helvetius’s work to see what in his proposal triggered such a public violent reaction, in contrast to the less noisy reception of La Mettrie and Diderot’s works.

The publication of *De l’Esprit* triggered a wider spread repression of many other philosophical texts which fell under then new column of materialism. The *Arrêt* of the *Parlement* de Paris was not only an indictment against Helvetius’ volume, but it also condemned seven other publications, starting with Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, which at the time had already issued 7 volumes, Louis de Beausobre’s *Pyrrhonisme du Sage* (1754), the Marquis d’Argens *La philosophie du bon sens* (1737), Voltaire’s *La Religion naturelle* (1756), Jean-Baptiste Pascal’s *Lettres semi-philosophiques du chevalier au comte de...* (1757), Diderot re-edition of his *Pensées Philosophiques* under the new title *Etrennes des Esprits forts* (1757), and de *Lettre au P. Berthier sur le matérialisme* (1759) by the Abbé de Coyer. All of those works, according to Fleury apologized for materialism in a way or another.

Through this wide association of names public authorities established a constellation of materialist works, constituting a new category or current within the Enlightenment through its political and political reception. Both the *Parlement* and the Sorbonne implied that there was a secret materialist plot to overthrow the Church and the government. Fleury ironically asked: “peut-on se dissimuler qu’il n’y ait un projet conçu, une Société formée pour soutenir le Matérialisme, pour détruire la Religion, pour inspirer l’indépendance et nourrir la corruption des moeurs?”²⁷⁸ And the theology censors of the Sorbonne went in the same direction when they affirmed: “C’est une conjuration formée contre la Foi et la Morale du Christianisme, et contre l’obéissance due à l’Autorité Souveraine; conjuration qui tend à tout renverser, et qui va jusqu’à promettre, si elle n’est point arrêtée dans ses projets, d’arracher du coeur de l’homme toute estime de la vertu, tout amour de la patrie et les sentimens les plus chers de la nature.”²⁷⁹ The proof of such a

277 Smith, *Helvétius* 13.

278 “Arrêts de la Cour de Parlement, portant condamnation de plusieurs Livres et autres Ouvrages imprimés” 1759 2.

279 *Determination Sacrae Facultatis Parisiensis Super Libro Cui Titulus: De l’Esprit*. [University of Paris] (Paris: Jean-Baptiste Garnier, 1759) 8.

conspiracy was to be found, for the Sorbonne censors, in the fact that *De l'Esprit* was a totalization of previously released materialist thesis, this time organized into a coherent system: “n’est de lui [Helvétius] que pour l’arrangement des matériaux que d’autres avaients employés avant lui; c’est en travaillant sur le fond d’autrui, qu’il a prétendy se faire un nom.”²⁸⁰ Helvetius was to be read then as the disseminator of a materialist doctrine which was a pastiche or mix of Hobbes’s *On Man* (1658); Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* (1714); Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*; Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* (1689); the Marquis d’Argens *Mémoires Secrets de la République des Lettres* (1743-1747); Morelly’s *Code de la Nature* (1755, for a while attributed to Diderot), La Mettrie’s *Homme Machine* (1748), *Les Animaux Plus que Machines* (1748), *Antisénaire* (1748) and *Discours Préliminaire* (1750); Spinoza’s *Ethique* (1677); Collin’s *Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty* (1715) and Hume’s *Philosophical Essays* (1741-42).

What was even more remarkable was the wonderful pieces of literature regarding the “epidemics” of materialist thought, which resorted to different natural paradigms to account for the seemingly uncontrollable power of subversive philosophy. For the Archbishop of Paris materialist philosophy was equivalent to an apocalyptic flood: “De là, comme d’une source aussi abondante que pernicieuse, sortent des ruisseaux empestés, qui se distribuent dans les villes de second ordre, qui pénètrent jusque dans les bourgades, qui portent contagion partout.”²⁸¹ For the Paris University, the philosophy was airborne: “Ce n’est pas seulement dans la Capitale que cette maladie fait des ravages; devenue comme épidémique, elle a passé dans les Provinces même les plus éloignées, où les écrits des ces Auteurs audacieux, semblables à de noires vapeurs et à des exhalations infectées, forment des nuages épais qui portent avec eux la contagion et la désolation dans tous les lieux où ils se déchargent.”²⁸² It is not that public and religious authorities did not relate philosophy to the materiality of books, but rather that the excess of their proliferation, the variety of printed text that could contain materialist ideas, the confusion of the genres and codes deliberately practiced by materialists themselves, made them feel confronted by a growing popularity of radical philosophy which was getting out of their hands and reaching all kinds of publics throughout the kingdom. The Archbishop Beaumont complained:

“Elle [cette philosophie] s’insinue en mille manières différents; elle répand son poison dans les livres de morale, dans les recherches sur la nature, dans les systèmes de politique, dans les brochures d’amusement, dans les relations de voyage, dans les pièces de théâtre etc.. Elle infecte les sociétés publiques et particulières, la jeunesse et l’âge mûr, l’opulence et la médiocrité, les professions graves, et les arts d’agrément.”²⁸³

The Sorbonne portrayed materialist philosophers as “des maîtres en séduction, maîtres infatigables pour tous les âges, et pour toute sorte de condition,” as philosophers

280 *Determination Sacrae Facultatis Parisiensis* 10.

281 “Mandement de M. de Beaumont, Archevêque de Paris, contre le livre intitulé de l’Esprit” 22 novembre 1758. qtd in Picot, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire ecclésiastique pendant le dix-huitième siècle* 3: 385.

282 *Determination Sacrae Facultatis Parisiensis* 4.

283 “Mandement de M. de Beaumont” 3:385.

who corrupted and turned everything they wrote or touched materialist: “il n’est point de livre sortant de leurs mains, sous quelque titre qu’ils donnent, et quelqu’en soit l’objet, qui ne renferme un poison tout prêt à s’insinuer dans l’esprit de ceux qui les lisent sans précaution.”²⁸⁴ There indeed seemed to be a perceived “magic” effect of materialism which fed a growing paranoia at the top levels of the State. Yet this feeling that radical philosophy was operating as a spreading epidemic can be explained by the inadequacy of the existing mechanisms of censorship and the political institutions in the face of a different political economy of book production, one where, as we said, the publishers had no incentive to follow the rules of pre-emptive authorization. Furthermore, the public condemnation of such works proved to increase, not diminish, their interest and therefore the profits of their publishers.

It is interesting to note that in the materialist constellation outlined by Fleury and *La Sorbonne*, La Mettrie and Diderot were implicitly presented as leaders of the cabal. The 1755 Mémoire of the 1755 Assemblée du clergé against the “*Mauvais livres*” was almost a direct indictment against La Mettrie, even if he was never mentioned.²⁸⁵ We know that the first draft of Fleury’s *arrêt* included several of Diderot’s works (*Lettre sur les aveugles*, *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets*, *Pensées sur l’Interpretation de la Nature*, and also Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*), that he could not include as the Parliament had already previously banned some of them.²⁸⁶ The list of so-called dangerous and materialist books would continue to grow in the 1760s in order to include in 1765 virtually all of Rousseau’s works, starting with his *Emile* and *Contrat Social*, Boulanger’s *Despotisme Oriental* (1762), and retroactively adding all of La Mettrie’s as well as many English works, and, of course, all of D’Holbach’s philosophical production.²⁸⁷

The question that remains to be asked though, is what in “materialist philosophy” was perceived as so dangerous. The general argument that it humiliated and depreciated the spiritual nature of men, bringing mankind closer to animality is already known:

“L’homme dégradé et avili jusqu’à la condition des bêtes. Son âme, ce souffle immortel de la divinité, anéantie dans la matière; la plus noble partie d’elle-même, cette faculté de concevoir et de penser, réduite à la conformation physique des organes et à une sensibilité nécessaire. Une religion sans culte, des passions sans frein, une société sans mœurs, des lois sans autorité, plus inventées pour intimider le crime que pour inspirer la vertu; le crime même dépouillé de tout ce qui en doit donner l’horreur. Tels sont les principes et les conséquences de ces pernicieux ouvrages.”²⁸⁸

284 *Determination Sacrae Facultatis Parisiensis* 8.

285 “Ils [ces philosophes confondent l’homme avec la brute; et pour se délivrer des remords importuns, ils affectent de borner leurs craintes, leurs espérances, tout leur être même, à cette vie fragile et périssable,” “Mémoire de l’Assemblée du clergé présenté au Roi au sujet des Mauvais Livres” 25 octobre 1755, qtd in Picot, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire ecclésiastique pendant le dix-huitième siècle* 3: 299.

286 Smith, *Helvetius* 41.

287 *Actes de l’Assemblée Générale du Clergé de France sur la Religion*. 1765 “Condamnation de plusieurs livres contre la Religion” 9.

288 *Procès verbal de l’Assemblée Générale du Clergé en l’Année 1758*. 88

But the political threat of materialism was not to be found in the critique of metaphysics alone. It had to do with the explicit connection and unveiling of the political role of metaphysical discourse, that is, the ideological alliance of the Church and Absolutism. In fact materialist philosophy aimed at extending the powers of critical reason to the very nature of political institutions, and therefore to the nature of despotic and even monarchical power. What was feared is the effects of rational discourse on people's relation with authority, as reason can provoke a diverse set of reactions, from forgetfulness and speculation, to the passional disgust and distrust of the existing political, and the subsequent desire and attraction for a better one:

“On *raisonne* avec une hardiesse sans exemple dans la monarchie française, sur l'origine et l'exercice de la souveraineté. On *oublie* cette doctrine salutaire qui reconnaît dans la royauté l'empreinte innéfaçable de la majesté divine. On *s'égaré* dans de vaines spéculations pour découvrir un contrat primitif entre les peuples qui obéissent et les princes qui commandent, et l'usage de ce contrat chimérique est d'affaiblir les liens qui doivent les unir. Les hommes *dégoûtés* de la soumission, *attirés* par l'amorce flatteuse de la liberté, s'accoutument à regarder toute puissance qui les gouverne, ou comme un dépôt, qu'ils peuvent reprendre, ou comme une usurpation contre laquelle ils ont le droit de réclamer.”²⁸⁹ [Emphasis added]

The scandal was then that political bonds could began to be considered as material ones, here represented by the economic metaphor of lending something to someone, and examined through the prisms of interest and sensibility. In Helvétius work the socio-political bond corresponded, in the last instance, to an individual *interest* or material calculation, as he warned in the beginning of his work that morals and also politics should be treated “comme toutes les autres sciences,” and reduced to experimental physics.²⁹⁰ Public authorities then feared the spreading of a *morale de l'intérêt* and politics of the same sort. What the visceral reaction against Helvétius revealed is that the core problem lay not in the substantiality of the soul per se, but the transformation of the criteria to evaluate social relations (moral and political), going from a metaphysical principle of obedience to an authority and values of a higher and unquestionable order, to a material principle, that could be checked, evaluated and discussed because it had a concrete and rational base.

As a very alarmed Fleury clearly denounced, what was at stake was the dissolution of a certain social bond. Materialists texts were guilty of being full of “anecdotes contraires à la sûreté publique, et capables de rompre les noeuds sacrés et inviolables qui attachent les peuples au Souverain.”²⁹¹ By insisting on pleasure and pain as the elementary social and political passions—that is to say by refusing to consider any metaphysical virtue—the very nature of the feudal social bond, and not only religious

289 “Mémoire de l'Assemblée du clergé présenté au Roi au sujet des Mauvais Livres” 25 octobre 1755, qtd in Picot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique pendant le dix-huitième siècle* 3: 299.

290 Helvetius, *De l'Esprit*, 67.

291 “Arrêts de la Cour de Parlement” 1759 11.

belief was in danger.

The singularity of *De l'Esprit* was then to present in a very clear and direct language such a simple thing: that all social and political relations could be examined from the prism of interest, and not of love and duty, and that such material interest was ultimately linked to physical sensation. He affirmed such obvious things without the rhetorical artifices La Mettrie had to deploy to escape persecution, producing a completely non-ambiguous text. Inspired more by Hobbes than by Locke, he argued that individual interest should be the foundation of public government, and he connected these interests to physical sensation and need, pleasure and pain. Individual interests were not then so individual as they seemed, but rather based on a shared and common physical sensibility, which in his view eliminated the potential antagonism between the particular and general interest. What was needed then was the development of a materialist anthropology or science of men, in order to guarantee its basic needs and happiness, as the goal of the state was not to ensure security and prevent civil war, but to realize human happiness, or at least the happiness of a people.²⁹²

The fundamental feature of Helvetius' materialist philosophy, as it was first exposed in *De l'Esprit* and later in *De l'homme*, a feature which clearly sets him apart from Condillac and brings him very close to La Mettrie, and it is that he sought to put forward a critical function of philosophy by not remaining only at the level of rational psychology (as did Condillac and other followers of Locke's empiricism) but he took those epistemological hypotheses to their logical social conclusion: "l'éducation peut tout"; that we must establish a public system of education and this should become a matter of public concern and debate, as should be the political administration of society. By doing so Helvetius stepped outside of the lines philosophy was not to cross: it set philosophical arguments to implement concrete political changes, proposing a bridge between theory and practice, and implicitly disputing the political competence of the monarchy. What was ultimately at stake was the social function of philosophy, or at least of a philosophy the regime could tolerate. With *De l'Esprit* and the *Encyclopédie* it became clear that the critical role materialists wanted to give to it was to be off the legal bounds, and Fleury's speech in front of the Parlement was crystal clear:

"le caractère de la vraie Philosophie est de terminer les spéculations par des accroissements de sainteté et d'amour envers l'Être Suprême; celle de la fausse Philosophie est de terminer les sciences par des systèmes impies, par un accroissement de présomption et d'ignorance, et de rendre le Philosophe vain, plus superbe et plus aveugle qu'il n'était avant ses recherches."²⁹³

The affaire of *De l'Esprit* followed a key political episode: the attempted assassination of the king Louis XV in January 1757 by Damiens, a servant who was said to be disturbed, but also to be inspired by the religious debates, Jansenism, and dissenting philosophy. As a result, in April 1757, the king had issued a declaration threatening to

292 On Helvétius' political philosophy, see Sophie Audidière, "Philosophie moniste de l'intérêt et réforme politique chez Helvétius," *Matérialistes français du XVIIIème siècle*, ed. Sophie Audidière et al. (Paris: PUF, 2006) 139-166; Jean-Louis Longué, *Le Système d'Helvétius* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008); David Wootton, "Helvétius: From Radical Enlightenment to Revolution," *Political Theory* 28.3 (2000): 307-336.

293 "Arrêts de la Cour de Parlement" 1759 22-23.

inflict the death penalty on any writers and publishers found guilty of composing and divulging works that could destabilize public order:

“ Art. 1 - Tous ceux qui seront convaincus d’avoir composé, fait composer et imprimer des écrits tendant à attaquer la religion, à émouvoir les esprits, à donner atteinte à notre autorité, et à troubler l’ordre et la tranquillité de nos états, seront punis de mort.

Art.2 - Tous ceux qui auront imprimé lesdits ouvrages, les libraires, colporteurs et autres personnes qui les auraient répandus dans le public, seront pareillement punis de mort.”²⁹⁴

This attempt to increase and harshen the police and control of the public sphere (as the declaration fear the contamination of “le public”), replaced the previous ordinance fro 1728 that established lower penalties (the stocks and galleys). It seems the 1757 order was never applied, but it became clear that the ideological foundations of the regime where under attack.²⁹⁵

The Division of the Enlightenment Movement: The “Party of Humanity” or a Philosopher’s “Civil War”?

The scandal of *De l’Esprit* reveals one more thing: that Gay’s idealized vision of the Enlightenment as a movement where all philosophers remained united the toughest fights was an illusion. The critic, relaying a purified and romanticized 19th century vision of the Enlightenment, believed “the men of the Enlightenment [were] united on a vastly ambitious program, a program of secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism and freedom, above all, freedom in its many forms,” and that despite that fact that “unity did not mean unanimity,” that the philosophers did constitute a “petite troupe”, that if “they did not have a party line, but they had a party.”²⁹⁶ He even went to assert that “the Enlightenment, then, was a single army with a single banner.”²⁹⁷

The isolation of Helvetius throughout his persecution, however, proved rather the opposite, where “far from being a united force grouped around the *Encyclopédie*, ready to defend any of their number at the slightest provocation,”²⁹⁸ Helvetius was to a large extent left to his fate by very prominent figures of the philosophical Enlightenment. Of his friends only Quesnay remained with him; four of the important figures—Voltaire, Duclos, Buffon and Turgot—who were his friends left him to hang to dry.²⁹⁹ In the span of three years (1758-1760), from the condemnation of *De l’Esprit*, the *Encyclopédie* and the publication of Palisot satirical comedy *Les Philosophes* (1760) a real of rupture inside

294 Qtd in Pierre Laffite, “Diderot et son siècle” *Revue Occidentale, Philosophique, Sociale et Politique* 13 (1884) 17.

295 Birn, *Royal Censorship* 80.

296 Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Knopf, 1966) 3, 4, 6.

297 Gay, *The Enlightenment* 7.

298 Smith, *Helvétius* 1.

299 Smith, *Helvétius* 157, 159.

the “party philosophique” was consumed.³⁰⁰ Pappas even talked of a philosophical “civil war” between a growing group led by Voltaire and the philosophers attracted by Diderot’s encyclopedia project later gravitating around D’Holbach and Helvetius.³⁰¹ More recently Israel has divided the Enlightenment movement, in a somewhat reductive way, between a moderate and a radical current.

According to Israel the key moment of public rupture was the abandonment of the *Encyclopédie*’s project by some key players who followed Voltaire and D’Alembert’s departure in 1759: “The incompatibility of radical ideas with moderate Enlightenment first became obvious and a matter of public concern during the battle over the *Encyclopédie*.”³⁰² Diderot perceived this exodus of Voltaire’s group as disloyal. Voltaire’s contribution to the *Encyclopédie*—which was the product of D’Alembert negotiations beginning in 1754—was short-lived, and though he wrote several articles for the volumes 5 and 6 (like “Esprit”, “Eloquence”, “Gens de Lettres”), as Israel noted, “none of Voltaire’s entries concerned major social, philosophical, scientific, religious, or political issues”.³⁰³ The rupture which led to a division of the philosophers in two camps had to do with a difference of social and political strategy for Enlightenment. The *Encyclopédie* began to show its hidden radical character and proved to be “a philosophical engine of war directed not only against Christianity but also against the providential deism and Creationism of Voltaire, Turgot, Réaumur, and the like, against Newtonian physico-theology and Locke’s version of empiricism.”³⁰⁴ It became clear that philosophers disagreed on how far the critique of religion and despotism should go, and what its ultimate goals were. For Pappas, it was with Palissot’s play *Les Philosophes* in 1760 and Voltaire’s refusal to publicly defend Diderot and Helvétius, who were publicly targeted by the play, or to side with the Abbé Morellet who published in defense of the materialist philosophers under fire (*Vision de Charles Palissot*) and who was imprisoned

300 See Didier Masseau, *Les Ennemis des Philosophes: l'antiphilosophie au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000).

301 John Pappas, “Voltaire et la guerre civile philosophique,” *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 61 (1961): 525-549.

302 Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011) 56. “Buffon, with the royal gardens and cabinet to supervise, quietly withdrew, confining himself henceforth to court circles. Francois Quesnay, économiste, leading surgeon, and man of letters, unwilling to prejudice his status as personal physician to Madame Pompadour at court or be associated with Diderot’s materialism, resigned, demanding the return of the draft articles he had already submitted, including key pieces on taxation and interest on loans and investments. Turgot, equally familiar at court, cut all ties with the *Encyclopédie*, despite repeated efforts on Diderot’s part to get him to reconsider. Marmontel, a literary figure who had eagerly cultivated Diderot earlier, now felt obliged to consider his own position and withdrew. Another defector was Charles Pinot Duclos (1704–72), wit and habitué of the Café Procope and the Café Gradot, author of several best-selling novels who, humble birth notwithstanding, boasted numerous aristocratic connections. Although his three or four entries on literary topics were of scant importance in themselves, his departure added further to the gloom now shrouding Diderot’s enterprise. Did he see that this vile troop of encyclopédistes, Fréron asked Palissot, in January 1758, exulting over these successive setbacks to the *Encyclopédie*, was at last on the verge ‘d’être exterminé?’” Another notable defector was the young Abbé André Morellet (1727–1819).” Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 73-74.

303 Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 59.

304 Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 69.

in the Bastille for writing a public attack of a well protected *pamphlétaire*.³⁰⁵

Yet the particular moment when the hidden war was released in the open was not as important as the reasons behind it. There was, as Pappas noted, at the bottom of the *affaire* a “conception divergente sur la tactique à suivre dans la guerre contre ‘l’Infâme’”.³⁰⁶ And this disagreement about how to defeat the Church and Superstition had political implications: the philosophical division of theism and atheism and newtonism and materialism was compounded by a different political vision for early modern philosophy in France.³⁰⁷

Voltaire had always envisioned a “pro-court strategy” to forward his view of the Enlightenment summarized very clearly by Israel: “the philosophes must convince king and court aristocracy that they were his loyal, peace-loving subjects whereas their adversaries—‘tous ces gens-là’, as he put it, in October 1760—‘sont des perturbateurs’; that we are ‘citoyens, et ils sont séditeux’, a theme central also to his *Traité de la tolérance* where (following Bayle without citing him) he accuses the clergy of nurturing the perfidious idea that peoples have the right to depose monarchs when they are proven heretics, as a way of subordinating politics to theology.”³⁰⁸ Voltaire defended the model of “enlightened despotism” (an expression which did not exist at the time; it was created by German 19th century historiography) and more particularly Frederic II of Prussia. As Goulemot noted, the ideal of enlightenment absolutism was conceived as the realization of the alliance of philosopher’s intellectual capacity and the king’s political power in order to rule according to justice, an aspiration of philosophers since Plato’s apology for the king-philosopher:

“Si l'essentiel était que la raison régnât, qu'elle gouvernât les hommes à la place des usurpatrices qu'étaient la tradition et la providence, il ne convenait alors pas de trop se soucier de la forme du pouvoir, de la nature du souverain, dès l'instant que celui-ci était éclairé, acquis aux Lumières, décidé à mettre au service de la raison les moyens de l'État. Un prince autoritaire, fortement armé, était même plus apte à faire aboutir les réformes concrètes que le progrès exigeait. S'il était trop évident que la masse des gouvernés était insuffisamment éduquée – et donc éclairée – pour que ce progrès pût partir d'en bas, de l'homme du « commun », alors l'opinion, excluant la voie démocratique, mettait ses espoirs dans la voie autoritaire, dans ce progrès imposé d'en haut. Ce qui revenait à faire appel à des princes tout ensemble sages et énergiques, disciples et amis de la philosophie et des philosophes, qui réaliseraient le rêve avorté de

305 Pappas, "Voltaire et la guerre civile philosophique" 528.

306 Pappas, "Voltaire et la guerre civile philosophique" 528.

307 "Étant donné l'union de l'Église et de l'État en France au XVIIIe siècle, on constate sans surprise que la querelle entre les 'philosophes' se développe sous un double aspect: l'un métaphysique, l'autre politique. Les deux ne sauraient se séparer et nous essayerons de traiter à la fois les différences doctrinales qui divisent le parti Voltaire-d'Alembert et la coterie Diderot-d'Holbach, et l'application de ces doctrines à l'État." Pappas, "Voltaire et la guerre civile philosophique" 525.

308 Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 114.

Platon.”³⁰⁹

This is one of the reasons why he distanced himself from Helvétius and the *Encyclopédie* after the publication of *De l'Esprit*. At least in his correspondence with his former ally he was clear, explaining that his political strategy was that of achieving an “enlightened despotism” in France, as he wrote to him on October 1760 that “c’est l’intérêt du roi que le nombre des philosophes augmente, et que celui des fanatiques diminue. Nous sommes tranquilles, et tous ces gens-là sont des perturbateurs; nous sommes citoyens, et ils sont séditieux; nous cultivons la raison en paix, et ils la persécutent.”³¹⁰ And restating some months later his philosophical strategy Voltaire wanted to make clear to the other side that philosophers should enforce question the foundations of royal authority instead of questioning them:

“Croyez moi, mes frères, notre petite école de philosophes n’est pas si déchirée. Il est vrai que nous ne sommes ni jésuites ni convulsionnaires, mais nous aimons le roi, sans vouloir être ses tuteurs, et l’état, sans vouloir le gouverner. Il peut savoir qu’il n’a point de sujets plus fidèles que nous, ni de plus capables de faire sentir le ridicule des cuistres qui voudraient renouveler les temps de la Fronde.”³¹¹

Whether there was a contradiction in Voltaire's philosophy to stop before arriving at ultimate consequence of his thoughts, as Pappas suggested, or whether Voltaire was the first formulation of the cynical role that philosophy was to play under the French Republic is not for us to decide.³¹² What is certain is that Voltaire shared the civil authorities’ fear that a certain kind of philosophy—materialism—would break the social bonds, as in 1752 he wrote to Armand du Vignerot du Plessis, a prominent aristocrat, Cardinal de Richelieu's great-nephew, and one of the key players in the Académie Française due to his connections with the king:

“Il ya une grande différence entre combattre les superstitions des hommes, et rompre les liens de la société et les chaînes de la vertu. La Mettrie aurait

309 Jean Marie Goulemot, “Le Despotisme éclairé” *Encyclopédie Universalis*, Web August 1 2014. See also H. M. Scott, *Enlightened Absolutism: Reform and Reformers in Later Eighteenth-century Europe* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1990); Jonathan Israel, “Enlightened Despotism,” *Democratic Enlightenment 270-301*; Derek Beales, “Philosophical kingship and Enlightened Despotism,” *Enlightenment and Reform in Eighteenth-century Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 28-59.

310 Voltaire, “Lettre à Helvétius du 26 octobre 1760,” *Oeuvres* (Garnier) 41: 42. As Israel noted, the attraction for “enlightened despotism was wide for european philosophers: “Enlightened despotism”, endorsed by Voltaire, Turgot, Grimm, and Beccaria as a key tool of enlightened social and legal reformism, was yet another issue splitting the Enlightenment into opposed blocs. Moderate enlighteners supported ‘enlightened despotism’ for itself, or as with Hume, the best solution in most cases (i.e. outside Britain), while radical thinkers, with their republican instincts, were unenthusiastic in principle and, eventually, despite lingering support where circumstances seemed to necessitate this outcome, as with Joseph II, did so with growing reluctance.” Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 270.

311 Voltaire, “Lettre à Helvétius du 12 décembre 1760,” *Oeuvres* (Garnier) 41: 95.

312 “Mais c'est là le paradoxe voltairien: il semait des idées révolutionnaires et refusait ensuite de suivre leurs conséquences jusqu'au bout. Ainsi ses *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) avaient attaqué l'idée de la spiritualité et de l'immortalité de l'âme en soulignant la suggestion de Locke que la pensée pouvait bien n'être qu'une autre propriété de la matière. Quand il critiqua plus tard l'athéisme de Saunderson dans la *Lettre sur les aveugles*, Diderot ne manqua pas de lui rappeler ses propres mots: ‘Quelle force n'ajou- terait point à ce raisonnement l'opinion qui vous est commune avec Locke que la pensée pourrait bien être une modification de la matière !’”. Pappas, “Voltaire et la guerre civile philosophique” 530.

été trop dangereux s'il n'avait pas été tout à fait fou. Son livre contre les médecins est d'un enragé et d'un malhonnête homme; avec cela c'était un assez bon diable dans la société. Comment concilier tout cela? c'est que la folie concilie tout. Il a laissé une mémoire exécrationnelle à tous ceux qui se piquent de mœurs un peu austères. Il est fort triste qu'on ait lu son Éloge à l'Académie, écrit de main de maître. Tous ceux qui sont attachés à ce maître en gémissent. Il semble que la folie de La Mettrie soit une maladie épidémique qui se soit communiquée. Cela fera grand tort à l'écrivain; mais avec cent cinquante mille hommes on se moque de tout et on brave les jugements des hommes."³¹³

Diderot, on the other hand, developed an increasing distrust and dislike of the monarchy throughout his career, particularly after Meaupou's coup and his disappointing experience at the court of Catherine II of Russia. By the 1770s he had completely abandoned any hope of enlightening any monarchy. Furthermore, the question of enlightened despotism was particularly the question that was raised as the central debate for philosophers by materialists themselves, a dispute that Helvétius and Diderot opposed. The latter, in his *Réfutation de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé De l'homme* (1773):

“Et c'est vous, Helvétius, qui citez en éloge cette maxime d'un tyran! Le gouvernement arbitraire d'un prince juste et éclairé est toujours mauvais. Ses vertus sont la plus dangereuse et la plus sûre des séductions: elles accoutument insensiblement un peuple à aimer, à respecter, à servir son successeur quel qu'il soit, méchant et stupide. Il enlève au peuple le droit de délibérer, de vouloir ou ne vouloir pas, de s'opposer même à sa volonté, lorsqu'il ordonne le bien; cependant ce droit d'opposition, tout insensé qu'il est, est sacré: sans quoi les sujets ressemblent à un troupeau dont on méprise la réclamation, sous prétexte qu'on le conduit dans de gras pâturages. En gouvernant selon son bon plaisir, le tyran commet le plus grand des forfaits. Qu'est-ce qui caractérise le despote? est-ce la bonté ou la méchanceté? Nullement; ces deux notions n'entrent pas seulement dans sa définition. C'est l'étendue et non l'usage de l'autorité qu'il s'arroge. Un des plus grands malheurs qui pût arriver à une nation, ce seraient deux ou trois règnes d'une puissance juste, douce, éclairée, mais arbitraire: les peuples seraient conduits par le bonheur à l'oubli complet de leurs privilèges, au plus parfait esclavage. Je ne sais si jamais un tyran et ses enfants se sont avisés de cette redoutable politique; mais je ne doute aucunement qu'elle ne leur eût réussi.”³¹⁴

The Moderate Enlightenment and the Académie Française

If Pappas and Israel did perceive and analyze the real chiasm that split the

313 Voltaire, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Garnier) 37: 363.

314 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 2: 381.

philosophical Enlightenment into two camps, they only partially managed to explain how this division at the level of political strategy was doubled by opposing social strategies within the intellectual field itself. Not enough importance has been given, in my view, to the diverging ways in which the moderate and the radical Enlightenment occupied the public sphere and the kind of public and readership they tried to create. At the core of this difference was the role of the Academies and philosophers' positioning towards royal patronage in a context of the deepening political crisis of absolutism.

The Académie was a key institution for the consolidation of “moderate” wing of the Enlightenment as the dominant one, providing legitimacy to this current. The Académie Française, but also to a greater extent the Académie des sciences became, in the 18th century, the privileged site of an intellectual and ideological struggle between a moderate version of Enlightenment philosophy and the Church. The take-over of the Académie by some dominant figures of the Enlightenment movement paralleled their progressive distancing from “materialist” thesis and their proponents and led to their bitter attack once the power was conquered. I will outline first how the *philosophes* took over the *académie* and the changes they made to consolidate their power, and second, the development of an anti-materialist rejection within the Enlightenment.

A feature that has not been really studied in the evolution of the 18th century Paris academies is that the major philosophical figures managed not only to get elected to it but to end up controlling these institutions: La Mothe le Vayer was elected to the Académie in 1632, Fontenelle in 1691, Mirabaud in 1726, Montesquieu in 1728, Maupertuis in 1743, Duclos in 1746 and Voltaire finally in 1746 after several attempts, Buffon on 1753, D’Alembert in 1754, Marmontel in 1766, Saint Lambert in 1770 and Condorcet in 1782; just to name the most important figures. What is even more striking is that from 1755 on, the *secrétaire perpétuel* of the Académie was a *philosophe* (Duclos, D’Alembert and later Marmontel); Fontenelle, was also the *Secrétaire perpétuelle* de l’Académie des Sciences between 1697 and 1740, the same with Condorcet between 1776 and 1793.

Leterrier pointed out that around “les trois académies ouvraient la voie à l’hégémonie du parti philosophique.”³¹⁵ In the same direction, Brunel also set the beginning of domination of the Royal academies by the Enlightenment philosophers a bit earlier—in 1760, after the defeat of Pompignan de Lefranc and the “Parti des Dévôts”: “les philosophes, à partir de 1760, marchèrent de deux côtés à la fois à la conquête de l’Académie.”³¹⁶ Despite their small initially number they managed to only to “materially” conquer the Academy (that is to appoint from then on their candidates and use the

315 Sophie Leterrier, “Des académies à l’Institut, continuités et ruptures,” *Académies et sociétés savantes en Europe*, Ed. D. O. Hurel and G. Laudin (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000). 373. As Leterrier points out this domination occurred first in the Académie Française and later spread to the two others: “A l’Académie française, le triomphe de ce parti avait été lié au secrétariat perpétuel de d’Alembert, de 1772 à 1783 malgré les contestations de Buffon et des siens” (373); “A l’Académie des sciences, le parti philosophique dominait aussi, du moins le parti de Turgot, auquel appartenait Quesnay, élu en 1751, de Gau, Turgot lui-même et d’autres moins connus. Ce parti, majoritaire dès le début du règne de Louis XVI, favorisa l’élection de Condorcet comme secrétaire perpétuel en 1776... A l’Académie des inscriptions, enfin, l’orientation vers l’histoire se concrétisa en 1786 par une réforme qui en faisait l’objet principal des travaux de la compagnie, dans une perspective très large englobant les moeurs, les lois, les arts.” Leterrier, “Des académies à l’Institut, continuités et ruptures,” 374.

316 Lucien Brunel, *Les Philosophes et l’Académie Française au 18e siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1884) 102.

resources) but also used it, according to Brunel to ensure their ideological hegemony: “Le philosophes accaparèrent [l’académie], et l’esprit de corps se confondit de jour en jour avec l’esprit de parti et de propagande; ils firent de l’Académie un cénacle à leur usage,” and this new hegemony “fut comme le certificat officiel de l’ascendant littéraire et moral qu’ils exerçaient sur l’esprit public.”³¹⁷ It was clearly the very disputed election of D’Alembert 1754 which definitely polarized around the question of philosophy and forced all its members to pick a camp: “elle divisait la société en deux camps, philosophes et dévots.”³¹⁸

Most of the scholarship has been centered on how the philosophers transformed the *académie*. This transformation was both one of the intellectual content or tendency of the works and publications of the academies, as Leterrier has noted, but also one of the internal functioning. The Academy whose intellectual work changed the most was the Académie des Sciences, where after the 1770 one could observe a “rupture de la réserve traditionnelle sur les questions de métaphysique, l’affirmation du rôle social de l’homme de science, l’orientation technique et appliquée des travaux depuis 1761.”³¹⁹ This change was initiated in Paris, and was one that Condorcet sought after his election in 1776 to replicate in almost all of the Académie de Province devoted to scientific inquiry, developing a project of uniformization of the provincial academies and reorganization of its the disciplines (sciences, letters, histoire); proposing everywhere new classes of experimental physics, natural history, mineralogy and an expansion of chemistry classes.

The Académie Française, the site of the convergence or the fusion of the powers of literature and philosophy which led the *philosophes* to power, were the site of a different kind of transformation. Duclos was the philosopher who introduced more changes regarding the functioning of the academy after 1755, when he succeeded Fontenelle as its “secrétaire perpétuel”. Initially Duclos played a key role as the “chef” or “l’interprète autorisé des gens de lettres.”³²⁰ At that time, the mid-18th century, the *académie’s* sessions were attended by only a few members called the *jetonniers*, who were of course *gens de lettres* who had a real interest in the institution, given that the members of the high clergy and noblemen were too busy with other activities. Duclos began to require the assistance of all members of the Academy to official sessions and put in place a policy of “excused absences”, ensured the regularity of the meetings (three times per week) Yet, the role and activities of the Académie were rather tedious and uninteresting for its newest Enlightenment members. This was the second main motivation for reforms to make their presence more meaningful, the main one was, of course, to impose and show the dominance of the new philosophy in the disputed and prestigious royal institution.

The first reform proposed by Duclos (who in 1755 would become in the *secrétaire perpétuel*), was to change the topic of the *concours de poésie*, to abandon the tradition of praising Louis the XIV, and to propose a composition on a moral topic to the

317 Brunel 102.

318 Brunel 36.

319 Leterrier 374.

320 Brunel 45.

chosen by the candidate. In 1754, Thomas was in charge of changing the *concours d'éloquence*, proposing that speeches should be devoted not to the king, but to the “grands hommes”, and to take away the stylistic restrictions that made all the past addresses look like religious sermons: it was now free form.

Yet, few scholars or thinkers have asked how the *Académie* transformed the philosophers themselves and the nature of their intellectual production, or worse, how such a struggle at the top had consequences in the Enlightenment movement as a whole: the Church-initiated “anti-materialist” campaign by some Enlightenment philosophers themselves after the 1759 double crisis around *De l'Esprit* and the *Encyclopédie*.³²¹

The effect of the entrance of key philosophers like D'Alembert and Voltaire into the Académie Française in the middle of the 18th century had an impact on the nature of the Enlightenment movement. In his discours de *discours de réception* to the Académie in 1754, D'Alembert stated: “la religion doit aux lettres et à la philosophie l'affermissement de ses principes; les souverains l'affermissement de leurs droits combattus et violés dans des siècles d'ignorance; les peuples cette lumière générale qui rend l'autorité plus douce et l'obéissance plus fidèle.”³²² His defense of the social utility of philosophy was that it strengthened the base of religion, the authority of the King, and made the people's their subjugation “softer” for them. It was clearly a function of legitimation of the existing social domination. D'Alembert's pitiful *Discours* insisted on the shared happiness of living under “un prince humain et sage qui sait combien les lettres sont propres à faire aimer à la nation ce que lui même chérit le plus la justice la vérité l'ordre et la paix”, and qualified the function of the Academicians as that of inspiring “à tous les citoyens dans nos écrits l'amour paisible de la religion et des lois.”³²³ The function of the Académie, under the *philosophes'* leadership became that of “fixer dans la nation par vos ouvrages la manière de penser bien plus que la langue,” that is to say, to establish a “way of thinking” that would sustain people's docility, what was certainly at that time the critical mission of philosophy defended by the initiators of the Enlightenment.³²⁴

Voltaire followed a similar path when in the 1730s, despite his private and veiled public critiques of such a body—as in the *Lettres Philosophiques*, he stated that the Academy was a place dominated by flattery and “beaux discours” but of no actual intellectual value—he began to seek election into the Academy.³²⁵ In order to secure his

321 Brunel reminds us that the entrance in the Académie only made the intellectual production of its members more dull, as it was the case with the paradigmatic case of D'Alembert, who after his ingenious *Discours Préliminaire* to the Encyclopédie, who made him elected never produced any other interesting work from a philosophical point of view, but many eloges and bureaucratic proceedings as secrétaire perpetuel. Brunel 105-113.

322 D'Alembert, “Discours de D'Alembert à l'Académie Française”, *Oeuvres* 1:140.

323 D'Alembert, “Discours” 141-142.

324 D'Alembert, “Discours” 142.

325 “Un jour, un bel esprit de ce pays-là me demanda les Mémoires de l'Académie Française. ‘Elle n'écrit point de Mémoires, lui répondis-je ; mais elle a fait imprimer soixante ou quatre-vingts volumes de compliments.’ Il en parcourut un ou deux ; il ne put jamais entendre ce style, quoiqu'il entendît fort bien tous nos bons auteurs. ‘Tout ce que j'entrevois, me dit-il, dans ces beaux discours, c'est que le récipiendaire, ayant assuré que son prédécesseur était un grand homme, que le cardinal de Richelieu était un très grand homme, le chancelier Séguier un assez grand homme, Louis XIV un plus que grand homme, le directeur lui répond la même chose, et ajoute que le récipiendaire pourrait bien

election into the Academy, Voltaire to reform his relationship with Louis XV, who did not like him despite the fact in 1744 that he composed a lyric poem (*La Bataille de Fontenoy*) and the libretto of *La Princesse de Navarre*, an opera by Rameau to the glory of the King in celebration of a royal military victory. Since 1739 he began to work, according to his correspondence, on *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, a work that will be only released in his totality in 1751, but of which Voltaire published the initial chapters in Holland as early as 1739. It in this work that Voltaire defended, amongst other things, the benefit of absolutism for Enlightenment and his vision of “enlightened despotism”:

“On ne croirait pas que les souverains eussent obligation aux philosophes. Cependant il est vrai que cet esprit philosophique, qui a gagné presque toutes les conditions, excepté le bas peuple, a beaucoup contribué à faire valoir les droits des souverains. Des querelles qui auraient produit autrefois des excommunications, des interdits, des schismes, n’en ont point causé. Si on a dit que les peuples seraient heureux quand ils auraient des philosophes pour rois, il est très vrai de dire que les rois en sont plus quand il y a beaucoup de leurs sujets philosophes.”³²⁶

In order to get elected to the Académie, Voltaire also had to disavow some of his previous works that had irritated the royal authorities.³²⁷ In fact Voltaire had tried three times to get elected to the Académie Française (1736, 1743, 1746), only managing the third time in 1746, after he had managed to build a moderate and non-confrontational image of his philosophical persona for the key religious and royal high players.

In the midst of the current political crisis of materialism, Voltaire tried one last attempt to avoid the rupture. He knew he could not bridge his differences with Helvetius, who knew was stigmatized as a dangerous philosopher, and who, despite his public retraction, continued to sustain the philosophical ideas which were the same—if not more radical—than the ones he had retracted. His last attempt to unify the philosophers under

aussi être une espèce de grand homme, et que, pour lui, directeur, il n'en quitte pas sa part.” Voltaire, “Sur les Académies” *Lettres Philosophiques, Oeuvres* (Garnier) 22: 184. In a 1732 letter to Lefebvre he point out that ““On se plaint que la moitié des académiciens soit composée de seigneurs qui n’assistent jamais aux assemblées, et que, dans l’autre moitié, il se trouve à peine huit ou neuf gens de lettres qui soient assidus. L’Académie est souvent négligée par ses propres membres.” Voltaire, “Lettre À Lefebvre, 1732” *Oeuvres* (Garnier) 33: 295. Some years later he confessed to Lefranc ““Je n’ai guère vu jusqu’ici que des gens de lettres occupés de flatter les idoles du monde, d’être protégés par les ignorants, d’éviter les connaisseurs, de chercher à perdre leurs rivaux, et non à les surpasser. Toutes les académies sont infectées de brigues et de haines personnelles. Quiconque montre du talent a sur-le-champ pour ennemis ceux-là même qui pourraient rendre justice à ses talents, et qui devraient être ses amis.” Voltaire, “Lettre à Lefranc, 30 octobre 1738,” *Oeuvres* (Garnier) 35: 27.

326 Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV, Oeuvres* (Garnier) 14: 538-539.

327 Voltaire started his maneuvers writing to the Archeveque de Sense in march 1743, who was campaigning for his rival Boyer, the chief enemy of the philosophes in the Academy, to disavow most of his works : “Je compte dans quelque temps avoir l’honneur de vous présenter l’édition complète qu’on commence du peut d’ouvrages qui sont véritablement de moi. Vous verrez partout, monsieur, le caractère d’un bon citoyen. (...) Vous verrez si, dans cette édition, il y a rien dont un homme qui fait comme vous tant d’honneur au monde et à l’Eglise puisse n’être pas content. Vous verrez à quel point la calmonis m’a noirci... Le désir de donner de justes louanges au père de la religion et de l’Etat m’aurait peut-être fermé les yeux sur mon incapacité; j’aurais fait voir au moins combien j’aime cette religion qu’il a soutenue, et quel est mon zèle pour le roi qu’il a élevé. Ce serait ma réponse aux accusations cruelles que j’ai essuyées; ce serait une barrière contre elles, un hommage solennel rendu à des vérités que j’adore, et un gage de ma soumission aux sentiments qui nous préparent dans le dauphin un prince digne de son père.” Voltaire, *Oeuvres* (Garnier) 36: 191-192.

his leadership was to convince Diderot to join him and get elected to the *Académie*. Voltaire tried some more electoral maneuvering by ringing D'Argental doorbell (without great success), but these efforts were useless: Diderot refused.³²⁸ Voltaire was hurt by the latter's lack of recognition and complained to Grimm, which only irritated Diderot more; he to Sophie Volland: "A propos de Voltaire, il se plaint à Grimm très amèrement de mon silence: il dit qu'il est au moins de la politesse de remercier son avocat. Et qui diable l'a prié de plaider ma cause?"³²⁹

The Consummation of the Split with the Publication of Boulanger's Oriental Despotism

The nature of Voltaire and Diderot's division was a difference about the possibility and convenience of an "enlightened despotism". This is why Voltaire considered that his adversaries had burned any possible bridges for reconciliation or even united action when Boulanger's posthumous work, *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* was published in 1761, edited and supplemented by Diderot, who was at the time beginning to work with D'Holbach. Diderot wrote a very compelling preface titled "Lettre de l'auteur à M.***", which was addressed to Helvétius. As Israel pointed out, Boulanger's work was the most open and compelling critique of absolutism that had ever been issued in France:

"Conceived by Boulanger as a corrective to Montesquieu, the *Recherches* makes crystal clear that the coming triomphe de la philosophie, should the underground Enlightenment prevail, would overturn not just the Church and intolerance but the existing order politically, socially, and in all respects; and not just in Europe, for Boulanger introduced something that soon became a permanent feature of the post-1770 Radical Enlightenment—its concerted assault also on the imperial structures of Asia and the Americas."³³⁰

Indeed in his work Boulanger denounced, "l'alliance étourde et funeste ... entre Idolatrie et despotisme," demonstrating "ne sont réellment qu'une seule et même chose".³³¹ This political critique was later developed by D'Holbach, who created of a new concept, that of "Theocratie", in order to confront the illegitimacy of the government and the supposed metaphysical foundation of its power. Boulanger blamed his predecessors for accepting such an "odieux gouvernement" in the first place: "les hommes ... furent imprudents et superstitieux, quand ils s'imaginèrent devoir soumettre leurs institutions

328 "He implored the Comte d'Argental, one of his closest allies at court, to help to foment a 'cabale' capable of staging this little drama. He promised to come in person to cast his vote. Neither Choiseul nor Madame de Pompadour could fail to back such a scheme, this being the finest coup imaginable in reason's war against 'le fanatisme et la sottise'. Victory would permanently demoralize the dévôt party. But d'Argental declined to help, deeming the plot hopeless, while d'Alembert, who prided himself on possessing a more discerning grasp of what passed at court than Voltaire, was equally adamant that in present circumstances inducting Diderot was impossible." Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 111.

329 "Lettre à Sophie Volland, 10 novembre 1760" Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes* 19: 23-24.

330 Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 132-133.

331 Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* 31, 124

civiles au Dieu monarque.”³³² While pretending to talk about ancient societies, Boulanger was of course indirectly telling the tale of the implications of his fellow contemporaries who compromised when they capitulated to religion and joined forces with the monarchy: “l’homme alors en fut cruellement la dupe, elle [la religion] seule présida à l’élection d’un Dieu monarque, ce fut la la première époque des maux du Genre humain.”³³³

Voltaire was furious with such a work because it forced philosophers to take a position on a clearly political and sensitive issue—their relation with the monarchy and the nature of the political regime—and had to consider which was more just or appropriate for people’s happiness. In January of 1762, he wrote to Damilaville: “Il semble que l’auteur ait tâché de réunir les princes et les prêtres contre lui; il faut tâcher de faire voir au contraire que les prêtres ont toujours été les ennemis des rois. Les prêtres il est vrai sont odieux dans ce livre, mais les rois le sont aussi.”³³⁴

Beginning in 1761, an onslaught of materialist books was released, mainly thanks to the collaboration of Diderot, Naigeon and D’Holbach, the latter spending most of his considerable fortune to finance the production and publication of materialist literature: D’Holbach issued his own *Le Christianisme dévoilé* (1767), *De l’imposture sacerdotale ou recueil de pièces sur le clergé* (1767), *Théologie portative* (1769) and *L’Esprit du clergé* (1767), Boulainvilliers’s *Analyse du Traité théologico-politique de Spinoza* (1767), Naigeon edited Freret’s *Traité des trois imposteurs* (1768) and published a reworked version of Challe’s clandestine and subversive manuscript *Le Militaire Philosophe* (1768) and so on. The climax was the release in 1772 of D’Holbach *Système de la Nature*, a totalizing, direct and political vindication of materialist philosophy. Voltaire read it and wrote, outraged, to D’Alembert: “Voilà une guerre civile entre les incrédules.”³³⁵

Philosophers’ Own “Dirty War” Against Materialism: the Case of Voltaire

In 1759 D’Alembert gave philosophy the task of becoming a harness for its new powers of critique, to be its own censor. For D’Alembert philosophy was to be a dam to itself, a contention to the “excesses” of the power of critique exercised by the new philosophy: “materialism”.³³⁶ However it was not D’Alembert who was the loudest critic

332 Boulanger, *Recherches sur l’origine du despotisme oriental* 230.

333 Boulanger, *Recherches sur l’origine du despotisme oriental* 88.

334 Voltaire, “Lettre à Damilaville 30 janvier 1762”, *Oeuvres* (Garnier) 42: 25.

335 Voltaire, “Lettre à D’Alembert 27 juillet 1770”, *Oeuvres* (Garnier) 47:153.

336 In his *Elements de philosophie* D’Alembert asserts: “Néanmoins l’invention et l’usage d’une nouvelle méthode de philosopher, l’espèce d’enthousiasme qui accompagne les découvertes, une certaine élévation d’idées que produit en nous le spectacle de l’univers; toutes ces causes ont dû exciter dans les esprits une fermentation vive; cette fermentation agissant en tout sens par sa nature, s’est portée avec une espèce de violence sur tout ce qui s’est offert à elle, comme un fleuve qui a brisé ses digues. Or les hommes ne reviennent guère sur un objet qu’ils avoient négligé depuis longtemps, que pour réformer bien ou mal les idées qu’ils s’en étoient faites. Plus ils sont lents à secouer le joug de l’opinion, plus aussi, dès qu’ils l’ont brisé sur quelques points, ils sont portés à le briser sur tout le reste; car ils fuyent encore plus l’embarras d’examiner, qu’ils ne craignent de changer d’avis; et dès qu’ils ont pris une fois la peine de revenir sur leurs pas, ils regardent et reçoivent un nouveau système d’idées comme une sorte de récompense de leur courage et de leur travail.” D’Alembert, *Oeuvres* 2:10-11.

of materialism; that was Voltaire.³³⁷ We know that despite his numerous metaphysical hesitations throughout his career the *patriarche* never embraced any materialist position. Even though he seemed to be, as Martin-Haag noted, a “anti-matérialiste de principe”, Voltaire had to position himself in relation to a wide variety of philosophies which were at each moment perceived as “materialist” (Descartes, Needham, Tremblay, La Mettrie, Diderot, Buffon, Helvetius, D’Holbach etc).³³⁸ What is clear is that Voltaire always sought to avoid the “materialist” epithet and never stopped publicly defending the necessary existence of a higher intelligence in order to explain the regularity of the natural world, as well a useful idea for keep the social order as it provided a solid foundation for political authority. It seems that Voltaire had developed a dual relationship with materialism from: on the one hand, he was in complete opposition to the extension of philosophical critique to the social and political world, the kind of critique as La Mettrie, Helvetius and finally Boulanger practiced in an open way, and which Diderot practiced more surreptitiously. On the other hand, Voltaire was very attracted intellectually by the development of experimental science: he (with Mme du Chatelet) translated and introduced Newton to France. In this regard, even though he spent part of his research to refute Needham's thesis on microorganism and spontaneous generation of living organism (the same Needham that inspired La Mettrie and Diderot) he had a more honest intellectual relation with materialist physics and the debates around atomism and the void which agitated the scientific world.

Since his 1734 *Traité de métaphysique*, Voltaire distanced himself from “materialists” who publicly denied the existence of God, and he sustained since that date a theist position:

“Quand je vois une montre dont l’aiguille marque les heures, je conclus qu’un être intelligent a arrangé les ressorts de cette machine, afin que l’aiguille marque les heures. Ainsi, quand je vois les ressorts du corps humain, je conclus qu’un être intelligent a arrangé ces organes pour être reçus et nourrir neuf mois dans la matrice; que les yeux sont faits pour voir, les mains pour prendre, etc. ... je ne peux conclure autre chose, sinon qu’un être intelligent et supérieur a préparé et façonné la matière avec habileté... je vous seulement qu’il y a quelque chose de plus puissant que moi, rien de plus.”³³⁹

For Voltaire, who was maybe the first to provide a definition and circumscription of materialism from within the philosophical world, materialists were those who said that “le monde existe nécessairement et par lui-même;” that thought and feeling were inherent to matter; and finally that “le mouvement est essentiel à la matière.”³⁴⁰ He tried to refute materialism from within, trying to show that materialists theses contradicted each other or led to absurd conclusions: if thought came from matter, how was it that all matter did not

337 On D’Alembert’s relationship with materialism see Michel Paty, “La Position de D’Alembert par rapport au matérialisme,” *Revue Philosophique de la France Et de L’Étranger* 171.1 (1981): 49 - 66.

338 Eliane Martin-Haag, *Voltaire: Du Cartésianisme aux Lumières* (Paris: Vrin, 2002) 40.

339 Voltaire, *Traité des métaphysique, Oeuvres* (Garnier) 22:194.

340 Voltaire, *Traité des métaphysique, Oeuvres* (Garnier) 22:201.

think? How to affirm at the same time the necessary existence of matter and the theory of the void? etc.³⁴¹ However, he did not get very far in his attempt to present materialism as an incoherent system, mainly because materialist themselves questioned the very form of the system and systematic philosophy.

In 1738 with the *Elements de la philosophie de Newton* Voltaire tried it from another angle: he criticized and rejected Descartes's *Dioptrique* and centered his polemics around materialist physics in order to defend Newtonism. In Descartes Voltaire saw that the presentation of vision as a mechanical action could lead to a materialist interpretation of the phenomena, like the one proposed by Diderot in his *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749). As Martin-Haag argued, Voltaire saw in nature the justification for a God and not for atheism; he considered "le système physique de la nature est porteur d'une finalité ou d'une volonté divines, au niveau des atomes qui assurent l'existence d'une nature fixe et immuable."³⁴² It seems that Voltaire's defense of Newtonian physics against Needham and the early formulations of chemistry was based partially on his metaphysical inclination, as the affirmation of an inner dynamism of matter would destroy the idea of the necessity of a God or a Divine intelligence that Voltaire is so eager to save.

However Voltaire's relation to materialist ideas would change after the publication of La Mettrie's first work, as what had been a philosophical debate centered on theories of matters became a much larger one about the extension of the experimental method and force of critique to other areas, such as morals and politics. Against La

341 "Il faut qu'ils disent que le monde existe nécessairement et par lui-même, de sorte qu'il y aurait de la contradiction dans les termes à dire qu'une partie de la matière pourrait n'exister pas, ou pourrait exister autrement qu'elle est; il faut qu'ils disent que le monde matériel a en soi essentiellement la pensée et le sentiment, car il ne peut les acquérir, puisque en ce cas ils lui viendraient de rien; il ne peut les avoir d'ailleurs, puisqu'il est supposé être tout ce qui est. Il faut donc que cette pensée et ce sentiment lui soient inhérents comme l'étendue, la divisibilité, la capacité du mouvement, sont inhérentes à la matière; et il faut, avec cela, confesser qu'il n'y a qu'un petit nombre de parties qui aient ce sentiment et cette pensée essentielle au total du monde; que ces sentiments et ces pensées, quoique inhérents dans la matière, périssent cependant à chaque instant; ou bien il faudra avancer qu'il y a une âme du monde qui se répand dans les corps organisés, et alors il faudra que cette âme soit autre chose que le monde. Ainsi, de quelque côté qu'on se tourne, on ne trouve que des chimères qui se détruisent.

Les matérialistes doivent encore soutenir que le mouvement est essentiel à la matière. Ils sont par là réduits à dire que le mouvement n'a jamais pu ni ne pourra jamais augmenter ni diminuer; ils seront forcés d'avancer que cent mille hommes qui marchent à la fois, et cent coups de canon que l'on tire, ne produisent aucun mouvement nouveau dans la nature. Il faudra encore qu'ils assurent qu'il n'y a aucune liberté, et, par là, qu'ils détruisent tous les liens de la société, et qu'ils croient une fatalité tout aussi difficile à comprendre que la liberté, mais qu'eux-mêmes démentent dans la pratique. Qu'un lecteur équitable, ayant mûrement pesé le pour et le contre de l'existence d'un Dieu créateur, voie à présent de quel côté est la vraisemblance."

"Si ce monde matériel est existant par lui-même d'une nécessité absolue, c'est une contradiction dans les termes que de supposer que la moindre partie de cet univers puisse être autrement qu'elle est: car, si elle est en ce moment d'une nécessité absolue, ce mot seul exclut toute autre manière d'être; or, certainement cette table sur laquelle j'écris, cette plume dont je me sers, n'ont pas toujours été ce qu'elles sont; ces pensées que je trace sur le papier n'existaient pas même il y a un moment, donc elles n'existent pas nécessairement. Or, si chaque partie n'existe pas d'une nécessité absolue, il est donc impossible que le tout existe par lui-même. Je produis du mouvement, donc le mouvement n'existait pas auparavant; donc le mouvement n'est pas essentiel à la matière; donc la matière le reçoit d'ailleurs; donc il y a un Dieu qui le lui donne. De même l'intelligence n'est pas essentielle à la matière, car un rocher ou du froment ne pensent point. De qui donc les parties de la matière qui pensent et qui sentent auront-elles reçu la sensation et la pensée? Ce ne peut-être d'elles-mêmes, puisqu'elles sentent malgré elles; ce ne peut être de la matière en général, puisque la pensée et la sensation ne sont point de l'essence de la matière: elles ont donc reçu ces dons de la main d'un être suprême, intelligent, infini, et la cause originaire de tous les êtres."

342 Martin-Haag, *Voltaire* 72.

Mettrie's *Discours sur le Bonheur* or *Anti-Sénèque*, he issued the *Poème sur la religion naturelle* (1756), where he affirmed that "la Morale uniforme en tout temps en tout lieu, À des siècles sans fin parle au nom de Dieu," and that God "jette dans tous les cœurs une même semence, Le Ciel fit la vertu, l'homme en fit l'apparence, il peut la revêtir d'imposture et d'erreur, Il ne peut la changer on juge est dans fon cœur."³⁴³ God then put in the hearts of men, according to Voltaire, the seeds of morality, ensuring a natural and transcendental sense of virtue despite and above pleasure and pain. And more importantly, he also deposited the foundation of the social bond or "un instinct qui nous lie à la société."³⁴⁴ The same year Voltaire published *Dialogues philosophiques entre Lucrèce et Posidonius* (1756), where, through Lucretius, he exposed the materialist point of view with strength. While appearing to be almost seduced by it, the whole point of the dialogue aims, from the beginning to show that "la physique d'Epicure [est] bien mauvaise," and must ultimately be rejected.³⁴⁵ The conclusion of the *Dialogue* is that metaphysical questions are, in the last instance, "incompréhensibles." However, at the end of the first *Dialogue*, Posidonius had managed to convince Lucrèce of a "reconnaître un Être suprême inaccessible à nos sens, et prouvé par notre raison, qui a fait le monde, et qui le conserve," that is to sustain the deist position.³⁴⁶ But the leading philosophical character cannot explain formation of ideas nor the connection between will and action, or soul and body, and concludes at the end of the dialogue: "Tout ce que nous pouvons faire, c'est de sentir notre impuissance, de reconnaître un être tout-puissant, et de nous garder de ces systèmes."³⁴⁷

If Voltaire had restricted his critique of materialism to the raising of his own philosophical doubts, one could say that he played a clean game. But maybe short of managing to find arguments strong enough to refute materialist thesis, he delivered another kind of attack on materialism, one that was more of a publishing and editorial war, or, as Israel put it "clandestine maneuvers" in order to neutralize his philosophical opponent; and he did so once he had managed to establish a clear domination of his party in the Academie.³⁴⁸ I already showed how unfaithful and dishonest was his editing of Dumarsais article "Le Philosophe" for the article of the *Encyclopédie*. Israel has explained how he used a similar sneaky maneuver when he published, heavily edited and amputated, Meslier Testament. Voltaire used Meslier (1664-1729) for his own ends: falsification through his editorial practice, the true philosophical content of the defunct priest thought, As Israel commented with astonishment: "the real Meslier was an atheist

343 Voltaire, *Poème sur la religion naturelle* 7.

344 Voltaire, *Poème sur la religion naturelle* 9.

345 Voltaire, *Dialogues philosophiques entre Lucrèce et Posidonius, Oeuvres (Garnier)* 24: 57. See E.D James, "Voltaire's Dialogue with the Materialists," *Voltaire and his world: Studies presented to W.H. Barber*, ed. W.H. Barber and R.J. Howells (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Taylor Institution, 1985) 117-131.

346 Voltaire, *Dialogues philosophiques entre Lucrèce et Posidonius, Oeuvres (Garnier)* 24:63.

347 Voltaire, *Dialogues philosophiques entre Lucrèce et Posidonius, Oeuvres (Garnier)* 24:69.

348 See Miguel Benitez, "Voltaire and Clandestine Manuscripts," *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, ed. Nicholas Cronk (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2009) 65-78.

and unforgiving foe of nobility who dreamt of liberating the peasantry from their sway. What Voltaire had done was commit a literary assassination, fabricating a ‘Meslier’ in no sense anti-aristocratic, atheistic, or a social rebel but rather a providential deist loyal to monarchy who prayed for forgiveness for having taught his parishioners Christianity.”³⁴⁹

In 1760’s Voltaire’s position radicalized even further, and his opposition to materialism became increasingly public. His correspondence shows that he pressured his publisher Cramer, who also published Boulanger’s *Despotisme Oriental*, to get rid of Diderot’s prefaces in the following editions.³⁵⁰ He also felt he had to clearly attack and refute the growing materialist atheism, and he did so in his article “Athée” for his competing *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764), which wanted to propose another point of reference for the Enlightenment, separate from Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*.

In his 1768 *L’Homme aux quarante écus*, Voltaire attacked what he considered to be the excesses of critical philosophy, in particular of those philosophers, which he qualified as charlatan, “qui se sont mis sans façon à la place de Dieu, et qui ont créé l’univers avec leur plume, comme Dieu le créa autrefois par la parole.” To the same goal of refuting publicly the arguments of materialism he published in 1775 *Histoire de Jenni ou le Sage et l’Athée* and *Les Oreilles du comte de Chesterfield*.³⁵¹

In the 1760s then, and even more in the 1770s, not only the public sphere, but the Enlightenment movement itself became polarized and divided around materialism: the philosophical Enlightenment supported from the *Académies* the need of metaphysics within critical philosophy, Deism and the monarchy; the radical Enlightenment or “materialism” was then an openly atheist movement, attacked theocracy and the foundation of despotism. The first one was to become even more institutionalized after the abrupt termination of Revolution, while the second was to remain an oppositional or subaltern current on the philosophical field.

349 Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011) 119.

350 Pappas, “Voltaire et la guerre civile philosophique” 534.

351 See Roland Virolle, “Voltaire et les matérialistes d’après ses derniers contes,” *Dix-huitième Siècle* 11 (1979): 63-74.

Chapter 3: What is “Materialism” and Where it Comes From? The Genealogy of a Contested Category

In a recent collection on “materialism”, German critic Gunter Mensching argued that: “le matérialisme ne connaît pas un enchaînement des doctrines transmises et modifiées de génération en génération... [Il] est plutôt la réponse à certaines questions qui se posaient dans quelques situations clés de l'histoire de la philosophie. La solution matérialiste s'imposa pour résoudre des problèmes aporétiques à une pensée strictement “idéaliste”.”³⁵² Mensching proposes to read an objective discontinuity of materialist philosophies, some of them claimed to be materialist retrospectively (like Epicurus, Lucretius, Bacon, Gassendi etc) not as a tradition in the sense of a transmission, but as the continuity of a particular critical solutions against the problems of an “idealist” or “metaphysical” use of reason, one that constructs or legitimizes some ideological constructions. For him “chaque époque l’a [la tradition matérialisme] quasiment fondée à nouveau”, the question I would like to explore is why and how each epoch also attempted to erase it.³⁵³ In this chapter I try to explain the origin of “materialism” in early modern period and to examine later some of the reasons of its discontinuity since the 19th century, which has to do with the transformation of dissident or emerging public sphere in the 18th century to its partial institutionalization under state control, and the re-professionalization of philosophy since the French Revolution. Where I differ from Mensching, of course, is that the repression of materialism led to its consolidation into a doctrine, implying that its unity comes from a protective reaction, as I see instead materialism as a plural and constantly changing tradition.

1. Emergence and Trajectory of the Words *matérialiste* and *matérialisme*

To state that today's conception of materialism is the result of a long and complicated historical construction would be a banality, as this is the case with all our philosophical concepts. However this is even more the case with materialism whose birth is intrinsically tied to philosophical and ideological disputes around and within the Enlightenment movement. It is now accepted that the 19th and 20th century mainstream history of the Enlightenment has done a disservice to materialism, erasing its radical potential and minimizing its importance (e.g. Bréhier or Cassirer).³⁵⁴ Yet the opposition to materialism began in the 18th century itself, when the word *matérialiste* was first

352 Günther Mensching, “Le matérialisme, une tradition discontinue” *Materia actiosa: Antiquité, âge classique, Lumières*. (volume in honor of Olivier Bloch), ed. Miguel Benítez et al. (Paris: Champion / Geneva: Slatkine, 2000) 513.

353 Mensching, “Le matérialisme,” 525.

354 See Benoît Schneckenburger, “Philosophie matérialiste et autonomie politique, le cas des matérialistes français du XVIII^e siècle: Julien Offroy de La Mettrie et Claude-Adrien Helvétius,” (Diss. Université Paris VIII, 2011) 15-19. As the author summarizes: “L'histoire officielle des Lumières a également souvent oublié ou déconsidéré les matérialistes. Émile Bréhier n'en fait, dans son *Histoire de la philosophie*, qu'une variante de la « Théorie de la Nature. » p. 383, et Cassirer, dans *La philosophie des Lumières* privilégie la pensée de l'Abbé de Condillac au détriment de celles de La Mettrie et Helvétius.” Schneckenburger 18.

invented. This chapter retraces the history and trajectory of the term in order to bring to light the real nature of materialism as a philosophical current, showing its coextensivity with the emergence of a bourgeois intellectual public sphere, its inherent social and political dimension and its resilience and capacity for mutation from the 18th century onwards.

In my dissertation, I argue that the emergence of the words *matérialiste* and *matérialisme* in the first half of the 18th century in France, imported from late 17th century England, and their controversial popularity in the second half of 18th-century France, were a symptom of a fundamental tension within the Enlightenment. Even though this tension seemed to be resolved through the unfolding of the French Revolution, I argue that materialism exposed the inherent contradictions of modern philosophy, that is to say of the practice of critical philosophy in the bourgeois public sphere. In this chapter in particular, I attempt to give the two key words *matérialiste* and *matérialisme* the historical and social density needed to make this case by retracing their emergence and circulation.

The first polemical statement regarding the history of materialism is that precisely that materialism has a *history* of its own. And this history is a recent one which deserves special study in the general history of philosophy. Contrary to widely accepted assumptions in the vulgar history of philosophy, the field of philosophy has not always been divided between two opposite poles, materialism and idealism. As I show, the latter is a configuration of philosophy established in the 19th century, wherein “materialism” and “idealism” were constructed as eternal and objective categories, beginning with DeGerando and Kant, and then reproduced by all the major attempts to systematize and institutionalize the field of philosophy. However, the words “materialist”/ “materialism” and “matérialiste”/ “matérialisme” did not emerge until the late 17th century, and because we think with words, it is more than reasonable to assume that our current concept of “materialism” cannot simply be equated with “atomism”, “empiricism”, “epicurism” or any other pre-existing word or concept that may seem to embrace an equivalent content. Greek atomism, the philosophies of Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius etc. were only re-appropriated as “materialists” through the 18th century in an attempt to valorize in that moment some thesis and aspects of philosophical practice that seemed relevant to modern philosophy, and of course to establish their practice of philosophy within a more legitimate philosophical “tradition”. Indeed, the idea of an “ancient” or “classical” materialism is an early modern invention.

Retracing the historical emergence and evolutions of the meaning of *matérialiste*, instead of taking it as a given, is not simply a matter of avoiding anachronism (the danger of superimposing a contemporary concept of materialism on the early modern one). There is something to be grasped about the meaning of materialist philosophy by observing its beginnings. In particular by the need in the 18th century to come up with a new word to designate a particular current of the Enlightenment. This chapter takes a short but productive detour through a linguistic and philology genealogy of materialism in order to de-familiarize readers from “spontaneous” and inherited meaning of both words in early modern England and France.

The Proto-History and Pre-History of Materialism

The term “materialist” and later “materialism” did not acquire a significant use in the French language until the middle of the 18th century, when the word consolidated its meaning first in the scholarly world before acquiring more widespread use. In one of his essays on the history of materialism, Bloch pointed out that even though we cannot mechanically identify the emergence of the word with the emergence of the concept, the appearance of the word still “marque du moins un tournant important dans l’histoire du [concept],” because it implies both a distance and an awareness towards all its possible meanings and implications.³⁵⁵ The word becomes an object for philosophical reflection itself, and in the case of materialism because of its polemical nature, it does so by being first an object of rejection.

In his seminal article “Sur les premières apparitions du mot ‘matérialiste’” Bloch found a very rare use of the word “materialist” in the 16th century (1553): that of the “seller of materia medica”, that is to say as a synonym for pharmacist, the person who sold the necessary chemical elements for the preparation of medicines and drugs.³⁵⁶ Following Bloch, this first meaning can be considered as the “proto-history” of the word, because it was only in the late 17th century that appeared in England a use of the word “materialist” which was closer to the one we know today. It was in the English theologico-philosophical milieu that the world materialist was coined, initially with multiple meanings. In the late 17th Century (1660-1680) the adjective “materialist” in English was employed somewhat more consistently by three different authors with three different meanings: two of them with negative connotations (More and Cudworth) and one with a positive connotation (Boyle). This periods coincided with the emergence of an intellectual public sphere of discussion and exchange in early modern England, a public sphere where different types of discourses such as scholastic philosophy and theology, modern science and natural philosophy encountered each other, and had to position themselves in relation to one another. So even though it does not seem that these different authors were aware of each other’s alternative meanings, it was no accident that “materialist” was coined in this particular moment. Here are the three occurrences of “materialist” with their respective meanings in the chronological order of their appearance:

1) Henry More, the English Jesuit philosopher and theologian who belonged to the Cambridge Platonist School, was the first, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to have ever used the adjective “materialist” in one of his later works, the *Divine Dialogues* (1668). He did so to characterize Hylobares, one of the characters of his philosophical dialogue, as a “young, witty and well moralized Materialist.”³⁵⁷

The Cambridge Platonists, to which also Cudworth belonged, led a blunt reaction against Hobbes’s philosophy which they began to call “materialist”, because, according to Mintz, they believed it “undermined the foundations of all religious belief,” and the very possibility of a “Christian philosophy,” both because of its method (of relying upon natural reason and not religious or institutional authority) and its philosophical thesis

355 Olivier Bloch, *Matière à histoires*, (Paris: J. Vrin, 1992) 21.

356 Bloch, *Matière à histoires* 21-36.

357 Henry More, *Divine Dialogues Containing Disquisitions Concerning the Attributes and Providence of God* (Glasgow: R. Foulis, 1743) xii.

(which will eventually be called materialistic and deterministic).³⁵⁸

Two years after the publication of Hobbes's *Leviathan* in 1651, More began to refute it. In *Antidote against Atheism* (1653) and later in the *Immortality of the Soul* (1659) More had already clearly refuted the problems of such a philosophical position:

“that there should not be any God, or Soul, or Angel, or Good or Bad; or any Immortality or life to come. That there is no Religion, no Piety nor Impiety, no virtue nor Vice, Justice nor Injustice, but what it pleases him that has the longest sword to call so. That there is no Freedom of the Will, nor consequently any rational remorse of Conscience in any being whatsoever, but that all that is, is nothing but Matter and Corporeal Motion.”³⁵⁹

Who was represented or targeted by the character of *Hylobares* (literally “heavy of matter”)? Henry More, as many commentators have pointed out, was referring here specifically to Hobbes' materialism, which he abhorred, but he was also targeting the new philosophies of Spinoza and Descartes, whose theories he also disputed. In fact, starting in the 17th and alongside the emergence of a para-institutional philosophy inspired by modern science, more and more philosophers were asserting in different ways the substantial nature of matter, and were therefore considered dangerous to the dogmas of religion (which only recognize God and the soul as the true immaterial substance). The defining criteria to be considered a “Materialist” for More was to claim any kind of substantiality for matter, giving it a separate and equal ontological substantial status to God, because Scholasticism and Christianity had reserved the privilege of substantiality for the soul and God exclusively. It was a very specific kind of transgression, a sort of philosophical heresy. In the *Divine Dialogues* though, this new philosophy (of Descartes/Hobbes) was presented as neither completely lost nor completely irreconcilable with the religious order. It was a subversive deviation that could be corrected. *Hylobares* and all of its multiple referents in the field still had a chance for redemption, because although the materialist position he presented was flawed and dangerous, the character was “young” and “witty.” That is to say, here the materialist position seems to be one embraced for social rather than intellectual reasons, (those of being funny, extravagant and witty in conversation). More considered that the assertion of the substantiality of matter is not absolutely unacceptable (it is then partially so) as long as it did not negate that of the soul, as long as the “materialist” established, as Descartes did, a dualist ontological framework where it is possible to preserve, according to Quintili, “le caractère incorporel de l'esprit et l'immatérialité de la substance pensante, désormais indentifiée avec l'âme humaine, qui laisse la porte ouverte à la théologie morale”.³⁶⁰ More's reaction to Cartesianism is an expression of the Church's fears of the possibilities contained by the philosophies sprouting outside of the scholastic institutions. However it was not until La Mettrie that a philosopher would attempt to demolish the whole

358 Samuel Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge U.P, 1962).

359 Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* 33.

360 Paolo Quintili, *Matérialismes et Lumières: Philosophies de la vie, autour de Diderot et de quelques autres, 1706-1789* (Paris: H. Champion, 2009) 176.

metaphysical system of scholasticism that intertwined philosophy with theology.

2) In 1674 the naturalist and British philosopher Robert Boyle, who is considered the first modern chemist, used the word in the most interesting and promising meaning: the “materialist” was the one interested in the study of matter and movement within matter, which differentiated the “materialist” from the “physicist”, more particularly the from the mechanist who only considers matter in its extension:

“when the chemists and other materialists (if I may call them that) restrict themselves to their favoured ingredients of bodies—whether two or three or more—they have to (and usually do) leave most of the phenomena of the universe unexplained. What they need is to bring into their explanations the mechanical and more comprehensive states of matter, especially how material things move.”³⁶¹

Boyle developed an epistemology based on Epicurus’ atomism and inspired by the French philosopher Gassendi and the English naturalist Francis Bacon, an epistemology which, in his essay *About the Excellency and Grounds of The Mechanical Hypothesis* (1674), he called “Corpuscularian Principles”.³⁶² This essay was a complex work that brought out, according to Wilson, the “conflict between Christian theology and the experimental life of involvement not only with small, dirty, and low objects, but with beautiful and transitory ones”.³⁶³ Experimental science flatly denied the existence of occult or supernatural causes to explain the world, and Boyle referred only to corpuscular or atomist ones. Yet, even if in his works there are more than a hundred quotations of Epicurus and Lucretius, Boyle always avoided publicly embracing such philosophical references and claimed to be a “corpuscularian”, instead of an atomist or Epicureanist, as they were associated with libertinism and atheism, two philosophies of which he tried to publicly avoid.³⁶⁴ The traditional scholarship on Boyle states that the philosopher transitioned from an early embrace of Epicurean philosophy (including its morals and defense of pleasure) to a more conservative position, presented in *The Christian Virtuoso* (1690). However recent scholarship, reviewing his lost and suppressed manuscripts, tends to read this last ideal philosophical figure, that of the Christian virtuoso, more as “an imaginary figure Boyle created to fulfill his own psychological needs and that he was able to enlist others in the task of creating an appropriate image of the natural philosopher,” than as a denial of his previous apology for natural philosophy.³⁶⁵

3) In his influential but unfinished work, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), Ralph Cudworth devoted several volumes to the critique of what he considered to be several forms of “materialism,” especially the materialistic atheism of Hobbes. For this English philosopher of the Platonist Cambridge school, “materialism”

361 Robert Boyle, *About the Excellency and Grounds of The Mechanical Hypothesis* (1674) 146.

362 Regarding Gassendi’s atomistic philosophy and its contradiction between scientific atomism and affirmation of Christian beliefs see Olivier Bloch, *La Philosophie de Gassendi* (La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1971) 288-302 and 485-87.

363 Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2008) 236.

364 J. J. Macintosh, "Robert Boyle on Epicurean Atheism and Atomism," *Atoms, "Pneuma," and Tranquility*, ed. Osler Margaret (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 199.

365 Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* 226.

and “atheism” could both be traced back to Aristotle's metaphysics, but they must be differentiated. According to Cudworth's reading, for Aristotle “materialist” refers to “many of those who first philosophized, assigned only a material cause of the whole mundane system without either intending or efficient cause” and “asserted matter to be the only substance”.³⁶⁶ Cudworth's philosophy was a very good example of the attempts of philosophers within the institutional scholastic framework to read, translate and integrate the new philosophy into the university and its Aristotelian categories. Brockliss pointed out that thinkers like Galen and Averroes were, by means of these strange transpositions, considered as “materialist Aristotelians”, and so was Descartes's philosophy.³⁶⁷ For Cudworth, “materialism” was not the same as “atomism” as it was in the case with More. Materialism was not simply a physical theory, but rather principally a proclamation of atheism. Thus, his main enemy was not Descartes or the exponents of the new science (as it was for More) but instead Hobbes's philosophy and its moral and political implications. Because “materialists” “acknowledged no other substances besides matter that might be an active principle in the universe” and did not recognize the existence of any other form of causality (like the formal and essential causes), they were unable to understand motion, life or action, or able to give an account of the “regular and orderly frame of this mundane system”.³⁶⁸ “Materialists” were therefore incapable of science because they had flawed metaphysics. One could say Cudworth was stuck in the logical paradigm of Aristotelianism that 17th century modern philosophy would do away with. For him, the new forms of “materialism” were just new reiterations of the philosophy of what he called “the old materialists.”

In his essay Bloch remarked that More's use of the word would be the meaning to become the most common in France: materialism as an ontological position that valorized matter as the sole substance, potentially overshadowing or even negating God and the substantiality of the soul and mind (which are the foundations of religious dogma).³⁶⁹ Indeed both More and Cudworth were trying to grapple with the new corpuscular natural philosophy (Descartes, Hobbes and Gassendi) and its apparent incompatibility with Aristotelian metaphysics.³⁷⁰ If More rejected as “materialist” any of the exponents or defenders of the new science and the substantiality of matter, Cudworth was more nuanced; he was trying to neutralize this new philosophy by tinkering with scholastic metaphysics, distinguishing what in Greek philosophy was “materialism” (the

366 Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) *The Works of Ralph Cudworth*, 4 Vols, ed. Thomas Birch, (Oxford, 1829) 1:247.

367 L. W. B. Brockliss, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Cultural History* (Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon, 1987) 338, 353.

368 Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* 1: 247.

369 Quintili here agrees with Bloch when he states that “Cudworth et Boyle opposent encore la matière non pas à l'esprit mais à la forme. More franchit cette frontière historique, à la fois conceptuelle et de vocabulaire, en opposant la matière à l'esprit.” Quintili, *Matérialismes* 174. Or as Quintili clearly summarized: “la naissance du terme “matérialiste” tombe dans ce contexte polémique, entre théologie néoplatonicienne et philosophie corpusculaire ou mécanique, de matrice cartésienne, qui cherche sa légitimation culturelle et scientifique.” Quintili, *Matérialismes* 174.

370 See Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003) 2: 698-677.

Ionian school of Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes) from “atheism” (Democritus and Epicurus). By doing so he implied that the old scholastic university might be willing to accept some materialists as long as they were not atheists; that is, that they studied natural philosophy (physics) without meddling in God and metaphysics.³⁷¹ For him the target of the critique should be atheism, and the subsequent results of applying the method of the new natural philosophy to the other parts of philosophy.³⁷²

In both cases—theology and neo-platonist philosophy—the derogatory use of the word “materialist” was the one prevailed from the beginning. However, the third meaning of the term “materialist”, the one referring to a chemist, did not disappear. It became marginal and associated not so much with philosophy as with a specific scientific practice. Yet the latter was full of semantic potentialities which interested Diderot, who paid very close attention to experimental physics and chemistry to develop a “materialism” of his own.³⁷³ It was also Boyle’s insight of materialism as the affirmation of a “secret life” of matter, the one which interested the early 20th century physicists who studied Brownian movement, like Perrin, Langevin and of course Einstein.

The History of “Matérialisme”: the Appropriation of the English Debates in French Philosophical Circles

What Bloch did not explain, however, is how one specific meaning—the one coined by Theologians—came to be consolidated and affirmed over the other ones, and especially how it ended up dominating the philosophical debates in Enlightenment France. Two events need to be mentioned: the first is the French reception of the English philosophical debates which shifted their attention from Hobbes’s scandalous “materialism” to Descartes and later to Locke, whose metaphysics and epistemology became suspicious. The second step has to do with the publication of a set of radical texts in the 1750s which generated a public polemic in which “materialism” was constructed as a particular kind of philosophical position. In the French philosophical world during the first part of the century (1700-1730) the meaning of materialism was still being formed. The quite rigorous philological history of philosophy in regards to materialism we have today provides some insight into the French philosophical appropriation of the English word “materialist” through two different vehicles: the French translation of Cudworth’s

371 “The main theme of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* is presented in the form of a sustained polemic against atheistic materialists. Not that Cudworth had any desire to reinstate a scholastic-Aristotelian theory of nature; in his eyes, the great virtue of the new science was that it had revived the atomic theory of body, which furnished, so he thought, the most secure of all foundations for theism.” John Arthur Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth an Interpretation* (Cambridge [England]: University, 1951) 19-20.

372 “Hobbes symbolized five things: atheism, materialism, determinism, individualism and ethical relativism. Cudworth was a theist, a dualist, a libertarian, who believed in the organic theory of the State and in eternal and immutable morality. Both accepted the atomic theory of body, both rejected the scholastic “faculties”, and there were certain other coincidences of doctrine, but on the vital philosophical issues there could be no compromise. If we want to know what Hobbes meant to his own age, what violence to tradition he seemed to do, we shall find no better source book than Cudworth’s *The True Intellectual System*.” Passmore 12.

373 See Paolo Quintili, *La pensée critique de Diderot* (Paris: Champion, 2001) 295-308; Annie Ibrahim, *Diderot: un matérialisme éclectique* (Paris: Vrin, 2010) 32-44 and François Pépin, *La Philosophie expérimentale de Diderot et la chimie* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012).

work and the Leibniz's dispute with Locke.³⁷⁴ The term *matérialiste* became most popular and solidified in France not within philosophical circles and press interested in the “new philosophy”, but by the Christian apologetic production, linked to the university and the defense of religion against the proponents of a more “radical” Enlightenment in France. It was this second reception or mediation (1740-1770's) which fixed the early modern meaning of *matérialiste/matérialisme*. Of course, this meaning of *matérialiste* current throughout the 18th century in France has little to do with the one we have inherited today, as it went through a new phase of semantic consolidation in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The first French philosophical articulation around *matérialisme* was the multiple receptions in France of the radical experimental and “materialist” philosophy in England, mainly Locke. It was sparked by the translation of parts of Cudworth's *True Intellectual System* in the *Bibliothèque choisie* (1703-1706) by Jean LeClerc,³⁷⁵ as Cudworth was already polemicizing with Locke, and this initiated a debate in the Continental french speaking philosophical *milieux*, mainly between LeClerc, Bayle, and Leibniz. Leibniz is the first to use the word *matérialiste* in French in his response to Bayle (*Réplique aux Réflexions de Bayle* 1702), where he associated it with Hobbes and Epicurus, calling them the “grands matérialistes” “qui croient que l'âme est matérielle”.³⁷⁶ Later, in Samuel Clarke's correspondence with Leibniz (1715- 1716) regarding the principles of natural philosophy and religion, we find a first warning of the “materialist danger” presented by Locke's philosophy, or by certain possible interpretations of it.³⁷⁷ This correspondence between Clarke (the English philosopher and Anglican clergyman, who was a Newtonian theologian) and Leibniz, a German rationalist, was key in consolidating the meaning of “materialism” in French philosophical circles. This correspondence was translated and edited in France as early as 1720 and was as influential as the early translation into French of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) by Pierre Coste in 1700.³⁷⁸ This philosophical rejection of “materialism” entered France therefore via the mediation of Leibniz, who cautioned the early French Enlightenment against the potential

374 Eliane Martin-Haag, "Une source oubliée de l'histoire du matérialisme: Ralph Cudworth," *La Matière et l'homme dans l'Encyclopédie. Actes du colloque de Joinville [10-12 juillet 1995]*, ed. Sylviane Albertan Coppola and Anne-Marie Chouillet (Paris: Klincksieck, 1998) 51.

375 The *Bibliothèque choisie* (1703-1713) by Jean LeClerc was a journal published in Holland that was read in France as well as England with the inten of keeping the reader informed about British publications. John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983) 11-13.

376 “En un mot, tout se fait dans le corps, à l'égard du détail des phénomènes, comme si la mauvaise doctrine de ceux qui croient que l'âme est matérielle, suivant Epicure et Hobbes, était véritable; ou comme si l'homme même n'était que corps, ou qu'automate. Aussi ont ils poussé jusqu'à l'homme, ce que les cartésiens accordent à l'égard de tous les autres animaux; ayant fait voir en effet, que rien ne se fait par l'homme avec toute sa raison, qui dans le corps ne soit un jeu d'images, de passions et de mouvements.” Leibniz, “Réplique aux réflexions de Bayle” *Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Janet) 2: 538.

377 For a general introduction and summary of Leibniz and Clarke's correspondence, see Ezio Vailati *Leibniz & Clarke: A Study of their correspondence* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 3-15, for their discussion of Locke and materialism see Vailati 53-77.

378 For a more detailed account of Locke's reception in France see John Yolton, *Locke and French Materialism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) and Jørn, Schøsler et al. *La diffusion de Locke en France, traduction au dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford : Voltaire Foundation, 2001).

“materialist” interpretations of Locke. Leibniz presented a picture of what still was an *hypothetical* materialism (only once embodied in Hobbes in England) as the enemy of religion, going beyond More’s fears. For Leibniz and the second generation of neo-Platonists, Locke’s philosophy—in contrast to Descartes’s which in perspective became less dangerous—was a total break with scholastic metaphysics and methodology. Locke could not be easily accommodated or read through “Aristotelianism”, since it relegated the ontological and metaphysical debate to a secondary role. The English philosopher was perceived as a Trojan horse of atheism and immorality. The historical overlap in the reception of two successive debates in English philosophy, that is to say the simultaneous reception of Locke and his critique by theologians, created a sort of chaos in France, as Locke became very popular at the same time he was considered quite dangerous and was a subject of intense debate.

In this first period (1700-1740) the first meaning of materialism embraced a variety of positions affirming the substantiality of matter and was perceived as a threat to theology. In this context a variety of authors were considered by some as materialists: Hobbes certainly, but also Descartes, Locke, and Spinoza. Yet more than an ontological definition, the French reception of Locke clearly showed that what was feared and labeled as materialism was a new kind of philosophy which minimized the traditional grounding of philosophy in essences and substances, a set of philosophy which, beginning with Descartes but intensified in Locke, accomplished what many intellectual historians have called an “epistemological turn” in philosophy.³⁷⁹ “Materialists” were those authors who not only affirmed another form of substance, but more radically displaced or re-centered the focus of philosophical inquiry from ontology (a problematic of substances) to an epistemology (the faculties and paths of human understanding). It was a new philosophy which did not value the traditional metaphysical debates and refused to be centered around them, turning instead to nature and science. Each philosopher proposed his own intellectual reconfiguration of the understanding of the tasks and goals of philosophy as a discipline based on the findings and questions that the revolution in natural philosophy (physics) made possible. It was also a moment where, for the first time, not only were different philosophical systems emerging, but a discussion the best criteria to define and evaluate a system was begun. The scholastic framework was an ontological one, based on forms of causality and degrees of being, a vertical or hierarchical order from the lowest degree of being and value (matter) to the highest one (God and the soul). It made no room for different interpretations of the natural world. In contrast, what later became “modern” philosophy was mapped as a field defined by different theories of knowledge with different foundations and criteria of validity; it developed a seemingly more horizontal structure. This not to say that ontology (and ontological disputes) disappeared during the course of the 18th century, but rather that for the proponents of the new philosophy ontology was increasingly subordinated to epistemological preoccupations as philosophy’s dialogue with science increased.

Only in this new modern rationalist context, which was initiated by German

379 See John W Yolton, *John Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). For a more nuanced view or revision on this issue see Marc Hight “The End of Ontology?” *Idea and Ontology: An Essay in Early Modern Metaphysics of Ideas* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2008) 27-34. I have to point out that there is a controversy regarding this issue regarding the tension between epistemology and ontology in Locke’s work, mainly embodied in a debate between Michael Ayers *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (London: Routledge, 199) and John Yolton *Locke: An Introduction* (Oxford [Oxfordshire]: B. Blackwell, 1985).

rationalists Leibniz and Wolff and intensified throughout the 18th century until Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), can such philosophical currents as "materialism" and "idealism" be constructed as twin or mirroring opposites.³⁸⁰ Deprun traces the first formulation of this dual system to Christian Wolff's *Psychologia rationalis* (1734), wherein, well before Kant and Hegel, the author offers a classification of philosophical systems and presents materialism for the first time as the path which is opposite that of idealism.³⁸¹ Wolff uses the word in Latin, but it is of course a Latin that never existed in antiquity, as "materialistae" is rather a Latinisation of the English "materialists". As Deprun stated, summarizing Wolff, "tout dogmatique est dualiste ou moniste. Tout moniste (partisan de l'unité de la substance) est matérialiste ou idéaliste. Tout idéaliste est lui-même pluraliste (s'il admet, comme Berkeley, la multiplicité des sujets pensants) ou égoïste (nous dirions aujourd'hui solipsiste) s'il n'en reconnaît qu'un seul: lui-même."³⁸² However, the Wolffian classification did not successfully impact its contemporaries, nor did it survive the course of philosophical debates. This is maybe because, in his detailed system of classifications, bifurcations and possible combinations, the opposition between idealism and materialism, which will become central a century later, was not at this time the main one.³⁸³

The Evolution of "Matérialiste/matérialisme" from the Perspective of Historical Linguistics

After covering the pre-history of the word in broad strokes, a more micro history is needed to grasp its true moment of birth in the mid 18th century. Initially *matérialiste* was an insult or defamatory term in French, coined by the apologetic discourse and relayed by layers of the philosophical institution and even by some of the Enlightenment philosophers themselves. The pragmatics of the word, its use as a social and intellectual marker to demarcate and single out a set of positions and ideas, initially embraced almost all of its semantics. The history of the words *matérialiste* and *matérialisme* is to be continuous analogous to and continuous with *libertin* and *libertinage*. As Cavallé pointed out:

"le sens de ces termes [*libertin* and *libertinage*] est à la fois très riche, du point de vue de leur potentiel polysémique, et très vague, indéfiniment adaptable à de nouvelles cibles, à partir de ce qui me semble en être le noyau sémantique, étymologiquement dérivé du mépris nourri par la société latine à l'égard des liberti (affranchis) et des libertini (enfants

380 Of course the mapping of systems will be successively rearranged by DeGérando, Hegel or Cousin, just to name a few.

381 Jean Deprun, "Deux emplois du mot matérialisme, Christian Wolff et Jean-Jacques Rousseau," *Dix-huitième siècle* 24 (1992): 11-15.

382 Deprun 12.

383 As Deprun noted: "Notons enfin que leur querelle (sur la matérialité de la substance) n'est pour Wolff qu'un débat métaphysique parmi d'autres. Ni l'un, ni l'autre, à ce stade, n'incarne une option exigeante ou exclusive. L'échiquier métaphysique selon Wolff, comprend beaucoup plus que deux cases. L'heure des simplifications et des amalgames ne sonnera que plus tard." Deprun 13.

d'affranchi) : l'exercice d'une liberté excessive, erronée, périlleuse, susceptible d'être identifiée dans n'importe quel domaine (religieux, moral, politique, belles-lettres, etc.).³⁸⁴

The word *matérialiste* was initially characterized, like *libertin*, more as a marker inside the field, which ahd, as Cavaillé remarked, little semantic density as Cavaillé and which denoted a mutating enemy that needed to be purged. Both terms belonged to the same hidden and unacknowledged “histoire de l'incrédulité et de l'irréligion”.³⁸⁵ The question then is why was there a need to coin a new term to stigmatize a philosophical position? What did change (if anything) from the 17th century *libertin* to the 18th century *matérialiste*? The answer is partially to be found in the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere where the plurality of meanings of materialist and their respective philosophical positions in the late 17th century became regrouped or consolidated around new lines of polarization within the new public status of philosophy.

In a first attempt to understand this evolution, I retraced the occurrence of both words using the largest text digital corpus of French texts available, ARTLF-FRANTEXT, which comprises more than 3,500 French language texts (from the 12th century to the present) and approximately 215 million words.³⁸⁶ The occurrences of *matérialiste* (481 in total), and *matérialisme* (738 in total), through the FRANTEXT database search (attached in the appendix) show that the word « matérialiste » appears before “matérialisme”. Initially materialism appeared in the language as an epithet (and not as a substantive), embodied and inseparable from the figure of some philosophers and libertines that identified as “materialists” by the clergy and the philosophers of La Sorbonne as “those who only admit matter.” Before being a philosophical current, materialism designated someone, as we will see, who did not rightfully belong to the field of philosophy.

Even though “materialist” appears first in the 18th century, it was only in the 19th century that the word acquired a more recurrent use and a more stable meaning and permanently entered into the official philosophical vocabulary where it will be incorporated in a clear-cut conceptual world. This evolution is confirmed if we look at the successive definitions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, where it appears very clearly that during the whole 18th century “materialism” is not a doctrine but an “opinion”.³⁸⁷

Year of	« Matérialiste »	« Matérialisme »
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384 Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, “L’histoire des ‘libertins’ reste à faire,” *Les Dossiers du Grihl*, Libertinage, athéisme, irrégion (2010, par. 1.

385 Cavaillé, “L’histoire des ‘libertins’ reste à faire” par 1.

386 From a methodological point of view, it is important to point out that FRANTEXT is not comprehensive database: the texts available are selected arbitrarily, and some key texts in the history of philosophy are absent. Therefore, the results of FRANTEXT can only be used as general guides or indicators to formulate initial working hypotheses, but cannot lead to definitive conclusions. One of the main limitations of the use of this database for my particular project is that some of the key proponents of materialism, like La Mettrie or Helvetius, are missing, as are most of the 18th century “materialists”, who I will show did not use the word very frequently.

387 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. 1st (1694), 4th (1762), 5th (1798), 6th (1835), and 8th (1932-5) editions. *Dictionnaires d'autrefois* ARTFL Project.

publication		
1762	Celui ou celle qui n'admet que la matière.	Opinion de ceux qui n'admettent point d'autre substance que la matière.
1798	Celui ou celle qui n'admet que la matière.	Opinion de ceux qui n'admettent point d'autre substance que la matière.
1832-1835	Des deux genres. Celui, celle qui n'admet que la matière. Il s'emploie aussi adjectivement. Opinions, doctrines matérialistes. Un écrivain matérialiste.	Système de ceux qui pensent que tout est matière.
1932-1935	Des deux genres. Celui, celle qui adopte les principes du matérialisme. Adjectivement, Doctrine matérialiste. Un écrivain matérialiste.	Doctrine philosophique qui ramène tout à la matière.

As this table shows, the evolution of the meaning of the word provides a significant insight to the intellectual historian: it was only around 1830 that “materialism” became a “system”, that is to say that it was considered a coherent philosophical current, and in 1932 acquired the rather pejorative qualifier of “doctrine”, which implies not only a definite cohesion but also a rigidity. This mutation in the 19th was the result of the re-institutionalization of philosophy under the First Empire and Restoration, particularly at the hands of Victor Cousin and the production of his several volumes and re-editions of the history of French 18th century philosophy. The change from “système” to “doctrine” in the early 20th century can be read as a refraction of the Russian Revolution in the field of philosophy and the spread of Marxism as a new challenge for institutional philosophy in its form, content and social practice. Yet the intriguing question posed by this first quantitative survey and this evolution of the definition is the nature of the significant lapse of time between the moment when the term first appeared and the moment when its meaning got fixed, that is to say roughly the period between 1730 and 1840. What are the different meanings of the word “materialist” in the second half of the 18th century? How are these meanings produced, and how did they arrive at a point of fixation? This is the question I address in this dissertation, concentrating on the period between 1740 and 1780, when materialism in France suddenly becomes “popular” among the literate circles and subject of widespread debate.

Materialism in the Early Modern French Dictionaries

A rough way of narrowing down the understanding of materialism throughout the 18th Century is to adopt a more qualitative approach by comparing the different definitions of “materialist” and “materialism” given by different dictionaries of the time. Far from presenting an “objective” point of view, each one of those dictionaries clearly

portrayed the normative view of materialism, expressing the partisan view of the various intellectual institutions of the French *Ancien Régime*. This is not to say that these dictionaries did not aspire to “objectivity” but their standards of truth were different than those applied by contemporary linguists.

We can look first at the definitions of dictionaries that were attached to or issued by two specific and very prominent institutions: the French Academy which was under the patronage of the King and the Jesuit order, who belonged to the Catholic Church. The *Académie* officially published its *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* in 1694, but we can also consider Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* (first edition in 1690) for the first purpose.³⁸⁸ The Jesuits issued later the *Dictionnaire universel français et latin*, also known as the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, published between 1704 and 1772 under the leadership of the Jesuits and based on Furetière’s work. Another dictionary coming from the same religious order and institutional perspective is Jean-François Feraud’s *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française*, who was a member of the Jesuit order and was worried about simplifying and correcting the *Académie*’s dictionary.

<i>Dictionnaire Universel</i> d' Antoine Furetière- (édition de 1725, revue et augmentée par Henri Basnage de Beauval & Jean-Baptiste Brutel de La Rivière.)	« Matérialiste: Sortes de philosophes qui soutiennent qu'il n'y a que la matière ou le corps qui existe, et qu'il n'y a point d'autre substance au monde; qu'elle est éternelle, et que c'est d'elle que tout est formé; que tout ce qui est produit ou existe dans l'univers n'est autre chose que de la matière et des accidents, qui naissent et qui périssent; et que tout ce que l'on aperçoit de vie et de pensée n'appartient qu'à la matière. »
<i>Dictionnaire universel français et latin</i> , vulgairement appelé <i>Dictionnaire de Trévoux</i> , (1752)	"Matérialisme: Dogme très dangereux suivant lequel certains Philosophes indignes de ce nom prétendent que tout est matière, et nient l'immortalité de l'âme. Le Matérialisme est un pur Athéisme, ou pour le moins pur Déisme: car si l'âme n'est point esprit, elle meurt aussi bien que le corps; et si l'âme meurt il n y a plus de Religion. M Locke disputait pour le Matérialisme."
<i>Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française</i> (1762)	« Matérialiste: Celui ou celle qui n'admet que la matière.»
<i>Dictionnaire critique de la langue française</i> by Féraud (1787-1788)	«Matérialisme est l'absurde opinion de ceux qui n'admettent point d'autre substance que la matière. — Dans un sens plus resserré, on le dit de ceux qui tiennent que l'âme est matérielle. = Matérialiste, partisan du matérialisme. = <i>Matérialité</i> , <i>qualité</i> de ce qui est matière. "La matérialité de l'âme est une opinion aussi absurde que pernicieuse.”

388 The *Dictionnaire* was published posthumously. Antoine Furetière was expelled from the *Académie Française* in 1685 when his peers found out that he was on the verge of publishing a dictionary based on the *Académie*'s works in progress without their consent due to despair over the dictionary's slow progress.

Two additional dictionaries presented definitions from slightly different points of view: the *Manuel lexique ou Dictionnaire Portatif des mots français* (1788) by Prévost, and a re-edition of Richelet's *Dictionnaire*. Prévost's dictionary was an edited translation of the *New General English Dictionary* (1738) originally published by Thomas Dyche, a British laymen whose successful dictionary went through 18 editions in the 18th century:

“Matérialistes: Secte de philosophes, qui croient la matière éternelle, et qui ne laissent pas d'admettre un premier Être immatériel; supposant qu'elle a reçu successivement différentes formes, suivant l'usage qu'il en a voulu faire. Il y a d'autres Matérialistes, qui n'admettent absolument que de la matière, et qui, rejetant l'existence des substances spirituelles, comme une chimère de l'imagination, soutiennent que l'âme n'est qu'une certaine modification de la matière, ou une harmonie qui résulte de l'assemblage et de l'organisation de ses parties. C'est proprement cette monstrueuse opinion, qu'on nomme aujourd'hui le Matérialisme”³⁸⁹

A slightly different account of materialism is presented by the 1759 edition of Pierre Richelet's *Dictionnaire de la langue française, ancienne et moderne*, originally published in 1680, and expanded in the middle of the 18th century by the Jansenist Jean-Pierre Goujet and which was of course published in Amsterdam. There we find a definition of materialism as the opposite of Cartesian dualism, and not the affirmation of the substantiality of matter: “Matérialisme: on appelle ainsi l'opinion insensée de ceux qui nient que l'homme soit un composé de deux substances distinctes, dont l'une est matérielle, savoir le corps, et l'autre matérielle, savoir l'âme. L'immatérialisme est le contraire du matérialisme.”³⁹⁰

Even though it might seem that Richelet's dictionary defined materialism the same way, separating it from Cartesianism (which he appears to defend) in order to separate materialism from the new science, it is very clear that he was equally hostile to materialism, as the following entry shows:

“Matérialiste: celui qui n'admet qu'une seule substance dans l'homme, savoir la matière. Immatérialiste, celui qui a recours à une seconde substance, qui est spirituelle et non matière, savoir l'âme. Le matérialiste s'écarte également de la raison, du jugement, de l'expérience, et de la révélation. Il n'y a point de matérialiste de bonne foi. Tous les efforts que fait l'esprit pour se convaincre qu'il est matière sont la preuve de son immatérialité. Le matérialisme ne peut être l'ouvrage que d'un coeur vicieux.”³⁹¹

What is clear is that two very different institutions -- the Catholic Church and the French Academy -- agree that materialism is the opinion of “fake” philosophers, at best

389 Antoine-François Prévost, *Manuel lexique, ou Dictionnaire portatif des mots françois* (1788) 2:87.

390 Pierre Richelet, *Dictionnaire de la langue française, ancienne et moderne* 2: 606.

391 Richelet, *Dictionnaire de la langue française, ancienne et moderne* 2: 606. “Materialist: someone who only perceives one substance in mankind, that is, matter. An immaterialist has recourse to a second substance, spiritual and not matter: that is, the soul. The materialist equally rejects reason, judgement, experience and revelation. There cannot be a materialist of sound faith. All the efforts of the mind to convince itself that it is material prove the contrary – its immateriality. Materialism can only be the the product of a depraved mind.”

the philosophy of a “sect” that makes “absurd”, “scandalous” and even “monstrous” claims. Materialism is above all an imposture that wants to pass for philosophy, and most of the attacks against materialists were not based on a concrete refutation of their theses, but on derogation of their discourse and their person. If *matérialiste* was a more potent epithet than *athée*, *impie* or *phyrronien*, it is probably because *matérialiste* was derived as much from *matériel* as from *matière*, and *matériel* in the Early Modern period meant in a figurative sense *grossier*. As the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* (1762) notes: “[matériel] signifie aussi Grossier, qui a beaucoup de matière et d'épaisseur. Cet ouvrage est trop matériel. Cette menuiserie est trop matérielle. On dit figurément d'un homme qui a l'esprit grossier et pesant, qu'il est matériel, fort matériel, que c'est un esprit bien matériel.”³⁹² The Church by launching this attack against materialism is leading above all a campaign of intellectual discreditation, trying to monopolize philosophy by ensuring that philosophy is, if not subordinated to theology, at least compatible with religious dogma.

The Reaction the Christian Apologists to the Popularity of the “New Philosophy” and the Coining of “Matérialiste”

The term “matérialist” became in the writing of the different currents of Christian and theological discourse their limit of toleration and their demarcation line from the new Enlightenment philosophy.³⁹³

It was also in the apologetic discourse or what McMahon has called the Counter-Enlightenment which first constituted the idea of a materialist “doctrine”.³⁹⁴ I would like to borrow McMahon’s method of departing from the negative definition of materialism, as he did with the notion of “Enlightenment”, that is the real constructing through the debates in the public sphere, instead of an abstract definition derived from an etymology as we could say that the history of materialism a double or dialectical one: made by the representation created by the Counter-Enlightenment and by the various reactions of the so-called “materialists”. McMahon argued that “it was over and against their own construction of their enemies' doctrines” that materialist authors had to position themselves in order to shape and orient their own philosophical intervention.³⁹⁵

Some philosophers in the 17th century began to disturb the perfect match of philosophy and theology, and to violate such adequations in the metaphysical and moral domain through the expression of doubts and the valorization of pleasure, and were thus stigmatized as “libertine”. Throughout 18th century the relation of forces became reversed: while a set of Enlightenment philosophers tried to prove the possibility of a compatibility between theology and this new philosophy, another trend completely disregarded the opinion of the Sorbonne and the Church and sought a full emancipation

392 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. 1st (1694), 4th (1762), 5th (1798), 6th (1835), and 8th (1932-5) editions. *Dictionnaires d'autrefois* ARTFL Project.

393 Regarding the different attitudes of several journals towards materialism in the second half of the 18th century, including the *Journal de Trévoux*, the *Journal Encyclopédique* and the *Journal des Dames*, see Jack Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1994) 89-92.

394 Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment the French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002).

395 McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment* 10.

of philosophy from theology, proposing a divorce of the two; finally there a current, later called materialist, which envisioned this new philosophy not as a new “discipline” or autonomous domain of discourse, but as a critical political force against religion and later the Monarchy with the aim of developing a wider social enlightenment. The term “*matérialist*” eventually came to be a circumscribed target, a last current which wanted to irreversibly undermine the social and political power of religion in early modern society.

The Church's initial resistance to and polemics with different kinds of natural philosophy (from Locke and Bacon to Spinoza) in France, was led by the Jesuit order, as this was the order most distinguished by its intellectual and symbolic capital and its ability to intervene in, comment on and censor all kind of scientific and moral debates. Thus it was the organ of the Jesuits, the *Journal de Trévoux* and later the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1770) that waged the most effective combat against the “new philosophy” from the apologetic side. For the Jesuits “la philosophie tout court est la science des choses divines et humaines.”³⁹⁶ Lu devoted a whole chapter of her book to the Jesuits’ conception of philosophy, notes:

“Les Jésuites affirment toujours que la vraie philosophie est celle qui est fondée sur la religion. Le philosophe ne doit pas se piquer d’être théologien, mais doit savoir assez de théologie pour ne rien enseigner qui y soit contraire. Le rapport entre philosophie et religion est ainsi résumé: “La philosophie et la théologie ne sauraient se contredire, non plus que la raison et la foi qui en sont les objets. La théologie n’est point contraire à la philosophie; elle est au-dessus d’elle, comme la foi est élevée au dessus de la raison,” (35, 01, 318).”³⁹⁷

From its creation in 1701, the aim of the *Journal the Trévoux* was to present an “objective” review of major scientific, literary, philosophical and artistic work in order to become a kind of natural judge in the new intellectual sphere. Its goal was to become “utile pour l’histoire des arts et des sciences” refusing in theory any “parti pris”, “excepté quand il s’agira de religion,” (Catholic, one should add).³⁹⁸ But this task and aspiration commitment to neutrality became more and more compromised when confronted with philosophical works that questioned the foundations of religion.

The Jesuits were not the only religious sect or group to oppose materialism and the new philosophers. The Jansenists, through the *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques*, were even harsher, especially under the direction of Fontaine de la Roche between 1729 and 1761, targeting Montesquieu, later Voltaire, and finally Helvétius, D’Alembert and Diderot for their impiety. Yet the vast majority of the books they reviewed were concerned with religious wars.³⁹⁹ The Jansenists, unlike the Jesuits, were not preoccupied with defending

396 *Journal de Trévoux*, 40, 01, 116-17, qtd. in Jin Lu *Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe?: Éléments d'une enquête sur l'usage d'un mot au siècle des Lumières* ([Québec]: Presses De L'Université Laval, 2005) 86.

397 Lu, *Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe?* 86.

398 *Journal de Trévoux*, January-February 1701, janvier-février. For a good analysis of the *Mémoires de Trévoux*, see John Pappas, *Berthier's Journal De Trévoux and the Philosophes* (Geneve: Institut Et Musée Voltaire, Les Delices, 1957). For an analysis of the *JdT* in a previous period see Alfred R. Desautels, *Les Mémoires De Trévoux Et Le Mouvement Des Idées Au XVIIIe Siècle: 1701-1734* (Rome: Institutum Historicum S.I., 1956).

399 Close to 90% to be exact. See Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard, “L’évolution d’un périodique ennemi des philosophes: les *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* entre 1750 et 1780,” *Les Marges des Lumières françaises (1750-1789)*,

their symbolic capital and increasing their intellectual legitimacy. Their goal was to regenerate religion as a more true and austere faith. For this group the authenticity of faith was linked to a sort of intimacy so they were reluctant to participate in the public debate with the same intensity as the Jesuits. In this sense the main target of the Jansenist were the Jesuits, as the utmost expression of the current corrupt and degenerated leadership of the Church. The Jansenists often criticized the Jesuits' "softness" in dealing, at least initially, with many of these philosophers, for they thought that too much debate was already a form of publicity and that the Jesuits were training the future new philosophers, as was the case with Voltaire.

Both currents were united to attack without any compromise the so-called "materialists". They relented somewhat once they had to seek potential allies amongst the new philosophers and concentrate their efforts on the most dangerous enemies. And while they never softened their rejection of materialism, the most radical current of the Enlightenment, the Church adopted a variety of strategies to deal with more "moderate" currents. Of course all religious commentators attacked materialism on the grounds that it contradicted religion, negated God and the immateriality of the soul, and promoted immoral and anti-social behaviors. But religious dogma was not the only thing the Jesuits, and an important sector of the Catholic Church, were worried about. They were also worried about the progressive dissociation of philosophy and theology, and about the fact that the intellectual prestige of Church and its institutions (starting with La Sorbonne) were being displaced and minimized by secular intellectual ferment, thus restricting the domain of intellectual expertise of the Church to religion, and placing science, art, philosophy under the new aegis of "public opinion".

During the first period of this journalistic counteroffensive (1701-1745) the Jesuits tried to recover philosophical hegemony through their monthly *Journal de Trévoux* by reviewing as many books and essays they could, competing to be what we call today a reliable "scientific journal", and also by independently publishing books and essays. This was also a moment of the burgeoning circulation for old and new journals alike.⁴⁰⁰ But the "new philosophy" could not be beaten back. If their initial strategy was to defend their conception of a "subordinated" philosophy, they soon realized that the epistemological and logical grounds of the philosophy as a discipline were changing too fast. They were losing ground, though they were trying to respond philosophically to many of the arguments of their adversaries, and rebuttals were articulated in the *Journal*.

In the 1730s philosophical debate becomes even more effervescent: the *Journal* gains readers, publishes more often, and moves to Paris. In 1734 Voltaire publishes the *Lettres philosophiques*, followed a decade later by the *Histoire naturelle de l'Ame* (1745) by La Mettrie, which provokes a huge uproar. By 1745 then, the Jesuits changed their strategy as Guillaume Berthier (former theology professor of the University of Paris) took over the *Journal* and remained at its head until 1762 when the Pope suppressed the Jesuit order. Berthier launched a uniform but more targeted rejection of some key radical contemporary figures: the *Encyclopédistes*, and later the "*Côtierie de D'Holbach*". This

Actes du colloque organisé par le groupe de recherches Histoire des représentations (EA 2115), 6-7 décembre 2001 (Université de Tours), ed. Didier Masseau, (Genève: Droz, 2004) 91-110.

400 For an overall panorama of the literary and philosophical press in the 18th century see Jack Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* 87-120.

critical focus on only one sector of the new philosophers, the ones around the *Encyclopédie* was in fact a slight change in strategy. As the Jesuits, the “religious *philosophes*” par excellence, were losing ground they sought new tactical alliances to stop the advance of a philosophy that was seeking to supplant the institutions and foundations of religious thought, not only to establish itself “next to” it. Newton's introduction to France by Voltaire, and Locke's by Voltaire and Condillac, (which will also inspire La Mettrie and Helvétius, and embolden the underground materialist current to go public) was a turning point. By 1740 the Jesuits were seeking an alliance with Descartes's followers to stop the rise of “materialism” and incredulity. They were acknowledging a new institutional reality: Cartesian physics had penetrated a significant part of the academic institutions of the Church, and its metaphysics were not far behind.⁴⁰¹ In order to compete with philosophers they had to sometimes jump the fence, as was the case in a review of Abbé Pluche's *Le spectacle de la nature*, a flat rejection of the *philosophes*:

“D’ailleurs pourquoi supposer toujours que ces Philosophes font inutiles à la société? Ne sont-ce pas ces Philosophes qui ont perfectionné l’Astronomie, la Géographie la Navigation et la plupart des Arts? Ne leur avons nous pas l’obligation de nous avoir guéris d’une foule de préjugés au sujet des Comètes, des Eclipses, des Aurores Boréales: de nous avoir démontré le naturalisme de tant de phénomènes qui effrayoient nos pères, de nous avoir dévoilé les sources secrètes de nos goûts, de nos sentiments, et de nos pensées, de nous apprendre tous les jours des choses que nous ne sçavions pas, et de nous en désapprendre que nous croyions sçavoir; et ce qui est encore plus estimable, de perfectionner d’éclairer, et d’éteindre notre intelligence?”⁴⁰²

In their strategy to delimit an “acceptable” philosophy, one which was compatible with religion and affirmed the intellectual legitimacy of the Church by “coexisting” with it, the Jesuits had to draw a line between good philosophy and the bad “new philosophy”. It is important to understand how philosophy was organized inside the academic institution of the *Faculté de Philosophie* at the Sorbonne in order to get a sense of how the Jesuits and Catholic apologists in general drew the line between “good” and “bad” philosophy, and how they defined as “materialist” any departure from the sacred turf they reserved for God, theology and metaphysics. First of all, all the universities and *collèges* were under the control of the Church. Some *collèges* were controlled by particular religious orders. Others depended directly or indirectly on the *Faculté*.⁴⁰³ But the study of philosophy happened at the *Faculté* of Theology. And the whole educational structure and content of the *collèges* mimicked the University.⁴⁰⁴ Philosophy, which at the time

401 See John Gascoigne “A reappraisal of the role of universities in the scientific revolution,” *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, ed. David Lindberg (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 207-260.

402 *Mémoires pour l’Histoire des Sciences & des Beaux-Arts: Le Journal de Trévoux*, (Dec 1746) 138: 2780.

403 Brockliss, *French Higher Education* 13-37.

404 For a detailed account of philosophical education, see chapters 1 and 4 of Brockliss, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*.

was considered a science completely separate from the “liberal arts”, was the main and central discipline of study, but it was not a degree in itself. It was a two-year prologue to a professional degree in the *Faculté* of law, theology, or medicine (apparently the liberal arts were not considered professional disciplines at the time). The study of philosophy itself was divided into four main parts (*physique* or *philosophie naturelle, morale, métaphysique, et logique*), and its content consisted mainly of the scholastic version of Aristotle’s philosophy, reconciled with Biblical dogma and partially updated by Thomas Aquinas. The Renaissance brought some changes to the study of liberal arts, but it was Cartesian philosophy that posed the first serious challenge to the philosophical curriculum in the mid-17th century. The introduction of a more experimental approach transformed the content and the method of instruction in physics or “philosophie naturelle”. And once one “part” of philosophy changed within the institution, it challenged the other parts (ethics and metaphysics especially) as the whole curriculum becomes incoherent. And it also begins to cast doubt on the master discipline, theology.

In this sense, the Jesuits' change of tactics of the Jesuits—their focus on denunciation and refutation of materialist authors— makes perfect sense if their aim was to remain in control of the upper layers of the University. They were trying to contain the “philosophical contamination” based upon scientific research, which had infected natural philosophy and medicine to preserve the orthodox teaching of metaphysics, and above all to preserve the institutional and intellectual subordination of philosophy to theology. Their main target will be, starting on the 1740, and to some extent in the two following decades, the “materialists” portrayed as “demi-savants” and “soi-disant philosophes” who, according to them, lacked the proper training and intellectual capacities to think:⁴⁰⁵

“L’impie affecte le nom et le personnage de philosophe: notre auteur montre le faible et l’orgueil de cette prétendue philosophie; et du reste on peut aller tout d’un coup au but, et démontrer par des faits avoués que rien n’est moins philosophe que tel et tel, qui osent s’en arroger le titre, uniquement pour avoir droit de saper la théologie, qui est la philosophie de la religion.”

“Un autre libertin, un de ces débauchés qui contrefront les philosophes, qui se livrent au vice avec méthode et par principes, entreprendra peut-être de justifier l’origine de ses doutes.”⁴⁰⁶

Berthier was key in coining the “matérialiste” insult to create a category of authors who were, from his point of view, “misusing” the new scientific theories to apply them to the social and political world and to openly attack the dogmas of religion. And while Locke was perceived as an ambassador materialism, sometimes rejected, sometimes “tolerated”, it was mainly his French followers who were attacked. Interestingly, the *Journal de Trévoux* approved of Condillac and Buffon because they

405 The “materialist” threat, clearly related to the new reading and re-interpretation of Locke’s philosophy in France was noticed by the journalists of the *Journal de Trévoux* since 1734: “Locke disputait pour le matérialisme: il raisonnait donc contre la foi, contre la raison, contre la vérité, contre sa propre pensée, par conséquent en misérable sophiste, en insensé, en furieux, en ennemi de toute bonne philosophie.” (35, 01, 318-319). See Franck Salaün *L’Ordre des mœurs: essai sur la place du matérialisme dans la société Française du XVIIIe siècle, 1734-1784* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 1996) 51-65.

406 *Journal de Trévoux*, 35, 05, 892 and 35, 10, 1932. Qted in Lu 87.

always publicly backed Christian revelation, openly rejected La Mettrie and Helvetius for “attempting to undermine religious truths,” and because they applied?⁴⁰⁷ Locke’s method of critique of the origin of ideas to the moral and political ideas of Early Modern France.

It seems fair to say that the Jesuit line of attack against the new philosophy of the Enlightenment was followed by most Catholic apologists. In her work on Christian apologetic discourse Albertan-Coppola shows that “les apologistes catholiques du XVIIIe siècle ne s’interdisent pas de recourir à la raison, d’une part pour démontrer la véracité de leur religion, d’autre part pour établir qu’aucun dogme n’est contraire à la raison,” and this was not without consequences for them and their dogma.⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, by 1770 the apologists not only ended up defining religion in terms of reason and experience, accepting the rational criteria for free examination set by the Enlightenment philosophers, but they also promoted religion as a vehicle for happiness and civic harmony, implicitly accepting the social values promoted by Enlightenment *philosophes*.⁴⁰⁹ This was quite a transformation, but it was not perceived as a compromise or evasion by the apologists:

“Les rapprochements entre philosophes et apologistes sont si nombreux que la philosophie des Lumières semble avoir “investi” la pensée apologétique.” Yet, “Les apologistes n’utilisent le plus souvent le langage des philosophes que pour le retourner contre les philosophes, sans jamais adopter véritablement les valeurs philosophiques.”⁴¹⁰

In her recent analysis of Bergier, a key figure of the anti-materialist discourse who in 1771 published *Examen du matérialisme, ou réfutation du “Système de la nature”*, targeting D’Holbach but also all materialist ideas, Boulad-Ayoub explains very precisely this procedure of *retournement*, of combatting the philosophers with their own rhetorical and conceptual weapons: “c’est avec les mêmes armes théorico-méthodologiques que notre théologien défend la religion chrétienne”.⁴¹¹ She added: “l’abbé Bergier ne campe pas la Réfutation dans une arène théorique voisine de celle du *Système*; c’est bien la même, avec son armature conceptuelle identique et le jeu similaire des catégories qui la peuplent. Les arguments que l’on brandit de part et d’autre obéissent aux mêmes critères de validité: ‘la Nature, la raison, l’expérience’”.⁴¹² The Abbé Bergier, about whom we have today a recent excellent monograph by Albertan-Coppola, not only exemplifies this method of *retournement* or internal critique adopted by apologetic discourse, but also the difficulty inherent in clearly distinguishing the Enlightenment (that tended towards secularism but was not a strict synonym of it) from the apologetic discourse.⁴¹³ The

407 John Pappas, *Berthier's Journal De Trévoux and the Philosophes* (Geneve: Institut Et Musée Voltaire, Les Delices, 1957) 212-215.

408 Sylviane Albertan-Coppola, “L’apologétique catholique française à l’âge des Lumières,” *Revue d’Histoire des religions* 205.2 (1988) 163-64.

409 Albertan-Coppola, “L’apologétique catholique” 171-72.

410 Albertan-Coppola, “L’apologétique catholique” 177-78.

411 Josiane Boulad-Ayoub, “‘La Nature, la raison, l’expérience...’ ou la réfutation du matérialisme dans l’apologétique chrétienne des Lumières” *Dialogue* 31 (1992) 27.

412 Boulad-Ayoub, “La Nature” 28.

413 See Sylviane Albertan-Coppola, *L’Abbé Bergier (1718-1790). Des Monts-Jura à Versailles, le parcours d’un*

borders were more blurred than we think. Of course this blurring was controversial because it served a purpose. Indeed the Abbé participated, like other clergymen, until 1771, in many philosophical circles and salon, including D'Holbach's. He tried to rally other philosophical figures of the Enlightenment in the charge against materialism to save philosophy:

“Curieusement, pour nos esprits contemporains accoutumés à trancher entre partisans et adversaires des Lumières, l'abbé Bergier ne se trouve pas en compagnie de seuls écrivains chrétiens pour entrer en lice contre le baron de D'Holbach. *Le Christianisme dévoilé* (1767), ce livre qui fut de l'avis de Grimm “*le plus hardi et le plus terrible qui ait jamais paru dans aucun lieu du monde*” et plus encore ce “*maudit Système de la nature*” (1770), décrié même par Voltaire, s'attirèrent également les foudres d'une partie des Philosophes, au moins autant parce qu'ils heurtaient leurs convictions désistes que par le danger que représentait leur audace pour le parti philosophique.”⁴¹⁴

Overall, it is clear that the Church was weakened and divided regarding how to face its own diminishing power and legitimacy as an institution and confront the rising philosophy that managed to develop autonomously and outside of its control. It had for one lost its leading and prominent figures of the past century (Pascal, Bossuet, Fénelon). The Jesuits thought the best strategy would be to dispute its legitimacy in the rising public space. This is why Albertan-Coppola counts a total of 900 works between 1715 and 1789 in defense of religion and refuting the new philosophy coming from the Catholic side (10 per year in the first half, and up to 20 works per year between 1760 and 1770).⁴¹⁵ The *Jansenists* completely opposed the Jesuits and the overall strategy of the Catholic Church; they refused to question the central place of God or to examine faith with rational arguments. They maintained their conviction of the necessary humiliation of men in relation to the divine power and the idea that the purest faith was the one which manifested itself the less, the most interiorized, one closer to feeling than to rational discourse. The Jansenists saw the rising interests in philosophy and public debate as an excess of individual pride, besides being a source of impiety, that religious belief must seek to contain. If the strategies to combat the Enlightenment as a whole failed, those of stigmatizing one of its most vigorous intellectual currents, “materialism”, were quite successful, as the next century would show. In this sense it can be assessed that the Jesuits did contribute to shape the public debate and symbolic space, as they were constantly trying to dialogue with the new philosophy. They shaped the Enlightenment as much as they were shaped by it.

apologiste du XVIIIe siècle (Paris: H. Champion, 2010). The most recent scholarship has explored and interrogated this relationship between the Enlightenment and theological discourse, see Sylvianne Albertan-Coppola and Antony McKenna, eds, *Christianisme et Lumières, Dix-huitième siècle* 34 (2002); and Sébastien Drouin, *Théologie ou libertinage?: l'exégèse allégorique à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris: H. Champion, 2010). Some scholars have gone as far as to propose the term “Theological Enlightenment”, see Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin De Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-century France* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2010).

414 Albertan-Coppola, *L'Abbé Bergier* 135-36.

415 Albertan-Coppola, “L'apologétique catholique” 152.

Materialism According to the Materialists

Materialism became a “popular” term amongst the learned elite only after the 1740s, when it was used by the clergy and la Sorbonne as a defamatory weapon against some philosophers and “free thinkers”. To a great extent it would be fair to say that amongst the other attacks, if *matérialiste* survived as a useful category (and was kept instead of sceptique, phyrronien, impie or athée), it was because there was one philosopher, one *effronté*, who proudly claim it in a very particular historical and philosophical context: La Mettrie in 1745. But that was not the reaction of all the so-called “materialist” philosophers, on the opposite, La Mettrie was the exception. I survey here extremely briefly what was the relation of the later classified “French materialists” with the label of materialism itself, just to show how a natural or spontaneous application of this category to define the philosophy of these authors, with no critical mediation, would be a mistake. Rather than taking materialism as a legitimate category or a coherent doctrine in the 18th century, “materialist” authors themselves problematized both its use and possible meanings. This is what I would like to study in the following chapters. Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, as well as D’Holbach’s staryrical *Dictionnaire abrégé de la religion chrétienne*, and even Helvétius, in his posthumous work, disavowed not only being materialists, but the very meaning or coherence of such a word to characterize their philosophy. It was clear for those targeted philosophers that the use of word *matérialiste* was often intended to discredit not only their philosophy (the content of their thesis or positions) but even more, their capacity as philosophers on the first place.

<p><i>Encyclopédie</i>, Volume 10, Diderot (1765)</p>	<p>« MATERIALISTES, s.m. (Théol.) nom de secte. L'ancienne église appelait matérialistes ceux qui, prévenus par la Philosophie qu'il ne se fait rien de rien, recouraient à une matière éternelle sur laquelle Dieu avait travaillé, au - lieu de s'en tenir au système de la création, qui n'admet que Dieu seul, comme cause unique de l'existence de toutes choses. Voyez Monde & Matière.</p> <p>Tertullien a solidement & fortement combattu l'erreur des matérialistes dans son traité contre Hermogène, qui était de ce nombre.</p> <p>On donne encore aujourd'hui le nom de matérialistes à ceux qui soutiennent ou que l'âme de l'homme est matière, ou que la matière est éternelle, & qu'elle est Dieu; ou que Dieu n'est qu'une âme universelle répandue dans la matière, qui la meut & la dispose, soit pour produire les êtres, soit pour former les divers arrangements que nous voyons dans l'univers. Voyez Spinosistes.”</p>
<p><i>Théologie portative ou Dictionnaire abrégé de la religion chrétienne</i>,</p>	<p>"Matérialisme. Opinion absurde, c'est-à-dire contraire à la Théologie, que soutiennent des impies qui n'ont point assez d'esprit pour savoir ce que c'est qu'un esprit, ou</p>

D'Holbach, (1768)	une substance qui n'a aucune des qualités que nous pouvons connaître. Les premiers docteurs de l'Eglise étaient un peu matérialistes; les grivois croyaient Dieu et l'âme matériels; mais la Théologie a changé tout cela, et si les Pères de l'Église revenaient aujourd'hui, la Sorbonne pourrait bien les faire cuire pour leur apprendre le dogme de la spiritualité."
<i>De l'Homme</i> , Note 75 de la Section 4 du Chap XX: L'intolérance est le fondement de la grandeur du Clergé, Helvétius, (1770 ouvrage posthume)	"Les théologiens ont tant abusé du mot matérialiste, dont ils n'ont jamais pu donner d'idées nettes, qu'enfin ce mot est devenu synonyme d'esprit éclairé. On désigne maintenant par ce nom les écrivains célèbres, dont les ouvrages sont avidement lus."

The response of Diderot, D'Holbach and Helvetius to the “materialist” epithet aimed, in different fashions, at dislocating this over-confident subordination of philosophy to theology, claiming a new secular philosophy that not only rejected the traditional metaphysics, but was built in this radical critique of metaphysics. But beyond this, there was a shared rejection of the conceptual validity of the term “*matérialiste*”, as a term that has no clear semantic content: “les théologiens n'ont jamais pu donner d'idées nettes” of the word, and, as we saw, it is quite true that they have given multiple interpretations given to it (aiming philosophies as different as Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza or Locke). All materialists then, regardless of their identification or not with the category, insisted that the meaning *matérialiste* is to be found in its pragmatics rather than in any theory of matter or particular metaphysical position. They understood the *étiquette* as functioning as an empty signifier with no clear intellectual referent, but rather a moving social and political one. For D'Holbach, “materialism” was a *repoussoir* that can successively designate any new opinion emerging “contraire à la Théologie”; for Helvetius, ironically, *matérialiste* had been the jealous nametag given to “les écrivains célèbres, dont les ouvrages sont avidement lus”. Diderot’s definition in the *Encyclopédie* is maybe the most complicated, first of all he referred to “matérialistes” as a term belonging to theology and not to philosophy, and secondly the term was presented as confusing and imprecise. While the ancient materialist could be identified as the ones that hold logical opinions “prévenus par la Philosophie,” the modern materialist appeared as impossible to define. It was presented an artificial category with no real cohesion, seeing as it could embrace a whole wide range of philosophical positions.

2. Towards the 20th Century and Back: the Making of a Materialist Doctrine

The relationship between materialist philosophy and the French Revolution was and still is today a paradoxical one, for while materialists developed in various way a harsh critique of the ideological foundations of the regime, they never proposed or formulated a political program of reform, much less a theory of revolution. The different generations of early modern materialism from La Mettrie to Volney accomplished then a negative work of critique of science, moral values, political institutions etc. not because

they wanted to provoke a revolution, but because they were convinced that that was the kind of philosophy needed, a critical and independent voice in the new public sphere. For sure they did not see their philosophy as a conscious political force of social transformation like Marxism did. In his detailed essay “Le matérialisme et la Révolution Française” Bloch gave maybe the most sound and convincing explanation:

“Lorsque commencent les événements révolutionnaires, il y a eu un matérialisme révolutionnaire, mais il est hors-jeu, et les matérialismes successifs, s’ils ont eu un rôle de subversion, de nature à affaiblir les appuis idéologiques de l’Ancien Régime, sont sans impact révolutionnaire par eux-mêmes, ou n’en ont que sur les aspects les plus modérés de la Révolution.”⁴¹⁶

Nevertheless if materialist philosophers did not provoked the revolution, this was a narrative mobilized first by the Counter-Enlightenment but also by the political forces who first sought to prevent the Revolution and second to condemn the Robespierre Terror period. McMahon showed how as early as 1785, some pamphleteers like Richard denounced the existence of a “philosophic doctrine” which “grouped these ideas into three principal categories—physics, metaphysics, and ethics” and “entailed a thoroughgoing materialism, a complete rejection of man's duties to God, and a morality based solely on self-interest and pleasure, where “man and the world were only random assemblages of matter without purpose or design, a physical supposition with direct metaphysical and ethical consequences,” and thus a potential for revolution.”⁴¹⁷ The idea that the Radical Enlightenment was responsible for the “worst” of the revolution became solidified in the Napoleonic period.⁴¹⁸

In the following section I argue how the philosophical “restoration” and counter-revolution starting with the Directoire and the First Napoleonic Empire were the beginning of a long anti-materialist century, which first erased materialism and then reconstituted a disciplined field of philosophy hostile to materialism as a public critical use of reason. To the *re-institutionalization* of philosophy in the first part of the 19th century, which closed up the agitated and polarized public sphere of debate of the pre-revolutionary decades, followed the *professionalization* of philosophical activity at the end of the century. However, materialism was not completely erased, although it was marginalized. However because of its rejection of any meaningful dialogue with the sciences, in particular with physics, and its retreat into metaphysics, the crisis of institutional philosophy in the 20th century was only accentuated and never fully resolved. It is no accident then that none of the philosophical production of that period has survived or made it even into the actual philosophical canon.

The Invention of “Sensualism” as a Cover-Up to the Materialist Enlightenment

The fate of materialist philosophy throughout the French 19th century is quite remarkable. This long and tumultuous period inaugurated by the French Revolution and which ended with the institution of the Third Republic in 1871 was also a process of

⁴¹⁶ Bloch, *Matière* 337.

⁴¹⁷ McMahon *Enemies of the Enlightenment* 28-29.

⁴¹⁸ McMahon, “The Terror and the International Construction of the Enlightenment” and “Concrete Literary Politics during the Reign of Napoleon” *Enemies of the Enlightenment* 89-120; 121, 154.

pacification, digestion and elimination of the “excesses of philosophy” of the previous century, which according to many intellectuals, led to the Robespierriest Terror— and “philosophical excesses” usually referred to materialism. It was also after the Revolution (throughout the *Directoire*, the first Empire and the Restoration period) that philosophy was re-institutionalized as a discipline. This time not only under the leadership and centralizing control of the Catholic Church (like it was the case with the university) but of the newly formed bourgeois state. Philosophy, now transformed into a doxa that was to be taught and then learned, had to be first reformulated into either a linear history of intellectual evolution or an overarching system of classification, like Condorcet’s *Tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (1794) did just after the Revolution. This transformation was necessary for philosophy to be organized and systematized by the new academic institutions, once again acquiring an instrumental function of legitimation. In the course of this operation of digestion and categorization, materialism, which in the decades preceding the Revolution was framed and labeled dangerous, suddenly became systematically overlooked and sometimes intentionally erased from the Enlightenment’s philosophical legacy. This was a major accomplishment of the “organizing” works by the key figures of the French academic institution, beginning with Degérando, Royer-Collard, Jouffroy, Cousin, Laromiguière and later Auguste Comte and Felix Ravaisson.

Even though most scholars today agree that Cousin, because of his fundamental institutional and social positioning, was the key figure who masterfully achieved the erasure of materialism from the history of French philosophy, Daled has recently shown the importance of a missing link: Degérando.⁴¹⁹ Cousin did not really invent any concept or category of his own; rather, he rather developed a new psychological relation to philosophy and systematically applied a certain program of study and method to the entire academic and educational system. He was a good administrator of the discipline. Yet his institutional and administrative operation over materialism was only possible after the relabeling and restructuring of the philosophical field carried out by Degérando and other early French neo-Kantian philosophers (like Villers). Degérando’s *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie, considérés relativement aux principes des connaissances humaines* (1804) aimed, according to Picavet, to “faire une introduction générale à l’histoire de la philosophie, préparer à ses successeurs une nomenclature régulière et simple, analogue à celle des naturalistes,” a history or productive balance that will end up in the establishment of some firm philosophical truth.⁴²⁰

419 Bloch, *Matière* 348-360. See Pierre F. Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté et la genèse du "sensualisme"* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2005). See also Jean-Luc Chappey, *La Société des observateurs de L’homme, 1799-1804: des anthropologues au temps de Bonaparte* (Paris: Société Des Études Robespierriistes, 2002).

420 Francois Joseph Picavet, *Les Idéologues: essai eur l’histoire des idées et des théories scientifiques, philosophiques, religieuses, etc. en France depuis 1789* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1891) 513. “Degérando voit dans l’histoire un moyen de distinguer, par des caractères fixes et certains, la fausse philosophie de la véritable. La multiplicité des systèmes a été une préparation à la découverte de la vérité; bon nombre d’opinions, sans être la vérité tout entière, en ont été le commencement. Leur diversité tient à ce quelles sont incomplètes, et chacune a son prix, puisqu’elle apporte quelques éléments nécessaires à la formation des notions exactes. Avec Leibnitz, il faut faire un choix entre les maximes des philosophes, en découvrir les traces chez les anciens, les scolastiques, les Allemands et les Anglais, tirer l’or de la boue, le diamant de sa mine, la lumière des ténèbres, pour constituer la vraie philosophie, perennis quaedam philosophia. Aussi, l’histoire terminée, en extrait-il les résultats.” Picavet, *Les Idéologues* 514.

His work was key in both the erasure of materialism from French intellectual history and in the invention of a new and problematic category with which refer to some of the materialist authors: “sensualism”. Degérando belonged to the second generation of *Idéologues*, the spiritualist and Christian one according to Picavet, and he was himself Catholic and a royalist, who overtime became increasingly close to Napoleon.⁴²¹ He traced a comparative history of philosophical systems wherein the absence of French materialism was startling.⁴²² His account of materialism in the 17th and 18th centuries was reduced to Spinoza and Dodwell and Coward, who were presented as English disciples of Hobbes.⁴²³ What is remarkable then is not what his work shows but what it hid or erased: the “face cachée de l'exposé historique des systèmes de philosophie - la volonté d'occultation et d'omission du matérialisme de Gassendi, Helvétius, La Mettrie, d'Holbach, Diderot, Hartley, Priestley, Cabanis.”⁴²⁴ Degérando managed to accomplish an important maneuver: presenting an account where “il n'y eut donc pas un seul philosophe français dans l'histoire degérandienne du matérialisme,” and leaving behind a materialist current or tradition that seems inhabited by ghosts: “un courant de pensée sans représentants, un matérialisme sans matérialistes ... un matérialisme sans corps, sans matière, un courant de pensée quasiment vide d'hommes, bref, un courant d'air dans l'histoire de la philosophie.”⁴²⁵

In the second part of his work, Degérando also invented the philosophical category of “sensualism.” He borrowed this term from Villers, an early Kantian philosopher, who first gavel a confused formulation of the term in 1801 to translate or qualify first Locke and then some representatives of the French materialism into his system.⁴²⁶ Daled notes a sharp contrast, not to say a contradiction, between the first and

421 Picavet, *Les idéologues* 498. On the *Idéologues* as an intellectual current, see Picavet, *Les Idéologues* 505-518 who divided the movement in three generations and placed Degérando in the third one; Sergio Moravia *Il pensiero degli ideologues : scienza e filosofia in Francia (1780-1815)* (Firenze : La nuova Italia, 1974) 417-457. Moravia focused his work on the movement on Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy and Maine de Biran, devoting though some pages to Degérando. Finally on the *Idéologues* and materialism see Georges Gusdorf, “Coherence de l'idéologie: ‘matérialisme’, ‘athéisme’?” *La Conscience Révolutionnaire: Les Idéologues* (Paris: Payot, 1978) 331-350.

422 Of all the *Idéologues*, he was the one who contrary to his distancing peers, became closer to Napoléon, occupying a series of important administrative positions (like *secrétaire général du ministère de l'intérieur*). Picavet, *Les Idéologues* 516.

423 Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 58-59.

424 Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 58.

425 Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 59, 74.

426 Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 61-68. “On a de ce fait , en 1804, une première définition (...) de la catégorie doctrinale de “sensualisme” (associé ici à l’“empirisme”) dans l’histoire française de la philosophie, à l’occasion de la substitution (dans l’analyse critique) de la question de l’origine des connaissances à celle de leur étendue.” Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 61. Daled traced the first use of “sensualisme” to Villers, who was one of the first to introduce Kant to France, and who also first coined the term “sensualist” to classify the challenging philosophy of Condillac: “Ce fut donc dans le cadre d’une promotion de la philosophie de Kant en France, au cours d’une esquisse très critique de la situation philosophique, morale et religieuse française du siècle écoulé, que Villers introduisit en 1801 le terme français et la catégorie doctrinale de “sensualisme (étroit).” Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 66. But even if Villers first used this term, his definition was not very clear. For Villers, Condillac represented a “lockianisme réformé,” in contrast with the Encyclopédistes, who went too far with a “sensualisme étroit”. For him, “sensualisme” was associated with Diderot, d’Alembert, d’Argens, La Mettrie, Helvétius and Voltaire. For a more detailed account of the introduction of Kant in France see François Azouvi and Dominique Bourel, *De Königsberg À Paris: La Réception*

the second part of Degérando's exposé. In the first, the *exposé historique*, materialism as a current is mentioned (with the considerable amputations mentioned), but in the second, the *analyse critique*, the exclusive concept of "sensualism" is used, instead, to qualify Condillac—ignoring La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and D'Holbach.

Materialism was defined by Degérando, as it became the case in most of the post-Kantian 19th century reevaluations of philosophy, through the sole lens of a theory of knowledge as a "système de ceux qui rejettent les connaissances nées de la réflexion et les bornent uniquement à la sphère des impressions sensibles et extérieures."⁴²⁷ This is an important mutation from the rather "metaphysical" definition of materialism operating during the previous century, one articulated around questions of being and substance. With the neo-Kantian turn (Degérando was a big admirer of Kant) philosophies were perceived and evaluated according to their epistemological method. Materialism was then characterized by a one-sided or extreme method of scientific evaluation, an insight that Comte would further develop. In the second part of the work materialist philosophy is transformed into "sensualism" and, as Daled showed, Degérando did so by abstractly dividing materialist philosophy into two categories: an epistemology (sensualism) and an ontology (materialism).⁴²⁸ Degérando's comparative history wanted to give the illusion that the reception of Locke in 18th century France, far from "radicalizing" its postulates, was a softened and domesticated one. It presented an orderly French Enlightenment, keeping the Lockean method of experimental critique within the Lockean boundaries of epistemology and psychology—while actually it was, as all serious scholars of materialism have shown, quite the opposite: it further extended the experimental method of critique to the existing social and political concepts, and even to the category of metaphysics itself.

Yet I would argue that the deeper impact of the transmutation of materialism into "sensualism" had to do with the conception of the role and nature of philosophy in the first place. Sensualism is not only a softened or amputated materialism, but also radical antonym from a practical point of view. While materialism intended to be in the 18th century an extended enterprise of social and philosophical *critique* based on the experimental method, "sensualism" is a simple theory of knowledge (origin of our ideas and limit and use of them). Sensualism is not simply the institutional "equivalent" or appropriation of materialism, but rather its negation, as it changed the function of philosophy from an independent and critical activity to an institutional and dogmatic one, from a discourse that interrogates, exposes, compares, and deconstructs concepts to a discourse that defines, fixes, and excludes them.

The truth is that Degérando's category of "sensualism", which is indeed the

De Kant En France (1788-1804) (Paris: Vrin, 19).

427 Joseph-Marie Degérando, *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie, relativement aux principes des connaissances humaines*, 3 vols, (Paris: Henrichs, 1804) 1: 299-300.

428 "Degérando instaure ainsi une scission entre, d'une part, les sens, les impressions sensibles (origine des connaissances/ "sensualisme") et d'autre part, l'(objet) extérieur ou l'extériorité de l'objet (réalité des connaissances/ matérialisme)." Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 73-74. He accomplishes a "scission ou opposition générale, soit entre sensé et extériorité, soit entre impression et objet," of the philosophical activity itself. Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 74.

deactivating euphemism for French materialism, had great and fast success:⁴²⁹ the verb "sensualiser" appeared in 1816, and Cousin started using the concept or category as soon as 1818 in his philosophy classes and then in his *Fragments philosophiques* (1826).⁴³⁰ Sensualism was not the philosophy proposed by Degérando, it was a category which was to serve as a retrospective mediation to his "philosophy of experience" (which he distinguished from the experimental philosophy of the previous century). The role of sensualism as a fictional category was to allow a detour and negation, doing away with materialism, to enable a transition towards what could be called a governmental philosophy.

Degérando's "philosophie de l'expérience" aimed at overcoming that of the first (or second) generation of the *Idéologues*, whose dominant figure was Cabanis, one of Condillac's students, and who were also labeled as *sensualistes*, as well as the more radical materialist heirs of the Enlightenment.⁴³¹ It was to be "une médiation ... à toutes les sectes," a sort of philosophical compromise which will have many common features with Cousin's eclecticism.⁴³² His experimental philosophy was to be, following the Kantian paradigm, a mediation between idealism and materialism, between spiritualism and empiricism.⁴³³

Cousin's Eclecticism and the Philosophical Restoration

429 But Bonald's or Maistre's similar concept "*sensibilisme*", which shows the need to erase or sublimate somewhere else the radicality of French materialism, did not come to fruition. Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 283.

430 Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 282.

431 Jean Lefranc, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1998) 8. The materialist philosophy of Sylvain Marechal, the first philosophy of Volney or the durable influence of D'Holbach were also on sight.

432 Degérando, *Histoire comparée des systemes de philosophie* 3: 562. "La philosophie de l'expérience fixe ses principes précisément au point où les systèmes se séparent, lorsqu'ils s'égarent en des sens opposés, et de même qu'elle préviendrait ainsi la division des sectes, elle offre les moyens de les rallier par une pacification aussi durable qu'universelle." Degérando *Histoire comparée des systemes de philosophie* 3: 562.

433 It is important to point out that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) was only translated into French in 1835 by Tissot. Even if we know that Villers (and maybe Degérando and Cousin) might have read him in German, the category of sensualism is not to be found in his work: "Kant a donc bien parlé en 1781 de "sensualphilosophen", et de "sensualsystem" mais pas exactement de "Sensualismus"." Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté* 68. However Kant did very clearly manifest his intentions to refute materialism, which he only defined by analogy by a now very familiar series of terms in 1787, in the 2nd Preface to the first critique: « *La critique seule peut couper les racines du matérialisme, du fatalisme, de l'athéisme, de l'incrédulité des esprits forts, du fanatisme, et de la superstition, ces fléaux qui peuvent devenir nuisibles à tous, comme aussi de l'idéalisme et du scepticisme qui du moins ne sont guère dangereux que dans les écoles et pénètrent difficilement dans le public.* » Immanuel Kant *Critique de la Raison Pure* Trans. Tissot. 3rd Ed. 1864. 1:25. For Kant's relation with materialism, see Denis Sauvé, "Kant, le matérialisme et la psychologie rationnelle" *Philosophiques*, 14 (1987): 227-261. "Opposant l'idéalisme et le Matérialisme l'un à l'autre, elle voit dans chacun d'eux le développement d'un ordre particulier de faits dont elle connaît la réalité: dans le premier, le développement des faits intérieurs qui appartiennent à la réflexion, l'exposition de toutes les lois qui constituent la puissance active de l'esprit; dans le second, le développement des faits externes qui sont du domaine de nos sens, et l'exposition des lois qui constituent la dépendance de notre esprit; mais elle condamne l'un et l'autre d'avoir converti en système des observations justes dans leur origine; d'avoir voulu expliquer tous les faits par un seul ordre de faits. ... L'Idéalisme et le Matérialisme étaient des systèmes incomplets; la philosophie de l'expérience les complète." Degérando *Histoire comparée des systemes de philosophie* 3: 567-568.

The stunning professional career of Victor Cousin and his elaboration of an “eclectic” though anti-materialist philosophy would definitely mark the fate of materialism as a philosophical current in 19th century France. After a short stint at the university as an assistant, Cousin traveled to Germany in 1817 to meet Hegel and exchanged with him his views on the legacy of the French Enlightenment. Soon after his return he returned to teaching a lengthy and popular course on the “history of modern philosophy” at the Sorbonne, a course which started with Descartes and ended, after a detour through the “moral philosophy of the French Enlightenment,” with the German metaphysics of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Proposing a combination of metaphysics and psychology, he named this academic practice of philosophy “eclecticism”.⁴³⁴ As Landrin showed, Cousin, following Royer-Collard managed to carry forward a sort of “philosophical restoration” which aimed to produce “une neutralisation des polarités idéologiques- le matérialisme réformateur des Lumières et ses différents héritages, sous leurs variantes ‘positivistes’, ‘physiologiques’ ou ‘sensualistes’, et les multiples réactions théologiques, traditionnelles ou mystiques - qui trouvent leur sens dans les luttes de définition du ‘pouvoir spirituel.’”⁴³⁵ Cousin's institutional career culminated in 1830 when he was simultaneously appointed as a full professor at the Sorbonne, a member of the French Academy, one of the directors of the Ecole Normale Supérieure and a counselor to the King Louis-Philippe, thus becoming “the King of philosophy”.⁴³⁶ It was then, at the top of his career, that he made an apparent “turn” towards spiritualism which he embraced fully, though Vermeren and Rey showed very convincingly that this is not a radical rupture but rather the continuation of the same politico-philosophical project—one initiated before by Royer-Collard and his appropriation of Reid and “common sense philosophy” and taken further by Cousin.⁴³⁷ We can say that, contrary to the careers of most of French intellectuals of the 19th century whose fate was closely tied to the developments of the social movements and the fate of different regimes (like

434 For a detailed account of eclecticism see Lucie Rey, *Les Enjeux de l'histoire de la philosophie en France au XIXe siècle: Pierre Leroux contre Victor Cousin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012) 55-149.

435 Xavier Landrin, “L’eclectisme spiritualiste’ au XIX siècle: sociologie d’une philosophie transnationale,” *Le commerce des idées philosophiques*, 2.

436 For a short parcours of Cousin’s philosophical career, see Pierre Macherey, “Les débuts philosophiques de Victor Cousin,” *Victor Cousin, Corpus* 18-19 (1991): 29-49. For a more detailed account see Lucie Rey, “Philosophie et histoire de la philosophie chez Victor Cousin,” *Les Enjeux de l'histoire de la philosophie* 43- 210; and Patrice Vermeren, *Victor Cousin: le jeu e la philosophie et de l'Etat* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

437 "Il est convenu, depuis l'historiographie du dix-neuvième siècle, de distinguer deux périodes dans la vie et l'oeuvre de Victor Cousin. Avant 1830, il tenterait de produire une philosophie nouvelle; après, il abandonnerait toute prétention théorique pour se consacrer à la gestations de sa politique de la philosophie, se contentant uniquement de réécrire ses cours et ses articles antécédents pour les y adapter. Le point de vue que j'adopte, soit celui d'une histoire inextricablement politique et philosophique de la philosophie, me fera soutenir une thèse quasiment à l'opposé. Victor Cousin hérite de Royer-Collard un projet qui n'est pas seulement théorique, mais aussi, dès l'origine, institutionnel, qu'il modifie jusqu'à lui donner le statut d'une tradition philosophique nationale et la fonction d'un paradigme politique de l'Etat libéral constitutionnel. Ce processus obéit donc à deux logiques étroitement imbriquées: une logique philosophique et une logique politique. L'eclectisme n'est plus perçu comme une doctrine constituée qui serait ensuite asservie à des fins non-philosophiques; il participe, tant dans son mode d'élaboration que dans son architecture conceptuelle, du paradigme politique." Vermeren, *Victor Cousin* 17-18. On Royer-Collard see Xavier Landrin “Les stratégies formelles de Royer-Collard: langage autorise et philosophie d'Etat.” *Le Style des philosophes*. Ed. B. Curatolo and J. Poirier. Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comte. 145-155.

Alexis de Tocqueville, Germaine Staël, Victor Hugo, etc), the “eclectic” nature of the philosophy preached by Cousin allowed him to perfectly navigate through, and even thrive in, a 19th Century which was rather complex from a political point of view, producing a philosophy that was equally suited for a monarchical, republican or Bonapartist regime. In 1840 he became the Minister of Education under Guizot and helped organize a public plan for primary education. He later defended the importance of keeping philosophy as the apex of a secondary education. He retired in 1855, devoting his last years at the Sorbonne to rewriting and further developing his many courses on the history of modern philosophy.

Indeed, “eclecticism” was nothing more than a method of rereading different philosophical systems in the history of philosophy and distinguishing in each system the true from the false, the morally good from evil and the beautiful from the ugly. The aim of “eclecticism,” contrary to the Enlightenment's conception of philosophy that claimed consistency, sincerity and authenticity in the formulation of any philosophical position, was to attain the correct and consensual philosophical point of view by way of “impersonal reason” of every different philosophical system in the history of philosophy. Vermeren is perhaps to this day the critic who has most clearly and eloquently explained the political and philosophical meaning of “eclecticism” as a philosophy of political impartiality and reinforcement of the liberal state ideology: “l’eclectisme ... contient au plus profond de lui-même la question de l'impossibilité de penser en dehors de la philosophie la formation de l'Etat moderne en France," it showed "l'impossibilité de penser pleinement l'Etat, aussi bien que la philosophie, en dehors de la philosophie".⁴³⁸ It managed, as Landrin showed, to erase political aspirations from philosophy, as it equally combated the monarchical-theocratic reaction, as materialism as critical philosophy and any attempt for social reform, producing a sort of “neutral” philosophy which was of course neutralizing any political debate in the interest of asserting the state ideology.⁴³⁹

What was the fate of materialism under Cousin's successful and uniform philosophical regime in 19th century France? Cousin's teachings were devoted to condemning the “equal evils” of thinking—materialism and spiritualism—with a special emphasis on the former (spiritualism being a natural, though excessive, reaction to counter the materialist impulse). Several definitions of materialism can be found in the work of Cousin who since 1829 concentrated his study and interests in the study and rewriting of the philosophy of the previous century. As a result in 1832 created the “nouveau programme” of philosophy that will be in application, with some modifications, for almost half a century.⁴⁴⁰ That said his clearest attack on French

438 Vermeren, *Victor Cousin* 18. He will go even further: "Impartial, s'entend du refus de condamner dans son entier quelque système que ce soit, parce qu'aucun n'est faux, mais que tous, malgré leur prétention à l'exclusivité, sont incomplets et n'épuisent pas les phénomènes de la conscience. Impartiale se dit aussi d'une position qui se veut au-delà ou au-dessus des partis singuliers, d'une légitimité à décider du partage du vrai et du faux au nom de la vérité une et universelle. La métaphore politique court le fil de toutes les descriptions que dessine Cousin sur la scène politique: "Proposez donc aux partis, je vous prie, de déposer leurs prétentions tyranniques dans le service de la commune patrie? Tous les partis vous accuseront d'être un mauvais citoyen. Les doctrines exclusives sont dans la philosophie ce que les partis sont dans l'État. L'éclectisme tend à substituer à leur action violente et irrégulière une direction ferme et qui emploie toutes les forces n en néglige aucune mais ne sacrifie à aucune l'ordre et l'intérêt général." Vermeren, *Victor Cousin* 19-20.

439 Landrin, “L’eclectisme spiritualiste” 8-10.

440 In 1829 he published *Histoire de la philosophie au XVIIIè siècle*; in the 1840's he published different version of

materialism is to be found in his *Cours sur la philosophie morale au XVIIIe siècle* (1841), which was published in 5 volumes, and the first one of which was devoted to the “*école sensualiste*”—fully embracing and promoting Degérando’s category. Materialism, according to Cousin ranged from being a theory asserting that “il n’y aura qu’une seule substance qui est la matière,” to being a school that:⁴⁴¹

“nie la liberté, la spiritualité de l’âme, le monde des esprits, et ne reconnaît d’autres moyens de science que les sens, d’autres réalités que les corps, d’autres principes que la matière. Helvétius affirme que si l’homme avait la main autrement faite, il perdrait peut-être toute sa supériorité sur les animaux. Saint-lambert définit l’homme une masse de matière organisée. Ai-je besoin de citer le grossier matérialisme du baron d’Holbach?”⁴⁴²

Materialism is for Cousin the logical conclusion of the “philosophie de la sensation,” which he associated with Locke, Condillac and Helvetius, and Diderot only in his aesthetics, willfully eliminating from this history the two most popular 18th Century Materialist philosophers: La Mettrie and D’Holbach, giving a very poor treatment to Diderot.⁴⁴³ Under this new history, as Bloch pointed out “le matérialisme n’y constitue pas une position indépendante: il n’est que la forme extrême, et la conséquence dernière, du sensualisme.”⁴⁴⁴ For Cousin the philosophy of sensation is comparable the “habitudes de l’enfance,” like a “pente de l’imagination qui entraîne l’imagination faible encore et mal assurée.”⁴⁴⁵ Materialism is therefore the common error of the infancy of thought, an error that dissipates with the development and exercise of reflection and mature thinking, when finally “le matérialisme apparaît dans toute son absurdité.”⁴⁴⁶ This portrayal of materialism as an “infantile disorder,” as regressive or pre-rational, in sum as a pre-philosophical position, had already been the base of some of the attacks against it during the 18th century. With Cousin this infantilization would become a recurring *topos* in his attack on materialism. His concluding remarks on materialism in his classification of philosophical systems assesses the historical fate of materialism as a dead end for philosophy: “La philosophie de la sensation date des premiers jours de la réflexion, et de

his courses on the period: in 1842 the *Leçons sur la philosophie de Kant*, which will be reprinted 4 times during the course of the century given its popularity, and in 1861 *Philosophie de Locke* and again in 1863 *Philosophie sensualiste au XVIIIe siècle*.

441 “Pour le spiritualisme, il n’y aura qu’une seule substance, savoir l’esprit, parce qu’il n’y a qu’un seul phénomène général, savoir la conscience. Pour le matérialisme, il n’y aura qu’une seule substance qui est la matière, parce qu’il n’y a qu’un seul phénomène fondamental qui est le solide ou l’étendue. Ce sont là, Messieurs, deux grands systèmes qui ont tous deux leur part de vérité et d’erreur.” Victor Cousin, *Cours d’histoire de la philosophie. Histoire de la philosophie au XVIIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Pichon et Didier, 182) 2: 522-523.

442 Victor Cousin, *Cours d’histoire de la philosophie morale au Dix-huitième siècle*, 5 vols., (Bruxelles, 1841) 1:115-116.

443 Bloch, *Matière* 357-559. For a study of the fate of materialism as a philosophical position in Cousin’s work, see Bloch, “Oublier le matérialisme,” *Matière à histoires*, 348-360.

444 Bloch, *Matière* 356.

445 Victor Cousin, *Fragments philosophiques*, 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Paris: Ladrangé, 1838-1840) 1: 124.

446 Cousin, *Fragments* 1: 125.

bonne heure elle a porté ces conséquences qui la décrivent. Il ya plus de trois mille ans que ce système existe; il ya plus de trois mille ans qu'on lui fait les mêmes objections; il ya trois mille ans qu'il n'y peut répondre."⁴⁴⁷ If through Degérando's operation materialism gets deformed into "sensualism", through Cousin's successive mutation it becomes the distinguishing trait of immature and irrational thinking. This was indeed the defining trait of the psychologization of philosophy, or *psychologisme*, inaugurated by Jouffroy and Cousin in 1828.⁴⁴⁸

"Et quelles sont ces grandes familles de systèmes philosophiques auxquelles on peut ramener tous les autres ou comme analogues ou comme dérivés? De quelle manière se forment elles et d'où viennent elles? Évidemment elles viennent de l'esprit humain, leur commune patrie, dont la fécondité naturelle les porte toutes, en même temps que ses divers penchants expliquent leur diversité.... L'esprit humain est comme l'original dont la philosophie est la reproduction plus ou moins fidèle, plus ou moins complète. Chercher dans l'esprit humain la racine des divers systèmes, c'est donc chercher tout simplement des effets dans leurs causes, c'est tirer l'histoire de la philosophie de sa source la plus certaine et la plus élevée."⁴⁴⁹

As Rey clearly explained, Cousin instituted human psychology as the true foundation of the history of philosophy, as the latter "apparaît ... comme la manifestation sans cesse renouvelée de l'essence de l'esprit humain," and can only be reached through internal observations of one's interiority.⁴⁵⁰ As Bloch put it, in Cousin "l'ordre logique des systèmes de pensée se traduit dans un ordre chronologique."⁴⁵¹ Cousin's history of philosophy is a "théorie de l'éternel retour de quatre systèmes qui se répètent et ne peuvent que se répéter incéssamment et dans le même ordre" a version of philosophy which leads to a "exclusion de ces philosophies dissidentes de l'histoire de la philosophie, soit à leur réduction au nom d'un principe psychologique pourtant absolument secondaire ou farfelu vu les enjeux du système"—this is what he did with materialist philosophy.⁴⁵²

With Cousin's new interiorized and psychological paradigm, materialism, always through this exogenous method of definition, became something else: the attitude of

447 Victor Cousin, *Histoire générale de la philosophie depuis les temps les plus anciens jusqu'au XIXe siècle*, 10th ed, (Paris: Didier et Cie, 1872) 12-13.

448 For a good summary of the origin and controversy around this method of recounting the history of philosophy, see Jean-François Braunstein, "L'invention française du 'psychologisme' en 1828," *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 2.65 (2012): 197-212.

449 Cousin, *Histoire générale de la philosophie* 5.

450 Rey, *Les Enjeux de l'histoire de la philosophie* 117.

451 Bloch, *Matière* 355.

452 Rey, *Les Enjeux de l'histoire de la philosophie* 117. Rey affirms, building on Vermeren and Gueroult's remarks on Cousin, that "la thèse essentielle concernant l'histoire de la philosophie cousinienne est, paradoxalement, celle de sa non-historicité." Rey, *Les Enjeux de l'histoire de la philosophie* 117. Rey also pointed out the key difference between Cousin and Hegel. 123-144.

those who could not follow scientific criteria. This definition had indeed many points in common with the one designed by the Jesuits and theologians. In Cousin's view, materialism had little to do with the thesis materialist thinkers defend; it was rather the manifestation of a limited intellectual capacity. There were different philosophical attitudes corresponding to different intellectual capacities, and it is not by accident then if Guizot, the leader of the conservative constitutional monarchists from 1830 to 1948, who was an admirer of Cousin's philosophy, vigorously opposed the universal suffrage in favor of a restricted one open to the *capacités* inaugurating the unequal and stratified French meritocratic system.

Another example of this caricature and mutation of the Enlightenment materialist philosophy into something else can be found in the no less influential work of Felix Ravaisson, one of Cousin's students and also a member of the Académie des Belles Lettres in 1849 and later of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques in 1899. Ravaisson became the main promoter of "Spiritualism" after Maine de Biran and Royer Collard and often criticized Cousin's eclecticism, which led to his marginalization in the academic institution until Cousin's death in 1867.⁴⁵³ In 1863 by Duruy, the Minister of Education, he commissioned him to write a report on the state and the progress of philosophy in France during the 19th century; this would become his most influential work, *La Philosophie en France au XIXème siècle* (1868). In this work Ravaisson developed the now "naturalized" opposition between materialism and spiritualism as a constant feature structuring the entire history of philosophy, with a strong defense of the latter. Ravaisson's synthesis was re-edited at least three times before the end of the 19th Century and became a sort of handbook. In *La Philosophie* he interestingly returned to the scholastic paradigm (abandoning the epistemological and psychological ones) in order to explain materialism:

"L'idée de la matière n'est réellement que l'idée de ce dont on fait une chose en lui donnant une forme, et qui passe ainsi d'un état relativement indéterminé et imparfait à un état de détermination et de perfection. D'où il s'en suit que si l'on veut chercher au delà de toute forme une matière première ou absolue, on n'arrivera qu'à un véritable rien. Qu'est-ce en effet que l'idée de quelque chose qui n'aurait aucune manière déterminée d'exister? C'est l'idée tout à fait abstraite de la pure et simple existence, qui équivaut à celle du néant. Le matérialisme absolu n'a jamais existé, et ne saurait jamais exister. Qu'est-ce donc que le matérialisme de tel ou tel système? c'est la théorie qui, sans aller jusqu'aux dernières conséquences de son principe, explique les choses par leurs matériaux, par ce qui est en elles d'imparfait, et dans elles prétend trouver la raison de ce qui l'achève. Selon l'excellente définition d'Auguste Comte... le matérialisme est la doctrine qui explique le supérieur par l'inférieur. Qu'est-ce qui en fait le faux? C'est que précisément il est contradictoire, comme disait Aristote, que le meilleur provienne du pire, que le moins produise le plus... C'est l'oeuvre achevée qui explique l'ébauche, le complet, le parfait qui explique l'inférieur. Par suite, c'est l'esprit seul qui explique tout."⁴⁵⁴

453 For a very short and clear account of Spiritualism, see Lefranc, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe siècle* 22-38.

454 Felix Ravaisson, *La philosophie en France au Dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1904) 189. "The idea of

For Ravaisson, materialism is not a true philosophy, as according to him “le matérialisme absolu n’a jamais existé”. It has not existed because it could not sustain a coherent philosophical explanation of things, as it refused to go “jusqu’aux dernières conséquences de son principe,” knowing it will be destroyed as matter negated the very principle of thought according to the Spiritualists. Materialism was, relying on the apologetic *topos*, the imperfect, partial and camouflaged pseudo-philosophy which explained things by their imperfect qualities (material ones) instead of reaching their true ones. Ravaisson, quoting Comte summarized the question:⁴⁵⁵ “le matérialisme est la doctrine qui explique le supérieur par l’inférieur.” For Ravaisson and the Spiritualist school the problem of materialism was no longer only a problem of excess and radicalism (as it was with Degérando neo-Kantianism), or a problem of a deficient mental cognition (as we saw with Cousin’s psychologization of philosophical positions or Comte’s classification), it is a problem of the misrecognition of true value and substance. And in this sense it was a dangerous moral transgression. Materialism did not know where the hidden essence of things lay and was conformed with its mere appearance and sensation. We see here, in the second half of the 19th century, a return to the Christian readings of Aristotle and Platonism which played on the dialectic of the seen and hidden and were founded on the scholastic hierarchy of the immaterial or metaphysical over the material or physical world, reproducing inside the philosophical world the categories that structure Christian theology. Ravaisson’s philosophy was an attempt then to completely erase the heritage of Enlightenment philosophy, its independence, its grounding on nature, and its critical function.

The first half of the 19th century could be seen as a period of digestion and evacuation of materialism into sensualism (Degérando’s, De Staël’s and Cousin).⁴⁵⁶ The

matter is only really the idea of the thing one make into a thing by giving to it a shape, and which by this means is transformed from an imperfect and relatively undefined state to a state of full definition and perfection. From this follows that if one wants to find beyond this any prime or absolute matter, one will only reach nothing. What is the idea of something that could not exist in any defined way? It is the completely abstract and pure idea of existence, that equals that of nothingness. Absolute materialism has never existed and will never exist. What is then the materialism of a given system? It is the theory that without going to the last consequences of its own principle explains things by its materials, by what in them is imperfect, and pretends to find there the reason of their existence. According to the excellent definition of Auguste Comte, materialism is the doctrine that explains the superior by the inferior. Why is it wrong? Because it is contradictory, as Aristotle said, that the best will come out of the worst, that the less will produce the more etc It is the finished work that explains the first draft, the complete and the perfect that explains the inferior and therefore the soul that explains everything.””

455 I do not have the conditions to develop Comte’s contribution to the more definitive definition of materialism as an inaccurate scientific attitude, which he developed beginning in his *Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme* (1848). On this issue see Christophe Prémat, “La critique du matérialisme dans le Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme d’Auguste Comte,” *Sens Public*, article n°504, (2008); Juliette Grange, *La philosophie d’Auguste Comte, science politique et religion*, (Paris:PUF, 1996) 61, 171; and in particular Jean-Francois Braunstein, “La critique comtienne du matérialisme,” *Présences du matérialisme*, (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999) 179-193. As Braunstein showed, Cousin established almost a “typology of materialisms”, from a “mathematical materialism”, characterized by its tendency towards abstraction and establishing unity, as a “synthese objective abstraite”, to the “medical materialism” which reduces every mental phenomena to biology, embodied, according to Comte, in Cabanis and Broussais, to finally the most dangerous of all: the “sociological materialism”, a sort of organicism or social Darwinism. As Braunstein notes, the two first kinds of materialism have no practical danger because they cannot have a political application. This is why Comte increased his opposition to the third kind of materialism after the 1848 revolution. Braunstein, “La critique comtienne du matérialisme,” 187.

456 In *De l’Allemagne* Germaine de Staël showed also her opposition to materialism, which like Degérando and Cousin she saw as a dangerous and unnecessary radicalization of “sensualism” present in Helvetius and D’Holbach, a

dominant philosophies of the second part of the century, however, constructed materialism as the eternal enemy of spiritualism (or idealism) and of rational or scientific philosophy. This was the case, of course, of the exponents of the spiritualist school led by Ravaisson, but also of Comte's positivism or the new proponents of neo-Kantianism at the end of the century, as the founding intellectual figure for the French Republic.⁴⁵⁷ In a nutshell, I think Bloch's account of the fate of materialism through the 19th century and before its resurgence with Marx and French Marxism is still valid: materialism was first minimized, then transformed into a philosophy of knowledge, making of materialism "*une sous-espèce des traditions sensualistes et empiristes*," and finally a suspicion was cast upon the moral and political intention of its authors⁴⁵⁸. What needs to be added is that the category of materialism, which emerged in the 18th century, was itself reified and naturalized into a particular narrative or history of philosophy which mapped the field as if it was as structured by some opposition presented as fundamental and eternal: ideas/matter, idealism/materialism, spiritualism/sensualism. This internal restructuring of philosophy corresponds to an external one: the transformation of a semi-autonomous public sphere of discussion and dispute into a profession and an academic discipline vertically organized under state control, where of course all these oppositions are uneven ones: materialism always ended up rejected at the borders of the field and rationalized as an extreme and untenable position.

Curiously, contemporary intellectual historians of early modern materialism (like Wellman or O'Neal, to mention just a few), continue to use uncritically not only the category of materialism, but also that of sensualism, which was invented, as we saw, to

category she used to define also the first generations of the Idéologues (Cabanis Destutt de Tracy). For De Stael materialism is pure and simply the elimination of the soul: "il n'y a plus de nature spirituelle dès qu'on l'unit tellement à la nature physique." Anne-Louise Germaine De Stael, *De l'Allemagne*. 4 vols (Paris, 1823) 4: 25. Materialism comes from Locke's metaphysics which when pushed to their extreme lead to materialism: "cette métaphysique n'est conséquente que lorsqu'on en fait dériver, comme en France, le matérialisme fondé sur les sensations, et la morale fondée sur l'intérêt. La théorie abstraite de ce système est née en Angleterre; mais aucune de ses conséquences n'y a été admise. En France, on n'a pas eu l'honneur de la découverte, mais bien celui de l'application," Anne-Louise Germaine De Stael, *De l'Allemagne*. 4 vols (Paris, 1823) 4: 25. For a critical perspective of De Stael on materialism see Robert De Luppé, *Les Idées Littéraires De Madame De Staël Et L'héritage Des Lumières* (Paris: Vrin, 1969) 68-76.

457 On this issue, see the unpublished dissertation by Jean Bonnet "Kant Instituteur de la République (1795-1904) Genèse et formes du kantisme dans la construction de la synthèse républicaine," (Diss. EHESS, 2006). For Bonnet, Kant becomes the dominant figure of the first intellectuals of the Third Republic: "La génération néo-kantienne de la IIIe République fait «'retour à Kant' dans des conditions de crise générale – crise de la réflexion spéculative d'abord (affirmation de la légitimité cognitive de la science contre les métaphysiques positivistes, matérialistes ou empiristes), crise des circonstances politiques de l'exercice philosophique ensuite (guerre franco-prussienne de 1870, Commune de Paris de 1871, engagement des philosophes dans l'installation de la République), crise de l'enseignement philosophique enfin (place de la morale dans le corpus à transmettre, contrôle par l'exécutif du contenu à enseigner, délimitation du rôle de la religion, reconnaissance de la sociologie et des sciences humaines, etc.). Or dans ce bouquet de crises la philosophie de Kant est partout présente. L'Himalaya kantien – l'expression est d'Alphonse Darlu, le maître de philosophie de Marcel Proust– finit par se confondre avec la philosophie elle-même. Kant devient le truchement obligé et le catalyseur de toute l'actualité réflexive de la période 1870-1900." Bonnet, "Kant Instituteur de la République" 215. As Bonnet continued: "Il fallait pour cela transformer la philosophie de Königsberg en machine de guerre contre le matérialisme, c'est-à-dire construire une modernité alliant les conceptions de la physique moderne à celles de l'idéalisme, bref imaginer un Kant comparable à Friedrich Albert Lange." Bonnet, "Kant Instituteur de la République" 307.

458 "1/ réduction de leur (les matérialistes) place et de leur importance (...) 2/ l'inclusion du matérialisme dans un cadre ou leur position devient subordonnée: celui du problème de la connaissance (...) 3/ une distorsion de la disposition relative des auteurs". Bloch, *Matière* 351.

salvage some of the “moderate” authors of the Enlightenment (like Condillac or D’Alembert) or to domesticate the radicalism of others (Helvétius or Diderot) by clearly distinguishing them from the “true materialists”, who were to be abhorred. This is precisely what Ansart attempted by differentiating Helvetius (supposed sensualist) from D’Holbach (materialist), establishing that:

“le sensualisme prétendait précisément éviter cette difficulté [du matérialisme], en rejetant l’idée de “substance”: en supposant que l’être sensible réagit en fonction des “fins” visées (...) l’expérience sensible apparaissant comme la possibilité d’une réorganisation constante des rapports humains avec le monde (...) et non comme la réduction des réactions les plus complexes à des associations mécaniques entre sensations.”⁴⁵⁹

However Ansart’s definition of sensualism and her difference from materialism does not really hold: none of the “materialist” authors, (except the later D’Holbach in some occasions) accepted the notion of substance or that of a simple and mechanical reduction of physical reactions to conscious phenomena without mediation. Despite the inconsistency or artificiality the distinction, the same argument has been made again and further developed by O’Neal in *The Authority of Experience* in regards to Helvétius. In his efforts to distinguish “sensationism” from materialism (197-227), which boils down to the project of setting Helvétius apart from La Mettrie, O’Neal presented materialism as a physical determinism, as a “gradual assimilation and extensions of sensationist principles” initially formulated by Locke.⁴⁶⁰ For O’Neal materialism is a theory that “dwarfs the importance of humanity by subjecting it and everything else to the material world’s laws of causality,” presenting a world where “human beings simply act and react,” that is, a world without freedom, a “wholly scientific world in which humanity is engulfed by the totality of nature.”⁴⁶¹ The main scientific problem of these scholarly attempts to continue to activate and function with this distinction between hard/materialism and soft/sensualism, is that it used both terms uncritically, assuming their legitimacy as if they were widely used and accepted in their period, and disregarding their charged and problematic history.

The first characteristic of institutional philosophy has to do with the erasure philosophy’s real history and historicity, that of its radical transformation in the Enlightenment and its necessary existence in historical time. Institutional philosophy produced what Macherey called a “monumental history”, or what Bourdieu and Fabiani have called a “philosophical history of philosophy”, establishing a “représentation éternitaire et purifiée de la discipline,” thus hiding its real nature as a “champ de luttes dont l’enjeu principal est le monopole de la définition légitime de l’activité”.⁴⁶² This philosophical history of philosophy is, as Fabiani notes, a pacified one:

459 Michèle Ansart, “Note sur le sensualisme et le matérialisme dans la pensée de d’Holbach,” *Revue Philosophique de la France Et de L’Étranger*, 156 (1966) 213-214.

460 John C. O’Neal, *The Authority of Experience: Sensationist Theory in the French Enlightenment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996) 197.

461 O’Neal, *The Authority of Experience* 213, 223.

462 Jean-Louis Fabiani, *Les Philosophes de la République* (Paris: Les Éditions De Minuit, 1988) 13.

“[elle] installe les hommes et les œuvres dans un univers déréalisé et purifié de toutes les traces de conflits, de censures et de prescriptions. En imposant la représentation légitime d’une communauté fictive et intemporelle, elle contribue puissamment à faire oublier que les lieux communs et la langue commune constituent la retraduction, dans la logique spécifique d’un champ, d’objets du monde social.”⁴⁶³

To counter this philosophical history, Fabiani proposed writing a social history that would show the fallacy of the harmonious philosophical community which never existed and will bring back “la ‘société des esprits philosophiques’ dans le monde réel”.⁴⁶⁴ Second, it needed to constitute a “corpus” or “canon” of texts for the discipline. A corpus that established a constant academic relation of explanation and commentary “le rapport au corpus de textes philosophiques est central parce qu’il est à la fois ce qui permet de marquer la différence entre les professionnels et les profanes et en particulier la différence entre les philosophes professionnels et les écrivains”.⁴⁶⁵ The constitution of a professional and docile class of philosophers and a corpus had two complementary consequences. The first one was the readjustment of the professional philosopher confined again to the “tâche de lecteur, de commentateur,” of the approved canon, as having the monopoly of the “rapport informé à l’Histoire de la philosophie,” and the second was to nullify the critical and emancipatory power of philosophy.⁴⁶⁶ And while Bourdieu and Fabiani have insisted on the first aspect, the second has been often neglected, and this is where the opposition to materialist philosophy becomes meaningful. For it was not enough to constitute “any” canon of texts or to rewrite any “random” history of philosophy. The question is to unveil why it was precisely the materialist current that was singled out, attacked, de-historicized and erased.

Institutional Philosophy and the Marginalization of Materialism (1820-1880)

The first definition of “materialism” adopted by the French Society of Philosophy in what will become later the school reference manual for the the discipline, the *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, was extremely close to the previously discussed 19th Century “digestion” of materialism consolidated now as a doctrine: “Doctrine according to which there is no other substance than matter.”⁴⁶⁷ The philosophical categories which were to frame the newly professionalized discipline were thus directly taken from the Spiritualist and neo-Kantian philosophy. This is very clear in

463 Fabiani, *Les Philosophes de la République* 16.

464 Fabiani, *Les Philosophes de la République* 17.

465 Pierre Bourdieu, “Le fonctionnement du champ intellectuel.” *Le Champ littéraire*. Spec. issue of *Regards Sociologiques* 17-18 (1999) 14.

466 Bourdieu, “Le fonctionnement du champ intellectuel”13-14.

467 There was in fact a predecessor to the Lalande, it was the *Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques*, edited between 1844 and 1953 by Adolphe Franck, a cousinien, who devoted several pages to attack materialism in the corresponding entrance. Adolphe Franck, *Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques*, 6 vol., (Paris: Hachette, 1844-52) 4: 134-144. In his *Dictionnaire*, amongst other things, contemporary materialism (Cabanis, Broussais) is the affirmation that “ce qu’on moral moral de l’homme n’est que physique d’un autre point de vue” 4: 134.

the “Observations”’s lengthy footnotes which pepper the dictionary and which were written by the members of the FSP (who read and carefully discussed all the articles in the dictionary). We find there the 1868 quote by Ravaisson I reproduced above. The lengthy observation, titled “On Matter and Materialism”, praises and even radicalizes Ravaisson's critique of materialism by reinforcing it. Lachelier’s observation argued for a necessary return to Aristotle in order to refund philosophy at the turn of the century:

“Je crois que l'on ne peut bien entrer dans le sens des mots matière et matérialisme qu'en partant de la philosophie d'Aristote. Il me paraît clair qu'il y a en tout être 1° ce qui lui donne son sens et son intérêt propre: c'est son idée ou sa forme; 2° ce qui est pour cette forme un point d'appui nécessaire, ce sans quoi elle serait abstraite ou simplement possible. (...) mais la philosophie d'Aristote consiste précisément à placer l'être véritable dans le penser, le sentir etc. et à ne voir dans ce qui pense, ou sent, que la condition matérielle du penser et du sentir; et croire (comme presque toute la philosophie moderne) que c'est cette condition qui est l'être et que le penser, le sentir, ne sont que des modes, c'est du point de vue de la philosophie d'Aristote, l'essence même du matérialisme.”⁴⁶⁸

Lachelier did not add anything significant to the critique of materialism formulated by Ravaisson four decades before. By keeping the Aristotelian framework of the theory of forms it identified materialism with the exclusive emphasis on the material form over the other properties of being. Materialism was presented as the philosophy mistakenly focused on the embodied thought or “ce qui pense”, which misses “le penser”, the ideal or essential form which constitutes the thinking activity itself. According to the members of the FSP, materialism was not only superficial, it had misrecognized and reversed the order of value, the “natural” hierarchy of reality, which allows some of them to conclude like Blondel: “le pur matérialisme est un non-sens. Le matérialisme est moins un système qu'une tendance, tendance dont Auguste Comte proposait cette profonde définition: ‘expliquer le supérieur par l'inférieur’.”⁴⁶⁹

The question that can be asked is why the first professional organization of philosophers, created at the peak of the institutionalization of philosophy under the Third Republic not only inherited and continued the rejection of materialist philosophy initiated by early modern theology, but returned to the Scholastic paradigm. What was the threat posed by materialism then, in such an organized, pacified and stabilized educational

468 André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1991) 597. “I believe that one cannot understand the true meaning of the words matter and materialism without starting from Aristotle. It seems clear that there is any being 1° what gives to is its meanings and proper interests, its form, and 2° what this form requires to support itself, without which any being will be either abstract or impossible. (...) Aristotle's philosophy consists precisely in the act of locating the true being in the act of thinking, believing or feeling itself, and refusing to see (as most of modern philosophy does) in what thinks or feel more than the material condition of the thinking and feeling itself, for the position of claiming that this material condition is the true essence and not just a mode, is what from the point of view of Aristotle's philosophy, we can call the very essence of materialism.”

469 Lalande, *Vocabulaire* 597. “It is clear that pure materialism is a nonsense. Materialism is less a system than a trend of thought of which Comte gave this thorough definition: “To explain the superior by the inferior”. Pécaut had a similar observation: “La définition d'Auguste Comte me paraît excellente. (...) Le roseau pensant est supérieur au roseau qui ne pense pas. Sont matérialistes, par conséquent, les tentatives pour expliquer une civilisation par le milieu physique ou la race; pour expliquer le biologique par le chimique, etc. (...) Et c'est contre la solution matérialiste, si bien définie par Comte, que s'élèvent la plupart des philosophies modernes, par exemple la doctrine de M. Boutroux, celle de M. Bergson, et la seconde philosophie de Comte lui-même.” Lalande 597.

system?

The context of the establishment of the Republican rejection of materialism is significant: the “restoration” of *Ancien Régime* after the First Empire until the consolidation of the Third Republic (1880) and the emergence of a professional organization of the discipline at the beginning of the 20th century, in competition with the new social sciences (sociology, psychology, etc.) but also with the progressive dissociation and specialization of hard sciences, like chemistry and physics. In both cases materialism was the name of a philosophy that challenged both the subordination of the discipline to the state and religion, and the consolidation of philosophical practice as a specialized, professional and academic one.

There was, however, a key difference between the way the Church and the monarchy combated materialism in the 18th century and the tactic adopted by the heads of the French state (both monarchists and republicans) after the Empire and throughout the 19th century. Instead of refuting all of the materialist arguments and thesis in the public sphere, which proved in the second half of the 18th century to increase the popularity of materialism and politicize the public opinion, the Restorationist and the Republican elite chose to combat such a philosophy through bureaucratic practices, by establishing a tight ideological control of the newly created educational institutions (from the universities and academies to the primary school) and by moving towards a professionalization of philosophical activity, restricting thus any political autonomy of the intellectual sphere.

It is important thus to understand the fate of materialism at the end of the process of re-institutionalization of philosophy and its professionalization in a bourgeois or capitalist society, where philosophy not only became “de plus en plus une affaire de professeurs,” instead of being the practice of independent intellectuals, but also when it began to serve a political purpose of legitimation as it became increasingly subordinated to the state.⁴⁷⁰ This was at least the idea formulated by Bourdieu and Vermeren for the latter shows that in France the First Empire transformed the university, which was to be a part of public administration, into a tightly centralized “corporatio”, and replaced the right to a public education with the submission of individual reason to the new “raison d’Etat”.⁴⁷¹ This institutionalization went way beyond a tight control of the new “monopole des moyens de reproduction du groupe et sa philosophie” by controlling most of the nominations, drafting the baccalaureate and the *agrégation* courses and exams (which in 1830 adopted the format and content of the eclectic philosophy) and the handbooks of philosophy.⁴⁷²

470 Jean-Louis Fabiani, *Les Philosophes de la République* (Paris: Les Éditions De Minuit, 1988) 28. As Fabiani noted, this was a trend all over Europe: “La professionnalisation de la philosophie, comme le montre Albert William Levi à propos de Kant, est contemporaine du développement du système d’enseignement et de la part croissante que prennent les professeurs dans le champ intellectuel. Des procédures apparaissent qui visent à constituer un cercle de spécialistes et à garantir l’autorité des philosophes universitaires: une communauté philosophique se constitue autour de revue spécialisées contrôlées par les professeurs eux-mêmes et de sociétés professionnelles.” Fabiani, *Les Philosophes de la République* 28.

471 Patrice Vermeren and Susana Villavivencio, “El estado y la universidad: de una orilla a otra del atlántico,” *Eidos* 1 (2003) 12-18.

472 Landrin, “L’eclectisme spiritualiste” 10-16.

As Vermeren showed when referring to Cousin as well as to the “libre penseurs,” the role of the university, and in particular of the teaching of philosophy in the university seems central to the consolidation of the French Republic.⁴⁷³

“L’existence de l’Université repose sur cet axiome incontestable que dans une société bien ordonnée la jeunesse doit recevoir une éducation conforme au principe de l’État. L’Université est donc nécessaire. Il faut que l’État quelle que soit sa constitution se prépare des représentants et des défenseurs il faut s’il veut vivre qu’il instruisse à le servir des hommes pénétrés de son esprit et comme façonnés à son image. Hors de là il n’y a que désordre dans l’avenir. Sous tous les régimes l’Université est nécessaire dans l’État, sous le régime républicain la philosophie est plus que sous aucun autre nécessaire dans l’Université. Voilà ce que nous voulons établir non par des raisons de circonstance et prises de tel ou tel système mais par des considérations puisées dans la nature même et l’essence de la philosophie.”⁴⁷⁴

The creation of a *corps* under the tutelary authority of the state was seen as a necessity by Victor Cousin, who besides being a “philosopher” was a politician. He praised the Napoleonic laws as “des merveilles d’organisation,” in particular the law of 1802 (regarding secondary education) and the law of May 1804 (regarding higher education) which managed to “faire un corps,” a professional corporation “car sans cela l’instruction publique n’a pas son gouvernement”.⁴⁷⁵ Cousin was opposed to the conception of education inherited by the French Revolution, in particular the December 19th decree by the Convention which proclaimed that “l’enseignement est libre,” and agreed with Bonaparte that the teaching was not to be thought as a free natural right, but was rather to be thought as a “pouvoir public,” under the monopoly of the government.⁴⁷⁶ The claim for academic and pedagogical freedom made no sense to him, and in the face of the rapid professional organization of the teachers “le pouvoir d’enseigner devenant alors plus redoutable, l’intervention de l’Etat est d’autant plus nécessaire”.⁴⁷⁷ Teachers from primary to higher education were to form a “corps” under the control of the state and not a free and independent profession: “il faut que ce corps ait un pouvoir purement civil, émané de l’Etat et en dépendant de toutes parts,” and be “sous le contrôle permanent du pouvoir supérieur”.⁴⁷⁸

Throughout most of the 19th century in France and until the Third Republic the

473 On the movement of “libre-penseurs” see Patrice Vermeren *Le Rêve démocratique de la philosophie: d’une rive à l’autre de l’Atlantique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001).

474 Jacques Amédée, “De l’enseignement public de la philosophie,” *La Liberté de penser: revue philosophique et littéraire* (Volume 2. Paris: Joubert, 1848) 168.

475 Victor Cousin, *Défense de l’université et de la philosophie. Discours prononcés à la Chambre des Pairs dans la discussion de la loi sur l’éducation secondaire (avril et mai 1844)* (Paris: Joubert, 1845) 36, 41.

476 Cousin, *Défense de l’université* 3. “La liberté d’enseignement sans garanties préalables est contraire, en principe, à la nature des choses; et, comme tout ce qui est faux en soi, elle ne peut produire dans la pratique que des conséquences désastreuses.” Cousin, *Défense de l’université* 4.

477 Cousin, *Défense de l’université* 8.

478 Cousin, *Défense de l’université* 42.

Napoleonic laws which forced all professors in the Universities to follow “les préceptes de la religion catholique”, to swear “fidélité à l'empereur, à la monarchie impériale, dépositaire du bonheur des peuples, et à la dynastie napoléonienne, conservatrice de l'unité de la France et de toutes les idées libérales proclamées par les constitutions” and to obey to the “statuts du corps enseignant” were applied.⁴⁷⁹ The French University and all of its peripheral institutions was under tight government control, and not only in a metaphorical sense. Gerbod who studied the purges of the educational system in this period had the following assessment: "depuis l'Empire, tout un réseau disciplinaire savamment ordonné s'est tissé de plus en plus serré, emprisonnant l'ensemble des personnels, les contraignant à la 'prudence' dans leurs comportements politiques, religieux, pédagogiques et sociaux".⁴⁸⁰ There were many cases of professors who were dismissed for belonging to the political opposition or expressing socialist views, and if the political where the most numerous causes of dismissal, manifestations of atheism and anti-clericalism were also sanctioned until 1880, like it was the case with Amédée Jacques who was revoked of his position in 1851 because of his project of creating an atheist popular philosophy.⁴⁸¹

Yet the big purge occurred between 1848 and 1850, after the 1848 revolution, and was led by Bonaparte III and the *Parti de l'ordre* against professors who showed "de la sympathie pour les idées "sociales" et démocratiques" - materialism, and more concretely “historical materialism” being the target.⁴⁸² The purges in this the period affected around 700 *fonctionnaires* in secondary and higher education who were dismissed or removed from their positions, but the repression was worse for the primary education instructors, who in 1850 were put under the direct authority of the *préfet*; this ended in 4000 removals and 261 judicial condemnations, including some deportations to Algeria.⁴⁸³ The result is that by 1877 France had a rather docile education staff, to the point that in 1877 the Broglie government dared to demand that all public servants to support the existing government and the candidates of the Moral Order Party in the elections of the same year.⁴⁸⁴

Bourgeois asserted that by 1900 “l’institutionnalisation du philosophe en société” was accomplished, and this was an “institutionnalisation sociale, nationale mais à visée cosmopolitique” which seemed to resolve the problem posed by radical Enlightenment philosophy and gave the illusion of “apaiser la longue période de tension intérieure que

479 See Art. 38 of the Law of May 10th 1806.

480 Paul Gerbod, "Les épurations dans l'enseignement public de la Restauration à la Quatrième République (1815-1946)," *Les Épurations administratives, XIX^e et XX^e siècles* (Genève: Droz, 1977) 85.

481 Gerbod, "Les épurations dans l'enseignement public" 84-88. On the project of popular philosophy by Jacques see the monograph and selections by Patrice Vermeren: *Le rêve démocratique de la philosophie : d'une rive à l'autre de l'Atlantique; suivi de textes choisis de Amédée Jacques* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2001).

482 Gerbod, "Les épurations dans l'enseignement public" 91.

483 Gerbod, "Les épurations dans l'enseignement public" 91-92.

484 Another wave of purification happened between 1900-1914 targeting, amongst others, teachers who were suspected of socialism and revolutionary syndicalism. Gerbod, "Les épurations dans l'enseignement public" 92.

fut celle du XIX^e siècle, période ouverte, à la fin du XVIII^e siècle, par ce qui s'était vécu, dans la Révolution de 1789, comme l'institution philosophique de la société."⁴⁸⁵ For Bourgeois and many other critics, the French Revolution was a deformed manifestation of the potential political powers of critical philosophy, its function of destabilization of the ideological foundations of power. It was a moment of *prise de conscience* of the existence, in the new public sphere, of a kind of public use of reason that needed to be controlled in order to guarantee social order and social peace, and that particular and dangerous use was again identified as "materialism".

The Creation of the Société Française de Philosophie and the Professionalization of Philosophy

The FSP (French Society of Philosophy) was the first professional association of philosophers in France created in 1901 by Léon (disciple of Fichte) and Lalande (rationalist) and was soon dominated by the followers of Spiritualist school, which became dominant in the academic institutions between 1860 and 1900.⁴⁸⁶ The circle of the FSP developed out the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (1895) and recruited all of its members from the top academic institutions (Collège de France, Institut, Sorbonne, Ecole Normale Supérieure), a true "aristocratie de l'esprit."⁴⁸⁷ The name of the journal already summarized its project of defending morals and métaphysics from its twin evils: positivism (which was perceived as a sort of materialism) and mysticism. The FSP came out of the the first Congrès International de Philosophie held during the Universal Exposition of 1900 by the founders of the *RMM*.⁴⁸⁸ It later organized the commemoration

485 Bernard Bourgeois, "La société des philosophes en France en 1900," *Le Moment 1900 en philosophie*, ed. Frédéric Worms (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2004) 63-64.

486 Fabiani, *Les Philosophes de la République* 35. Fabiani points out that in 1860 the two chairs of philosophy in la Sorbonne (general philosophy and history of philosophy) were occupied by Caro and Janet, two spiritualists, and a third one was created in 1870 also attributed to a member of that current (Waddington), positions that will be held until 1887, 1895 and 1897 respectively (32-33).

487 Christophe Prochasson, "Philosopher au XX^e siècle : Xavier Léon et l'invention du 'système R2M' (1891-1902)," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 1-2 (1993) 138. The initial nucleus of the journal was composed by Xavier Léon, Léon Brunschvicg, Elie Halévie and Louis Couturat, all students id Alphonse Darlu at the lycée Condorcet (who also joined the journal), around whom gravitated other philosophers like Jules Lachelier, André Lalande, Emile Boutroux, the old Felix Ravaisson, Frédecirc Rauh, Victor Delbos, Henri Bergson, Charles Seignobos, and some renowned scientists like Henri Poincaré, Edouard Le Roy or Gaston Milhaud. Prochasson, "Philosopher au XX^e siècle" 112-116, 125. As Fabiani noted "la création de revues spécialisées est un élément important dans le processus de professionnalisation. Jusqu'en 1876, il n'existait pas de revue philosophique universitaire." Fabiani, *Les Philosophes de la République* 34. Yet the *RMM* was not the first philosophical revue but the *Revue philosophique*, which was founded in 1876 by the physician Ribot, to oppose the dominant spiritualist philosophy which was becoming in his opinion too sectarian and dogmatic, and proposed a new philosophical journal closer to social and experimental science, open "à toutes les écoles." Fabiani, *Les Philosophes de la République* 35. In this context, the launching of the *RMM* two decades later can be seen as a clear competitor to the former.

488 On the First International Congress of Philosophy as the establishment of a new form of learned sociability, the regulation and new rules of philosophical communication (which excluded political debate as the incident with the pacifist Mach showed) and the overall domination of "new rationalism" and a "contemporary idealism" see Stéphan Soulié, *Les Philosophes en République: l'aventure intellectuelle de la "Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale" et de la Société française de philosophie, 1891-1914* (Rennes: Presses Universtaires De Rennes, 2009) 113-142.

of the 300th anniversary of Descartes's birth by putting out an edition of his complete works (10 volumes issued between 1897 and 1910) and produced a dictionary, the *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (1926) on Lalande's. The group constituted itself as an emerging "groupe de pression" influencing government and administrative issues regarding education policy.⁴⁸⁹

If we look at the first issues of the *RMM*, which became informally the official academic review for the profession, and while it refused to be just an organ of apology of eclecticism and spiritualism, welcoming other currents, it is easy to see that materialism was an exception to this philosophical liberalism. Soulié qualified the orientation of the founders of the journal as "[des] 'idéalistes critiques' dans la mesure ou selon eux, la philosophie se donne toujours pour tâche de dégager les conditions de possibilité de la pensée (scientifique notamment) et de la pratique."⁴⁹⁰ They constructed through the review an "imaginaire philosophique," a map of the field where the new institutional philosophy had to defend the "'vie de l'esprit' contre 'reduction matérialiste', 'idées' contre 'faits', 'Raison' contre 'Mystère'."⁴⁹¹

The project of the review was to frame or reorient the scope of philosophical studies so they could acquire a new relevance in a context where new sciences like psychology and sociology were emerging; and to establish a clear political direction for the profession. Overall its editors considered that philosophy had lost its historical course throughout the 18th and 19th century in France due to the French Revolution and the multiplication of "special sciences" and new types of knowledge. Halévy and Léon wanted to combat "l'esprit de spécialité" and argued for the need of philosophy as a universal science.⁴⁹²

In order to regenerate itself, for the FSP philosophy had to return to general theories of thought and action, enabling a return to classic and even ancient metaphysics, turning away from politics and science, and to establish the much needed autonomy of philosophy from other competing disciplines:⁴⁹³ "Ce qu'on veut remarquer seulement en circonscrivant d'une manière générale le domaine de la philosophie, c'est qu'il est distinct

489 Prochasson, "Philosopher au xx^e siècle" 131-133. For the commemoration of Descartes see Soulié, *Les Philosophes* 87-93.

490 Soulié, *Les Philosophes* 13.

491 Soulié, *Les Philosophes* 14.

492 While preparing the first issue of the *RMM* Halévy wrote to Léon: "Déclare tout de suite, par exemple, que tu en veux à l'esprit de spécialité (métaphysique réduite à la psychologie physiologique ou expérimentale - morale réduite à une sociologie); montre qu'il y a un problème scientifique général, qui est le problème philosophique posé par la métaphysique antique: rapport de l'abstrait et du concret, du logique et du réel, - et un problème mora général posé par la philosophie moderne, et qui enveloppe en quelque sorte le problème métaphysique: rapport du sujet à l'objet, problème de savoir à quelles conditions le sujet, dans un monde objectif, peut réaliser sa liberté." Lettre de E. Halévy à X. Léon du 21 octobre 1892, CH 76. Qtd in Soulié, *Les philosophes* 82.

493 "On voudrait, laissant de côté les sciences spéciales plus ou moins voisines de la philosophie ramener l'attention publique aux théories générales de la pensée et de l'action dont elle s'est détournée depuis un certain temps et qui cependant ont toujours été, sous le nom décrié aujourd'hui de métaphysique, la seule source des croyances rationnelles; on voudrait non pas suivre le mouvement des idées, mais essayer de lui imprimer une direction. Et cette direction, on osera la définir." "Introduction" *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. 1.1 (1893) 2.

de tout autre, et que sans ce domaine la philosophie se suffit à elle-même."⁴⁹⁴ But it also must fulfill a political and religious goal: "De même la philosophie n'est pas irréligieuses; elle est plutôt essentiellement religieuse. On sait assez qu'on la retrouve au berceau des dogmes chrétiens. Et de nos jours encore, elle demeure, par opposition avec les sciences positives, la science des choses éternelles. Cependant elle ne se perd ni ne s'achève dans aucune religion positive."⁴⁹⁵

The publication of an article by the father of French Spiritualism, Ravaisson, in the first issue of the *RMM* was no accident. He was to appear as the enterprise's intellectual mentor. And many of the articles of the review, including Brunschvicg "Spiritualisme et sens commun" affirmed the need of "rétablir le contact de l'esprit avec lui-même, de lui donner l'expérience directe et totale de sa vie intérieure."⁴⁹⁶ Philosophy should refuse any attempt to "fix" the soul, opposing materialism, because "déterminer l'esprit, c'est le nier en tant qu'esprit."⁴⁹⁷ The mind was not to be thought as an object of study, as it was the case with early modern natural philosophy, but to be conceived as an abstract function of understanding.⁴⁹⁸

Another example of this anti-materialist outlook was Janet's article in the *Revue Philosophique* on the unity of philosophy as a discipline and the hierarchy of philosophical systems.⁴⁹⁹ Janet was a follower of Cousin and German metaphysics, a professor at the Sorbonne, a member of the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* since 1864 and the author of numerous books on 19th-century philosophy. In 1864 he wrote a critique of the "new" German materialism (Buchner and his supposed French correlate Viardot), and later in 1893 he published in the *Revue philosophique*, "L'unité de la philosophie", an important essay in which, he defined the true essence of philosophy as "la pensée de la pensée", affirming that "la science pense le monde, la philosophie pense la pensée du monde."⁵⁰⁰ In this essay, Janet classified the different philosophical systems, putting materialism "au plus bas degré de l'échelle," because "il lui est impossible de penser la pensée en elle-même ... la pensée l'embarrasse et il cherche à la réduire le plus possible."⁵⁰¹ For Janet, materialism could be reduced to the obsession with "traduire ... la pensée en fonction cérébrale," simply representing "un premier effort philosophique ... mais c'est un effort qui ne s'est pas encore dégagé du monde extérieur."⁵⁰² Therefore

494 *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. 1.1 (1893) 2.

495 *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. 1.1 (1893) 3.

496 Léon Brunschvicg, "Spiritualisme et sens commun," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 5.5 (1897) 534.

497 Brunschvicg, "Spiritualisme et sens commun" 539.

498 Brunschvicg, "Spiritualisme et sens commun" 540.

499 Paul Janet, "L'unité de la philosophie," *Revue Philosophique de la France Et de L'Étranger* 35 (1893): 113-123.

500 Janet, "L'unité de la philosophie" 117.

501 Janet, "L'unité de la philosophie" 117.

502 Janet, "L'unité de la philosophie" 117.

materialism was the system “qui est le plus loin possible de l’objet propre de la philosophie, à savoir la pensée de la pensée.”⁵⁰³ Materialism, like positivism, were considered as “exclusively objective” philosophies, to the point of belonging more to the scientific domains than to the philosophical one.⁵⁰⁴ The purpose was then to exclude natural philosophy and the particular relationship it established between philosophy and science.

However, the main reason for this return to the spiritualist framework more than 40 years later was not as much a need to re-engage an ideological dispute with the new wave of materialism, but instead an attempt to immunize the field of philosophy from or make it impermeable to “materialism” and what was perceived to be a subordination of thought to nature and science, and to establish an institutional philosophy that would have a monopoly of “truth” —a metaphysical sort of truth—which was to be embodied in the State as a neutral and objective reference point. The goal was to transform philosophy into a discipline of ideological domination.

If institutional philosophy was perceived to be under attack by the rise of social sciences and the scientific revolution in the early 20th century, it was also of course because there was materialism had clandestinely returned in a new form: “historical materialism” or Marxism. Yet this current had almost no space in the institutional philosophical field: Marxist philosophy was of course widely ignored, and in the first decade of the new century, only four articles appeared in philosophical journals regarding Labriola’s discussion of materialism. Labriola’s work, *El materialismo storico* (1896), was translated and published in 1897 with a preface by Sorel, and Durkheim and Andler published a review of the work in the *Revue Philosophique* and in the *RMM* respectively.⁵⁰⁵ Both authors identified Marxism and Labriola as a “matérialisme économique”. For Durkheim, while Labriola was correct to affirm that one needed to scientifically study society and conscious phenomena, because reality, even psychic phenomena, was not necessarily immediately transparent to human consciousness. Rationalism asserted, however, that his materialism gave a too much weight to the “facteur économique” and was eager to draw hasty conclusions, in particular regarding religion.⁵⁰⁶ To Marxism he would propose, some years later, the foundation of a new

503 Janet, “L’unité de la philosophie” 117.

504 Janet, “L’unité de la philosophie” 119.

505 Charles Andler, “La conception matérialiste de l’histoire,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 5.5 (1897): 644-658; Emile Durkheim, “Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l’histoire.” *Revue philosophique* 44 (1897) 645-51; Camille-Georges Picavet, “Le matérialisme historique et son évolution,” *Revue Philosophique de la France Et de l’Etranger* 60 (1905): 511 - 532; and Baptiste Marie Jacob, “Le Matérialisme historique,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 15.4 (1907): 401 - 420.

506 On this issue Durkheim affirmed: “Sociologues et historiens tendent de plus en plus à se rencontrer dans cette affirmation commun que la religion est le plus primitif de tous les phénomènes sociaux.... nous ne connaissons aucun moyen de réduire la religion à l’économie.” Durkheim, “Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l’histoire.” 650. Sociology was to be interested in the relative autonomy and social function of these collective representations, which marxism seemed to neglect: “La psycho-physiologie, après avoir signalé dans le substrat organique la base de la vie psychique, a souvent commis la faute de refuser à cette dernière toute réalité; de là est venue la théorie qui réduit la conscience à n’être qu’un épiphénomène. On a perdu de vue que si les représentations dépendent originellement d’état organiques, une fois qu’elles sont constituées, elles sont par cela même sui generis, autonomes, capable d’êtres causes à leur tour et de produire des phénomènes nouveaux.” Durkheim, “Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l’histoire.” 651.

science, sociology, which would take the time to truly study the social world in a scientific way:

“Le marxisme est, sur ce point, en désaccord avec son propre principe. Il commence par déclarer que la vie sociale dépend de causes qui échappent à la conscience et à la raison raisonnante. Mais alors, pour les atteindre, il doit falloir des procédés aussi détournés et aussi complexes, pour le moins, que ceux qu'emploient les sciences de la nature; toute sorte d'observations, d'expériences, de comparaisons laborieuses doivent être nécessaires pour découvrir isolément quelques-uns de ces facteurs, et sans qu'il puisse être question d'en obtenir actuellement une représentation unitaire.”⁵⁰⁷

Bouglé, who was the only philosopher teaching materialism before he “converted” to sociology, made a similar argument in his article “Marxisme et sociologie” (1907) some years later.⁵⁰⁸ While he disagreed with Durkheim and all of Marx's commentators, who reduced historical materialism to an “economic materialism,” and recognized that sociology was in fact borrowing the materialist method of study against the “philosophie traditionnelle,” he argued that Marxism went beyond a simple analysis of society because it sought to unveil “la cause déterminante de l'évolution sociale”, to add to the scientific and practical (or even political) dimension of social transformation, a sort of partisanship on the object at stake foreign to sociology.⁵⁰⁹ Bouglé's main critique of materialism, however, was very similar to Durkheim's: that it reduced the conscious world to a mere “illusion” and did not properly consider the interior or conscious world as socially relevant.⁵¹⁰ Andler's reaction was, as expected, quite different, as Marxism appeared as a threat to the autonomy of reason and then to philosophy itself:

“une telle doctrine est la négation de toute idéologie. Elle nie le rationalisme, si par là on entend ‘que les choses dans leur existence répondent à une norme, à une fin, à une mesure’ (p. 149); et elle nie le volontarisme, so par là on veut dire que les hommes délibèrent librement. Tout ce qui se passe résulte d'une somme de conditions que les hommes se

507 Durkheim, "Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire" 650.

508 In 1905 he was teaching in the Faculté de Lettres a course titled “Le matérialisme économique chez les socialistes français jusqu'en 1848” “Rousseau, la philosophie sociale au XVIIIe siècle.”

509 Celestin Bouglé, “Marxisme et sociologie,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 16.6 (1908) 731, 735.

510 “Il faudrait faire subir ici à l'illusionnisme matérialiste une correction analogue à celle qu'on fait subir d'ordinaire à l'illusionnisme idéaliste. Le monde extérieur n'est qu'une apparence, dit celui-ci. Mais il est bientôt forcé d'ajouter: c'est une apparence bien fondée. Et pour que l'esprit humain se construise une science du monde force lui est de se représenter les phénomènes étalés dans l'espace et dans le temps. De même et inversement, à qui nous avertit que le monde intérieur n'est qu'une apparence nous devons répondre qu'il est une apparence bien fondée, non seulement à cause des réalités sociales qu'il traduit à sa manière, mais encore à cause de l'oeuvre de coordination qu'il accomplit, en offrant aux tendances individuelles des centres de convergence. Ainsi l'apparition de ces fantômes qui sont les croyances et les doctrines - religieuses ou politiques ou morales - ne serait pas seulement inévitable; elle serait indispensable. Elle aurait à jouer dans l'histoire un rôle d'irremplaçable intermédiaire. ” Bouglé, “Marxisme et sociologie” 745. And he concluded similarly to Durkheim: “De ce point de vue, on accordera aux représentations collectives une toute autre valeur que celle que leur assigne le matérialisme historique... on les traitera dès lors non plus comme des épiphénomènes, mais comme des synthèses sui generis, capables de déviations propres: prismes et non pas seulement reflets.” Bouglé, “Marxisme et sociologie” 750.

sont posées eux-mêmes par une expérience très étrangère à leur libre choix et à la raison raisonnante; et le vrai nom de ce système est déterminisme (p. 149-150).”⁵¹¹

Andler described Marx and Labriola’s materialism as a philosophical monism (an historical materialist monism), that is to say a metaphysical doctrine, but one which was posed in a contradictory manner as an “hypothèse nécessaire” while remaining largely scientifically unfounded.⁵¹² For rationalist and idealist philosophy, the Marxism’s most troubling affirmation was that of the non-transparency of consciousness to our real motives of actions, which rendered an entire part and social function of philosophy—both moral and practical —completely obsolete. The fact that a part of our social consciousness could remain unknown was grounds to accuse Marxism of being unscientific. They thus recurred to a *petition the principe*:⁵¹³ freedom must exist because we do think we act freely after deliberation, therefore any form of determinism should not be considered: “puisque dans la pratique nous ne connaissons que des hommes qui agissent en délibérant, il faut bien que nous transposions dans notre interprétation tout ce libre arbitre apparent. S’il y avait un déterminé dans l’histoire, nous ne l’y reconnâtrions pas. Ainsi il n’y a pas de science plus idéologique que l’histoire.”⁵¹⁴ Andler’s conclusion was indeed a rejection of materialism and Marxism as a valid philosophy, arguing that it had become outmoded, as for him all the scientific and moral problems raised by materialism against institutional philosophy “oblige à proclamer le marxisme une doctrine vieillie. Des fragments certes en demeurent; mais le système se désagrège. Il nous donne pour de la science une série d’hypothèses indémonstrables.”⁵¹⁵

By the turn of the century this philosophy was challenged by sociology, psychology, and soon psychoanalysis, that is to say a set of new human sciences which wanted also to have a part of truth of what remained the philosophical object by excellence after the natural and hard sciences had taken away from philosophy the scientific study of nature, which was human nature and consciousness. As Prochasson noted:

“La menace qui pesait sur la philosophie était davantage de nature intellectuelle qu’institutionnelle. La réflexion philosophique, dans son désir de généralité, subissait les coups de savoirs spécialisés qui prétendaient lui ôter toute légitimité à dire le vrai. Le social prenait la place de Dieu sous toutes ses formes, la sociologie chassait la métaphysique. La Connaissance s’éparpillait en mille lieux et ne se maîtrisait plus sous les auspices

511 Andler, “La conception matérialiste de l’histoire” 649.

512 “Si M. Labriola admit la part social, il n’y a pas de trace qu’il accepte la théorie de la connaissance qui portent la fonde. Dès lors, ses affirmations sur la conscience déterminée par l’être n’ont plus de sens précis. S’il faut y chercher une métaphysique, elle est sans cohérence.” Andler, “La conception matérialiste de l’histoire” 651.

513 “l’hypothèse... d’un inconscient actif en nous oblige à donner de nos mobiles réfléchis une explication plus obscure qu’eux-mêmes. Par principe, l’histoire ainsi comprise renonce à produire ses documents. Ce n’est plus du marxisme, et c’est moins de la science.” Andler, “La conception matérialiste de l’histoire” 651.

514 Andler, “La conception matérialiste de l’histoire” 658.

515 Andler, “La conception matérialiste de l’histoire” 658.

rassurantes d'une grande unité."⁵¹⁶

In this sense it seems that the rejection of materialism in philosophy was, as Janet put it, a rejection of the subordination and eventual absorption by the hard and social sciences. In order to exist as a specific and necessary activity, philosophy must return, according to the FSP, to metaphysics and religion, or to what Brunschvicg called "la philosophie de la conscience", in opposition to the "déterminisme psychologique" and the "synthèses sociologiques."⁵¹⁷ Philosophy's role is to contribute to the "raison d'être de l'humanité" which is "la formation d'une communauté morale, fondée sur l'unité spirituelle."⁵¹⁸

The Failure of Institutional Philosophy and the XXth Century Scientific Revolution

The Paris Commune and the proclamation of the Third Republic in the 1870s changed the ideological configuration of the French State and sealed a provisional alliance of the Republican elite with a mildly positivist intelligentsia, mainly composed of scientists.⁵¹⁹ It was the moment where the supposed "promises of science"—its ability to sublimate social conflict, to promote a more "rational" organization of society and to better regulate moral and collective behavior (to become the ideological replacement of religion) —were put to test. And of course it failed, thereby opening up a public debate about the "bankruptcy of science" and a new polarization of the intellectual field between the positivist and the philosophical elites, who felt betrayed by being provisionally set aside. This was the moment of a resurgence of a new form of idealism (Brunschvicg) and neo-spiritualism (Vacherot, Janet) and also of a distancing from science.⁵²⁰ As Pinto, a social historian of philosophy, put it, at the turn of the century: "les positions philosophiquement dominantes sont celles qui, par opposition aux dérives "déterministes" ou "naturalistes" suscitées par les disciplines "scientistes", la psychologie et sociologie, s'efforcent de rendre compatible de la conscience avec les méthodes et les acquis des disciplines scientifiques."⁵²¹ The rejection of materialism in this early 20th Century seemed to follow an additional logic: it was no longer only the result of an ideological persecution, which to some extent continued and objectified in the field, but it responded to a "logique du champ", to the necessity of philosophy to regroup itself as something distinct from the emerging new positive sciences.⁵²² This was very visible in

516 Prochasson, "Philosopher au XX^e siècle" 117-118.

517 See Leon Brunschvicg, *Le Progrès de la conscience dans la philosophie occidentale*, vol.2 (Paris: PUF, 1927).

518 Brunschvicg, "Spiritualisme et sens commun" 545.

519 See Harry W. Paul, "The Debate Over the Bankruptcy of Science in 1895," *French Historical Studies* 5.3 (1968): 299-327.

520 See Etienne Vacherot, *Le Nouveau Spiritualisme* (1884), Leon Brunschvicg, *L'idéalisme contemporain* (1905).

521 Louis Pinto, "Le détail et la nuance: La sociologie vue par les philosophes dans la Revue de métaphysique et de morale, 1893-1899," *Revue de Métaphysique Et de Morale* 98.1/2 (1993) 148.

522 This is at least Prochasson's reading of the orientation of the *RMM*, when he concludes that the review was not a "reactionary", but rather aimed at redefining metaphysics and regenerating morals 118.

the prospectus and objectives of the first *Congres International de philosophie* showed: “restaurer l’idée de la Philosophie comme unité du savoir humain, non pas encyclopédique, mais logique et critique,” by the means of distinguishing philosophy from the other positive sciences (psychology, anthropology, sociology) for bringing them closer to the “sciences rationnelles, plus logiques, et primordiales,” like logics and mathematics.⁵²³

However French institutional philosophy was not been able to sustain this radical separation from science, which led to a split and polarization of the field. Janet, representing the *RMM* and neo-spiritualist line, asserted that “dans le conflit qui s’élève entre la science et la philosophie, elles [materialism and positivism] sont inévitablement du côté des sciences,” which led him to reject materialism.⁵²⁴ However there was a camp inside institutional philosophy which sought to renew a new sort of alliance with some sciences in order to win back some legitimacy and combat the new social sciences by judging them as too empirical and experimental. This was, at least, the neo-Kantian line argued by Boutroux, who at inauguration of the First International Congress of Philosophy stated:

“[les sciences philosophiques] cherchent désormais une vérité universellement humaine, et non relative à un esprit individuel, si grand soit-il. Comme des sciences, elles ont besoin de recueillir, de comparer, de contrôler, d’envisager sous tous leurs aspects le plus grand nombre possible de faits et le plus grand nombre de connaissances acquises. Solidaire des sciences, la philosophie participe, dans une certaine mesure, à la loi de leur développement, qui est le progrès par la division du travail et la convergence des efforts.”⁵²⁵

This idea of a unitary and universal philosophy that would be able to guarantee the unity of sciences and become the new paradigm of truth, of dialogue between the different areas of specialization was also shared by Couturat and Lalande.⁵²⁶ The Congress had a whole section devoted to the relation between metaphysics and science, and while Soulié uncritically argues that this “alliance entre philosophes et savants” was actually realized in 1900, I think it proved to be pretty quickly a failure, in particular because of the incompatibility of contemporary physics and rationalist metaphysics.⁵²⁷

523 qted in Prochasson 130.

524 Janet, “L’unité de la philosophie” 119.

525 Emile Boutroux, “Scéance d’ouverture Mercredi 1er Aout” [Congrès international de philosophie, 1900] *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 8.5 (1900) 507.

526 Couturat wrote to Xavier Leon that the goal of the Congress should be “restituer l’idée de la Philosophie comme unité du savoir humain, non pas encyclopédique, mais logique et critique. Le moyen: la distinguer nettement de toutes les sciences et en même temps définir un véritable rapport avec toutes, la rapprocher des sciences rationnelles, plus logiques, plus épistémologique. La séparer de la psychologie, de l’anthropologie évolutionniste, de la sociologie” *Lettre de L. Couturat à X. Léon*, 22 avril 1899. Qted Soulié, *Les Philosophes* 121. For Lalande and his project of ensuring both the unity and scientificity of philosophy by a work of precision and definition of philosophical language see André Lalande. “Le langage philosophique et l’unité de la philosophie” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 6.5 (1898): 566-588; and “Sur la critique et la fixation du langage philosophique.” *Bibliothèque du Congrès International de Philosophie, Vol 1: Philosophie Générale et Métaphysique* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1900) 257-280.

527 See Soulié, *Les Philosophes* 213-228.

Naville, a philosopher closer to Ribot's *Revue Philosophique*, was the only one to consider the real problem and attempted to draft a resolution. He began to seriously consider the new scientific developments while questioning its philosophical conclusions in two important articles: "Les conséquences philosophiques de la physique moderne" (1881) and "La science et le matérialisme" (1890). In these articles Naville proposed a new strategy to avoid the materialist danger. Far from pushing science away from philosophy, and establishing an equivalence between science and materialism, he wanted to assert a qualitative break between science and materialism, to prove that contemporary materialism was "unscientific" and turn back to science as a necessary source of universal validity for philosophy. For Naville "l'esprit philosophique a deux qualités: la généralité de l'étude et la recherche d'un principe d'unité," to which he opposes "l'esprit systématique" (from which materialism emerged) which makes hasty generalizations, looking only at one side of reality: "il universalise un seul ordre de faits, ce qui conduit le plus souvent à la conception d'une unité arbitraire, étroite, et par conséquent fautive."⁵²⁸ It is not that philosophy does not to have a close relationship with sciences and to reflect on the results of modern physics (which contradicted the established metaphysical conception of matter by affirming its inner movement and the conservation of forces) but it cannot only rely on one science, as materialism, in particular D'Holbach's and later Buchner's, did: "Si l'on remonte aux origines de ce mouvement de la pensée [le matérialisme], on trouve, comme cause principale, une physique transformée en philosophie, c'est-à-dire une science particulière érigée en science universelle."⁵²⁹ The true philosophical enterprise certainly departs from the results of science; it seeks there some of its foundations, but it goes beyond them but "il ne permet pas de conclure des données d'une seule science à la solution du problème universel."⁵³⁰ The role of philosophy is precisely "de mettre la physique à sa place," without renouncing "à reconnaître les rapports qu'elle soutient avec la philosophie."⁵³¹

In his subsequent article, Naville addressed the problem in a more straightforward way: "La science produit elle le matérialisme?" he asked since the first line.⁵³² And of course the answer is negative, because here materialism is not only partial (and misinterprets the results of modern physics): it is a-scientific, or a "déduction d'une conception a priori," as science, on the opposite, affirms the existence of "deux classes de phénomènes parfaitement distincts," physiological and psychic phenomena.⁵³³ By

528 Ernest Naville, "Les conséquences philosophiques de la physique moderne." *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 11 (1881) 47.

529 Naville, "Les conséquences" 47. In similar a formulation Naville affirms: "L'esprit systématique, en s'attachant d'une manière exclusive aux données de la physique, engendre le matérialisme." Naville, "Les conséquences" 65.

530 Naville, "Les conséquences" 49.

531 Naville, "Les conséquences" 49.

532 Ernest Naville, "La science et le matérialisme," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 29 (Janvier-Juin 1890) 618.

533 Naville, "La science et le matérialisme" 626, 619.

excluding one of them, that is psychic and supposedly immaterial phenomena, materialism breaks its links with science. Only philosophy can truly and deeply examine the psychic phenomena science only barely discovered, as they are of the kind “qui se constatent subjectivement.” Naville’s conclusion is without any appeal: “le matérialisme est si peu le résultat naturel de la science qu’il est la négation positive d’une science sérieuse et complète,” and finally it is “un système de philosophie, produit d’une induction précipitée relative à un seul ordre des phénomènes.”⁵³⁴

This important question of the relation of philosophy to modern physics, and science in general, increasingly preoccupied the newly formed SFP, to the point that the discipline found itself confronted with a sharpening dilemma: the more it rejected materialism as “scientific”, the more philosophy wandered away from a kind of relationship to science (and plunge into morals and metaphysics) and also the more it lost legitimacy and prestige it acquired through the Enlightenment (with celebrated authors like Voltaire, Leibniz or D’Alembert), as it was precisely this relation established first to mathematics and since the 17th century to physics which gave philosophical discourse a status of truth. On the other hand, the more it became closer to science and embraced its results, in particular those of modern physics and chemistry, the more the thesis of materialist philosophy, previously rejected, became obvious and true. As Collin later asserted on this issue:

“la science est clairement matérialiste au sens où nous venons de le définir. Disons encore, pour moins prêter à polémique que le matérialisme est la philosophie la plus compatible avec la démarche scientifique et ceci n’est pas une affirmation métaphysique mais le simple constat de ce que font effectivement les scientifiques. Il est d’autant plus curieux de constater que les références au matérialisme se font rares aussi bien en philosophie que dans la réflexion sur les sciences que peuvent conduire les scientifiques”⁵³⁵

These challenges were first dealt in the *RMM*, in the two articles by the philosopher and mathematician Edouard Le Roy “Science et philosophie” (1899-1900) and later discussed in in two key issues of the *Bulletins de la Société Française de Philosophie*: one on the Brownian Movement published in 1910 that starts with an exposition on this matter by the very famous chemist and physicist Jean Perrin, and another from 1912 wherein the prominent physicist Paul Langevin gives an explanation of the discovery of the Theory of Relativity and its deep implications for science.

Indeed, in 1905 Einstein provided the first explanation of what was known since the 19th century as the “Brownian Movement”, that is to say, the irregularity of matter and its inner molecular movements. This theory of a “spontaneous” and uncertain movement of matter, which echoed the materialist conceptions of Epicurus and many other 18th Century materialists such as Diderot, was verified through concrete experiments in 1908 by Jean Perrin, and his work on this issue led him to obtain the Nobel Prize of Physics in 1926. This discovery also gave rise to a crisis for the newly formed FSP that was created, as I showed, as a rejection of materialism and its fundamental thesis on matter and substance. In the discussion with Perrin published by the 1910 bulletin, the scientist and philosopher Emile Meyerson tried to overcome the

534 Naville, “La science et le matérialisme” 629, 637-638.

535 Denis Collin, *La Matière et l'esprit: sciences, philosophie et matérialisme* (Paris: A. Colin, 2004) 11.

contradiction by still claiming a fundamental role for philosophy in relation to science on one hand, and, on the other, rejecting any possible implications of this new discovery for the field of philosophy (meaning a reconsideration and re-evaluation of Materialist philosophy as a whole). He argues:

“La philosophie veut se construire comme “science des concepts” indispensable à la science: relation science et métaphysique, puisque c’est une métaphysique que la philosophie apporte à la science: Des scrupules de ce genre, je crois que tout physicien ne peut manquer d’en éprouver dès qu’il s’agit d’atomes; instinctivement, il sent qu’il se trouve à la limite du domaine de la science, là où elle confine à la métaphysique. D’ailleurs, il y a un fait historique incontestable: le concept et le terme même d’atome ne sont pas nés dans la science, elle les a empruntés à la philosophie. Or, ce n’est pas toujours impunément qu’on prétendra détacher un concept de sa genèse. Tout concept un peu ancien constitue comme un centre autour duquel ont cristallisé des idées qui s’évoquent mutuellement et s’introduisent comme hypothèses inconscientes chaque fois que nous usons du terme. Il faut les dégager clairement si l’on veut se rendre compte de ce qu’on fait.”⁵³⁶

Meyerson here argued for a philosophy that would give science the complete clarity and mastery of the concepts that it needs to operate. But at the same time he was very careful to point out that separation of fields necessitates an interesting imbalance: on the one hand the philosopher knows how to explain its concepts to better inform science, science cannot trouble or question any of the conceptual foundations of philosophy. And Meyerson wants to be sure that there is not any backdoor through which materialism can return:

“J’en viens maintenant à des considérations proprement métaphysiques et je formulerai d’abord une restriction qui paraîtra, sans doute, un peu superflue dans cette enceinte, mais qu’il est peut-être utile tout de même d’énoncer clairement, en vue d’interprétations qui pourraient se produire à côté, ou au dehors si vous voulez, à savoir que ce que l’on appelle le matérialisme n’a rien à gagner à des résultats de ce genre. Que nous puissions peser les molécules et mesurer leurs distances, que nous parvenions même peut-être à connaître leurs formes et, par impossible, à les voir, cela n’ajoutera ni n’enlèvera rien à ce qui est une conception purement métaphysique, sans doute fort difficile à soutenir à l’heure actuelle.”⁵³⁷

But this openly contradictory position of philosophy, in which it tries to keep a close relation to sciences that will give it "scientific" legitimacy while rejecting a re-introduction of materialism in its ranks, was not ultimately tenable. And it became even more untenable when it became apparent that maybe the most extraordinary epistemological revolution of the 20th Century went way beyond these findings of the true nature of matter, to the point of questioning our fundamental conceptions of space

536 Jean Perrin, “‘Le mouvement brownien’ Discussion de la thèse de M. Perrin, (3 mars 1910),” *Liste des “grandes conférences” de philosophie des sciences. Centenaire de la Société Française de Philosophie* 284.

537 Perrin, “‘Le mouvement brownien’ Discussion” 287.

and time through Einstein's new theory of relativity. The reaction to Langevin's presentation in 1911 by the philosophers was not admiring so much as hostile: in particular, the reaction of Gaston Milhaud, mathematician and philosopher, who put into question the very validity and importance of this findings:

“Je me demande si les conceptions qu'on vient de nous présenter sont vraiment exigées par les faits expérimentaux, si, au contraire, elles ne reposent pas sur une base quelque peu fragile.”⁵³⁸

“Je ne méconnaiss pas l'intérêt de ces conceptions : elles forment un système plus complet, plus riche, plus symétrique que celles que traduisaient les équations de la mécanique ordinaire, ce qui, dans certaines mesures, semble justifier l'assertion que celles-ci n'étaient qu'une approximation des équations de l'électro-magnétisme. Mais n'y a-t-il pas là quelque chose de trop artificiel ? Sans parler au nom d'un système philosophique ou métaphysique quelconque, ne peut-on dire que ces notions nouvelles choquent par trop le sens commun ? Pouvons-nous vraiment renoncer au caractère absolu, par exemple, de la simultanéité ou de l'irréversibilité de deux événements dans le temps ?”⁵³⁹

Physics, therefore, according to Milhaud, provided now a too "artificial" portrait of nature, whereas philosophy claims to give a more genuine and natural understanding of the physical world. This reaction can be explained by the fact that in the early 20th Century the philosopher can no longer understand the language of science and the epistemological changes in contemporary physics. In its discourse on science and the material world, philosophy had then only the choice to offer "alternative" and not "complementary" explanations to science. But the only way philosophy could do that was to cut off its patronizing relationship of "collaboration" with and "assistance" to science, to cease being the "science of sciences" it had aspired to be in previous centuries. This new trend betrays a shift towards a configuration where philosophy will have to compete with science to claim the most scientific and authoritative discourse over the concrete world, and possibly risking losing the game. This is perhaps what explains Lalande's worry that philosophy will take this road of purely speculative thought without maintaining a connection to experimental science and thereby losing therefore all of its scientific prestige. Furthermore, his desperate attempt to find a new but impossible articulation between materialism and philosophy, which remained a minority position in the field is also telling:

“Il me paraît dangereux, en même temps qu'artificiel, de chercher une idée centrale et essentielle qui soit commune à toutes les acceptions du mot matière et matérialisme. Le sens des mots se transforme et se diversifie avec le temps par des processus qui sont bien loin de se réduire aux rapports logiques de genre et d'espèce: la sémantique nous met en garde contre les tendances de l'esprit philosophique, toujours enclin à systématiser son objet et à ne pas accorder une importance suffisante à ce

538 Paul Langevin, "Le Temps, l'espace et la causalité dans la physique moderne" (19 octobre 1911)," *Liste des "grandes conférences" de philosophie des sciences. Centenaire de la Société Française de Philosophie* 336.

539 Langevin, "Le Temps" 337-338.

qu'il y a dans les choses d'accidentel et d'historique.»⁵⁴⁰

In this introduction to his “Observation”, Lalande expressed the concern of the direction taken by the SFP not only to stigmatize materialism, but to do so by framing it in old scholastic categories of species and genre which no longer correspond to the scientific concepts with which his contemporaries operated in the world. He is asking the reader to pay closer attention to what in the designation of “materialism” is the product of contingency and history, as well as to look at its multiple meaning without fixing them.

I would conclude then that the new institutionalized and professionalized philosophy, formed during the 19th century through a polymorphous and continued rejection of Enlightenment materialism, i.e. materialism as a critical and subversive use of reason in the public sphere, was confronted with an insurmountable dilemma: in the face of the new social and human sciences which claimed ownership of its terrain, philosophy had to find new grounds of objectivity and scientificity, it had to forge a new dialogue and alliance with sciences. The new natural sciences, however, first with thermodynamics and later with the Brownian movement and relativity, in some way reinforced some of the materialist theses, and the methodology of collaboration early modern materialist philosophy had defended, and which were the basis for a political and social critique of society. The professional philosophers were then afraid that if they accepted the results of modern science, it would open the door for the recognition and legitimation of a contained and marginalized materialist political philosophy: Marxism. In the face of such a danger they preferred to commit intellectual suicide and condemn their own discipline to scientific irrelevance for the decades to come.

540 Lalande, *Vocabulaire* 598.

Chapter 4: La Mettrie, in a Materialist Way

1. La Mettrie, the Mechanist?

In this chapter I propose an alternative reading of La Mettrie's philosophy and his materialism, counteracting the traditional reading of his philosophy as mechanist, and thereby concretely dispelling the two wide misconceptions of early modern materialism: that it was either a monism or doctrine of the essence or a radical empiricism (an epistemology). Materialism as a philosophy went beyond a simple mechanistic or deterministic conception of the universe, that is to say, the "philosophical translation" of a scientific explanation of the world. As I show first with La Mettrie, and then with Diderot, it was the affirmation of the ineluctable political nature of philosophy in the new public sphere, and the need for the intelligentsia to risk a political *prise de position* for human emancipation and happiness asking how philosophy could aim at this radical transformation.

La Mettrie was the first philosopher to publicly claim to be a materialist, but how then to interpret this often-misunderstood vindication? The intellectual history of the Enlightenment has usually looked at the *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (1745) and the *Homme-Machine* (1747) to explore and qualify La Mettrie's materialism and by extension 18th-century French materialism as a whole. Most critics have located La Mettrie's main contribution to materialist philosophy in his critique of the substantial nature of the soul, and they have mostly done so by taking the metaphor of the *homme-machine* in a literal or descriptive way. By doing so, intellectual historians have tended to simply echo and reproduce the reaction of La Mettrie's contemporary enemies, as well as that of his 19th century "interpreters" such as Degérando, Hegel or Cousin, to name just a few. In this chapter, I will propose an alternative reading of La Mettrie's materialism, departing from the reprinting of his *Philosophical Works* by the author himself in 1750, a year before his death.

La Mettrie is presented in the history of philosophy as a simple (and sometimes simplistic) *reaction* to Descartes, a reaction that supposedly ended up producing, paradoxically, an inverted form Cartesianism. That is to say he is generally seen as a radical and reactive position in a linear history of philosophy to be quickly superseded and synthesized by more consensual figures like Voltaire or Kant, or more nuanced ones, like Spinoza, Diderot or Rousseau. As Lange, the first historian of materialism, pointed out, towards the end of the 19th century, La Mettrie has been constructed as the "souffre-douleurs du matérialisme," and "le représentant le plus exagéré du système".⁵⁴¹ His materialism has been presented as raw, "vulgar", "mechanistic" or "physicalist", and distinguished from the more nuanced or complex materialist propositions forward by Diderot (whose epistemological model was chemistry), or the radical interpretations of

⁵⁴¹ Friedrich-Albert Lange, *Histoire du matérialisme et de son importance à notre époque*, 2 vols. (Paris: Schleicher Frères, 1910-1911) 1: 365.

Locke developed by Condillac and Helvetius.⁵⁴² La Mettrie appears most of the time as a *doctrinaire* of materialism, and materialism is reduced to a monism or an ontological position that negates the soul and only recognizes matter.

Maybe the fairest and most interesting approach to La Mettrie should start then by dispelling a great misunderstanding: his classification as a “mechanistic materialism” which we originally owe to its 19th century readers such as DeGérando, Renouvier, Heine and Marx.⁵⁴³ It is unfortunately still in use today in some philosophy handbooks,⁵⁴⁴ in particular because the qualification of a philosophy as “mechanistic” has endured in the history of philosophy for a code word for “primitive” and “unsophisticated,” as an antonym of reflective thought. Pepin and Moutaux have explained why, from a scientific point of view, it would be wrong to qualify La Mettrie’s materialism as “mechanistic” or “mechanical” Pepin noted the ambiguity of the term “mécaniste” since Descartes it had been used since Descartes, but he asserted that despite the various uses in general it referred, in the 17th century, to something larger than the simple analogy between body/nature and machine. It was to become one of the emerging paradigms for scientific legality, one where were established “la nécessité d’une causalité; l’absence d’obscurité irréductible dans l’origine des phénomènes, permettant d’exclure par principe toute référence à un agent extra-naturel; l’intelligibilité des causes et des effets, l’unification

542 This materialist philosophy is presented as such a “mechanical” one, that one doubts it is still can be called philosophy at all, because of its lack of wit and soul. From what one reads in La Mettrie's critics it seems that it is such a vain philosophical enterprise that it is destined to collapse of its own weight in a movement of self-annihilation. Indeed, how could philosophy, which is founded on the autonomy and powers of reason, do so much violence to its very foundations or instrument, to the point of reducing reason to matter? Is not the materialist or physicalist reduction of reason the end of thinking? No wonder it did not make it into the great names of the history of philosophy, or its very history alone, in any other way than that of the *repoussoir* the philosopher should know to avoid at any price.

543 Moutaux’s reading of La Mettrie also suggests that the historical category of “matérialisme mécaniste” created and used to undermine a certain type of philosophy, was actually fabricated by 19th-century German idealism and then incorporated into the discourse of the philosophical *discipline* in France, in the moment of philosophy’s reinstitutionalization. Stenger sustains a very similar argument: for him, this idea of a mechanistic materialism developing out of Descartes' category was developed by Hegelianism and then initially blindly reproduced by Marx and Engels and early Marxists. See Jacques Moutaux, *Écrits sur les matérialistes, le travail, la nature et l'art: à la virgule près* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000) 99-101; Gerhardt Stenger, “Marx, Heine et le matérialisme de l’âge classique,” *Orthodoxie et hétérodoxie: Libertinage et religion en Europe au temps des Lumières*, ed. Marie Hélène Quéval (Saint-Etienne: Publications De L'Université De Saint-Etienne, 2010) 199-201. Thanks to the works of Bloch, we know that Marx took most of his knowledge on 18th-century French philosophy from Renouvier; this influence is clearly visible in his *Holy Family* (1840). Engels, on the other hand, sought to reconstruct the evolution of materialism and philosophy as a whole by applying the Hegelian schema. This approach is very clear in his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, in which he asserts: "The materialism of the last century was predominantly mechanical, because at that time, of all natural sciences, mechanics and indeed only the mechanics of solid bodies - celestial and terrestrial - in short, the mechanics of gravity, had come to any definite close. Chemistry at that time existed only in its infantile, phlogistic form. biology still lay in swaddling clothes (...) As the animal was to Descartes, so was man a machine to the materialists of the eighteenth century." Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (USA: International Publishers, 1966) 26. This characterization corresponds to a moment in which Marxism is trying to establish its specificity not only as a philosophy, but also as a materialist one. Therefore, it must distinguish itself from the more limited and therefore “mechanical” forms of materialism, but, as Stenger pointed out, it presents the history of materialism as linear and ascending, from Epicurus to La Mettrie, a history where, according to Engels (and not to Marx who never had such a pretension), the only qualitative change is the one introduced by Marxism as “dialectical materialism”. Stenger, “Marx, Heine et le matérialisme” 201.

544 This qualification of La Mettrie as a “mechanical materialist” is present still today in some philosophy textbooks. See Claude-Henry Du Bord, “Les matérialistes français,” *La Philosophie* (Paris: Eyrolles, 2007) 313-318.

possible des sciences dans le partage d'un modèle d'intelligibilité."⁵⁴⁵ Mechanism, or "legal mechanism" to be more precise, became, for Descartes and later Newton, a theorization of the functioning of the natural world that was founded on mathematics, excluding any "miraculous" or "extra-natural" cause of explanation, and always returned to a physico-mathematical theory of movement that could formulate its laws by deduction (applying in science the method of the Cartesian "*évidence*"), with no need for verifiable observations.⁵⁴⁶ Pépin therefore noted two contradictions or incompatibilities between mechanism and materialism as modes of explanation of the natural world: the first one was the method of reasoning based on mathematics as an a priori universal model of truth; the second was the problem of the analogy nature-machine, and in general that of any thesis on "intelligent design", which presupposed an intelligence or supra-natural creator (God).⁵⁴⁷

Further, if mechanism is the Cartesian epistemology to understand manner as a purely inert substance and necessarily organize "from the outside" by universal and mathematical laws, La Mettrie never embraced such a paradigm to understand living things; rather, quite the opposite: he rejected it.⁵⁴⁸ More particularly, La Mettrie rejected Descartes's conception of matter.⁵⁴⁹ The qualification of mechanist is more the product of a mis-reading, or a superficial reading than a serious consideration of La Mettrie's philosophy as a reflective practice. As mis-reading obsessed with the outrageous analogy of man as a machine, his philosophy was automatically deemed "mechanical" without any consideration of the intent, status and function of such an analogy in his philosophical work.

In his *Traité de l'Ame* (1745) La Mettrie clearly criticized the Cartesian concept of matter defined as pure extension, as an abstraction that does not correspond to reality. Descartes's conception of matter was, for La Mettrie, the product of a metaphysical abstraction, not one based on experience: "L'étendue de la matière n'est donc qu'une étendue métaphysique, qui n'offre rien de sensible (...) Il nous paraît donc que l'étendue est un attribut essentiel à la matière, un attribut qui fait partie de sa forme métaphysique; mais nous sommes éloignés de croire qu'une étendue solide constitue son essence."⁵⁵⁰ For La Mettrie, the conception of matter should not start with metaphysics but with the "propriétés que nos sens y découvrent," and nothing else but experience should be added in order to derive concepts through reflection.⁵⁵¹ Matter then was not a passive but rather

545 François Pépin, "Matérialisme, mécanisme et réduction dans la postérité de Descartes," *Matière première 2* (2007): 117-118.

546 Pépin, "Matérialisme, mécanisme" 125-129.

547 Pépin, "Matérialisme, mécanisme" 119-120.

548 On La Mettrie reading of the cartesian machine, see the great article by François Pépin "Lectures de la machine cartésienne par Diderot et La Mettrie" *Corpus* 61 (2011): 263-286..

549 See Jacques Moutaux "Machine et matérialisme," *Ecrits sur les matérialistes* 85-124.

550 Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Traité de l'âme, Oeuvres Philosophiques 1*, ed. Francine Markovits (Paris: Fayard, 1984) 130.

551 La Mettrie, *Traité de l'âme* 129.

an active force of nature, with an internal force or capacity for movement and transformation: “Il est assez évident que la matière contient cette force motrice qui l’anime, et qui est la cause immédiate de toutes les lois du mouvement.”⁵⁵² And not only was matter active and able to move and change by itself, it could also develop feeling and thinking faculties. In the last case, why should we consider plants, animals and men anything else but increasingly subtle and complicated organizations of living matter?

Lamettrian materialism was constructed *in opposition* to the Cartesian mechanism because it departed from matter, as it exists in nature, in all its diverse and complex variations, there is therefore a fundamental difference of method. But there was also a different relation to thought and rationality. The Cartesian conception of nature was a mechanistic one in the sense, of course, that bodies are considered machines or artifacts where the different parts or atoms did not have any kind of intrinsic or inner connections but were instead external to each other. A conception refuted by materialists who all, beginning with La Mettrie, insisted, that matter was internally animated and not moved solely by external forces. Cartesianism was also mechanistic in the sense that it presupposed a necessary pre-existing intelligence for the machine to work, an intelligence outside of itself. The whole mechanistic conception of nature implied that nature functioned like a machine, producing effects despite this exteriority of its parts to each other, and this was only possible because a sort of superior intelligence or productive intention was present in its design. The rationality of the natural machine (or *nature as a machine*) did not belong to it, it had to be given in advance by a rational creator (Man or God). Thought and intelligence are postulated as coming from outside the manifestations of nature, from a kind of transcendental or metaphysical origin. The whole point of materialist philosophy would be to counteract this view by asserting that consciousness and intelligence are immanent to the natural material world. For Cartesianism, nature could not be fully understood without managing to access that hidden source of rationality, located beyond nature itself. As Moutaux pointed out “la théorie qui conçoit les réalités naturelles, voire la nature elle-même comme machine est susceptible de servir au mieux les intérêts d’une philosophie spiritualiste, et par exemple théiste: ou ceux de la théologie.”⁵⁵³

2. Materialism, Philosophy and Science

If we look at the academic scholarship for a distinctive characterization of La Mettrie's materialism, two alternative answers are often given: it is either considered as a *monism* (a negative image of Descartes's dualism) or as a *radical empiricism* (a more extreme interpretation of the Lockean postulates geared towards rebuilding the human mind—its ideas and operations—starting from sensibility and experience). In fact this characterization is often applied to early modern materialism as a whole. In this section I argue that both answers miss the central point of materialism as a philosophy, because they fail to understand the real rearticulation of philosophy in regards to science as it was operated by materialist philosophers. My thesis is that materialism, as initially defined by

552 La Mettrie, *Traité de l'âme* 138.

553 Moutaux, *Ecrits sur les matérialistes* 88.

La Mettrie, was never to become a doctrine of matter or an ontology, nor was it to be restricted to an epistemological discourse. This philosophy had to be understood first as what it was not (but has been constructed as such by historiography), through this double negation (neither ontology nor epistemology). La Mettrie first rearticulated the relationship between philosophy and science so that philosophy could also have a social and political effect.

Materialism, Monism

To determine if 18th-century materialism is a *monism* or not, that is to say if materialism could be defined as an ontological theory of reality equivalent to statements like “only matter is real” or “all that exists is matter” or “could be reduced to it” is a difficult question, even though it is very hastily addressed by both materialism critics and defenders. It is true that La Mettrie gives us reasons to believe he was arguing for a monist position when he concludes his *Homme-machine* with a statement like: “Concluons donc hardiment que l'homme est une machine, et qu'il n'y a dans tout l'univers qu'une substance diversement modifiée.”⁵⁵⁴

However the question is more complicated than that. First because ontology, and the subsequent division of philosophical systems into “dualists” (two substances) or “monists” (one substance), while being a category initially formulated by Wolff (*Psychologia Rationalis* 1734), did not become a systematic criteria to classify philosophical systems until the 19th century. One needs first to interrogate the specific place of ontological issues in Enlightenment philosophy. The qualification of a whole philosophy as either dualist or monist is not a “natural” or necessary position; rather, it is the result or reflection of how the emerging field of philosophy was internally or conceptually structured. For one, Enlightenment philosophy was in competition with Scholastic and 17th-century rationalist philosophy, and the question was: which language should it speak? Scholastic philosophy had been grounded for centuries on the concept of substance and the hierarchy of the various degrees of being, and most of 17th-century metaphysicians (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz) still operated with the concept of substance, even though they each gave it a new meaning. The fact that La Mettrie’s materialism could be read as monism does not mean that his philosophy could be reduced to the simple proclamation of a new and simplified ontology: materialist monism.⁵⁵⁵ This

554 La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine, Oeuvres Philosophiques I* 117.

555 See Moutaux and Vartanian, but especially the work of Jonathan Israel who considers the “philosophical monism” expressed in French materialism and of Spinozist origin as the keystone of his “Radical Enlightenment”: “Without classifying radical thought as a Spinozistic tendency, combining one-substance doctrine or *philosophical monism*, with democracy and a purely secular moral philosophy based on equality, the basic mechanics of eighteenth-century controversy, thought and polemics cannot be grasped.” [Emphasis added] Jonathan I Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010) 21. This idea is further developed by Israel in *Democratic Enlightenment* where he argued that “It was because social grievance was widespread that radical ideas proved able to mobilize support and gain an important field of action, an opportunity widened by the fact that one-substance monism yielded a metaphysics and moral philosophy apparently more consistent and free of logical difficulties than any philosophical alternative—at least prior to the rise of Kantianism as a major cultural force in the late 1780s....Briefly, one-substance metaphysics went hand in hand with sweeping reform.” Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011) 14-15.

reduction only “makes sense” if one has already taken a position from which La Mettrie’s philosophy should be judged, that is to say if one judges his philosophy from his opposite position in the field, that of theology which recognized only one substance. One could say La Mettrie argued for a monism only if he is systematically *compared* with Cartesian dualism or Scholasticism, or rather only when seen through the philosophical lens of “substance philosophy” and its language.

However, the explicit goal of La Mettrie and other materialists was to break with this internal structure based on the concepts of substance and essence rather than reproducing it. Materialists wanted an Enlightenment that would create a radically new conceptual apparatus for philosophy and a new method of reasoning. Thus, if La Mettrie and other philosophers did take the positions, indeed, of firmly negating the substantiality and immortality of the soul and of God to oppose Scholasticism, they also opposed Cartesian dualism and its subsequent variants, by refusing to consider matter and thought as different substance. The proof of that is to be found beginning in La Mettrie's first works, starting with the *Traité de l'âme* in 1745 and his *Abrégé des Systèmes* where all the major philosophical systems are examined negatively through the sole prism of their relation with the category of substance and therefore with the problem of the mortality or immortality of the soul.

If there is a constant insistence in La Mettrie’s philosophy, which will be inherited by Diderot, is precisely that of the need to abandon the conceptual apparatus of Cartesianism and in particular that of reasoning with the categories of substance and essence. Since his first philosophical work, the *Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, La Mettrie asserted: “L’essence de l’âme de l’homme et des animaux est, et sera toujours aussi inconnue que l’essence de la matière et des corps,” stating that the only things we can know is what comes from the facts of observation, and not a priori thinking.⁵⁵⁶ And this was also the reasoning behind the *Homme-Machine*, as if La Mettrie concludes that there can only be a single substance in the whole universe, he immediately adds how he got to this conclusion, that is his thinking methodology: “Ce n'est point ici une hypothèse élevée à force de demandes et de suppositions: ce n'est point l'ouvrage du préjugé, ni même de ma raison seule; j'eusse dédaigné un guide que je crois si peu sûr, si mes sens portant pour ainsi dire, le flambeau, ne m'eussent engagé à la suivre en m'éclairant. L'expérience m'a donc parlé pour la raison: c'est ainsi que je les ai jointes ensemble.”⁵⁵⁷ Which observations is he talking about? Those coming from science, more particularly from physiology and compared anatomy which prove that “l'homme ressemble parfaitement aux Animaux dans son origine,” and in its functioning too, that there is not the “ontological” division between nature and man, between matter and thought, or between sensibility and reason that Cartesian and other rationalist philosophies established.⁵⁵⁸

The difficulty then of defining materialism as a monism and a focalization on matter is that this category of a “materialist monism” would leave out most of the authors considered materialists for the early modern period in France: La Mettrie, Helvetius,

556 La Mettrie, *Traité de l'âme* 125.

557 La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 117.

558 La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 122.

Condillac, Diderot, as none of them shared neither a conception of matter nor did they agree to base their philosophies as established on the concepts of substance. On the contrary, they constantly sought to reformulate ontological questions in other terms, trying to do away with the Scholastic categories. The only materialist philosopher who agreed to reintroduce the essentialist vocabulary into materialist philosophy—and therefore the idea that materialism was a monism—was D’Holbach, who in his *Système de la Nature* not only defined nature as an essence, but particularly human nature. He did so using the same move by which he transformed materialism into a doctrine that he sought to popularize.

How to talk then of La Mettrie’s materialism? In the beginning of his *Abrégé des Systèmes*, he praised Descartes: “Descartes a purgé la Philosophie de toutes ces expressions Ontologiques, par lesquelles on s’imagine pouvoir rendre intelligibles les idées abstraites de l’Etre. Il a dissipé ce chaos, et a donné le modèle de l’art de raisonner avec plus de justesse, de clarté, et de méthode.”⁵⁵⁹ The problem of Descartes was that “il n’a pas suivi sa propre méthode,” because while he theorized the vanity of doing so, he still capitulated to the impulse of defining substance: “Descartes avoue comme Locke, qu’il n’a aucune idée de l’être, et de sa Substance, et cependant il la définit.”⁵⁶⁰ Descartes was inconsequential. He reproduced inside his new and emancipated human philosophy, which he established as independent from theology, the same conceptual apparatus created by Scholasticism. Locke, on the other hand, was more consequential: “M. Locke fait l’aveu de son ignorance sur la nature de l’essence des corps; en effet, pour avoir quelque idée de l’être, ou de la substance, (car tous ces mots sont synonymes,) il faudrait avoir une Géométrie, inaccessible même aux plus sublimes Métaphysiciens, celle de la nature.”⁵⁶¹ The knowledge of the substance of nature was first of all impossible to achieve, as he noted in his critique of Leibniz: “de pareilles connaissances ne pourraient s’acquérir qu’au premier instant de la création des êtres, à laquelle personne n’a assisté.”⁵⁶² It was an impossible knowledge because it wants to be a knowledge by the causes, or origins. We need to develop a different methodology: a knowledge departing from facts and observations. This is why La Mettrie considered Boerhaave, one of the precursors of experimental physiology and his teacher, a philosopher of equal importance to Locke, Descartes or Spinoza: “Boerhaave a pensé qu’il étoit inutile de rechercher les attributs qui conviennent à l’être, comme à l’être; c’est ce qu’on nomme dernières causes Métaphysiques. Il rejette ces causes, et ne s’inquiète pas même des premières Physiques, tels que les Éléments, l’origine de la première forme des semences, et du mouvement.”⁵⁶³

559 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes, Oeuvres Philosophiques 1* 249.

560 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 249, 250.

561 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 263-264. For La Mettrie all these words were equivalent and shared the fact that they did not refer to anything in the world but rather to a fear or psychological impulse to know and dominate: “nous prononçons sans cesse, tous Philosophes que nous sommes, tant de noms dont nous n’avons aucune Idée; tels sont ceux de substance, de supôt, de sujet, (substratum), et d’autres sur lesquels on s’accorde si peu, que les uns prennent pour Substance, pour Nature, Etre, ou Essence, ce que les autres ne prennent que pour Attribut, ou Mode.” Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *Les animaux plus que machines, Oeuvres Philosophiques 1*, 341.

562 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 257.

563 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 266.

La Mettrie's philosophy was a critique of theology but also of philosophical discourse that behaves like theology, that constructs rational systems around imaginary things with little grounding in reality. His ontological positions or monism can only be understood as purely negative, as active forces of negation of the imaginary constructions of metaphysical discourse. His ontology is a critical one, an anti-dualism and an anti-metaphysics, without the positive affirmation of a solid theory of reality or substance. All of La Mettrie's materialist ontological positions should be understood as a *double negative affirmation* or a *double negation*: the negation of the existence of a non scientific form of substantiality proper to God and the soul, but also the negation of the usefulness of the concepts of substance and essence precisely because they are pre-established, a priori, and not derived from experience, because they are *meta-physical* from a methodological point of view.

Materialism is not a Radical Empiricism

Most of the scholars who refuse to see a materialist ontology in La Mettrie's philosophy argue, in contrast, that his philosophy was inspired by the epistemological revolution initiated by Locke, and that materialism is the result of a radical or immanentist epistemology.⁵⁶⁴ Yet, while La Mettrie proposed a new materialist philosophy based on experience which did away with unproven claims, this was not a distinctive feature only of his materialism, since most of the Enlightenment philosophers claimed a return to experience, in particular those philosophers influenced by Locke, like Voltaire, Condillac or even, in some respects, D'Alembert in his *Discours Préliminaire à l'Encyclopédie*.⁵⁶⁵

Indeed, the common point of Enlightenment philosophy was, as Charrak recently pointed out, "le rejet des hypothèses métaphysiques, qui ordonnent les systèmes des philosophes du XVII^e siècle à des principes que l'entendement humain ne peut atteindre ou justifier," a revolution started by Locke where metaphysics are dissociated from theology and reformulated within the framework of human theories of knowledge. This relation with experience as a new foundation of philosophy produced different types of empiricisms.⁵⁶⁶ But materialism was not simply a radical empiricism or "sensualism". La Mettrie, without a doubt, developed a new epistemology based on experience and science. And the *Homme Machine* was a clear attempt to do so, once freed of the conceptual apparatus of Cartesianism: "l'expérience et l'observation doivent donc seules nous guider ici."⁵⁶⁷ His reliance on the experimental method comes from his training as a

564 Benoît Schneckenburger, "Philosophie matérialiste et autonomie politique, le cas des matérialistes français du XVIII^e siècle: Julien Offroy de La Mettrie et Claude-Adrien Helvétius" (Diss. Université Paris VIII, 2011) 9; Kathleen Anne Wellman, *La Mettrie: Medicine, Philosophy, and Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke UP, 1992) 135-168.

565 "Prenons donc le bâton de l'expérience, et laissons là l'Histoire de toutes les vaines opinions des Philosophes." La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 67. For an account of the meaning of "experimental philosophy" in 18th century France see François Pepin, "L'épistémologie expérimentale des Lumières" *Raison Présente* 172 (2009): 47-57.

566 André Charrak, "Les systèmes du savoir au XVIII^e siècle, une analyse de la raison connaissante" *Labyrinthe* 34 (2010) 24. See also André Charrak *Empirisme et théorie de la connaissance* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2009) 8-17.

567 La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 66.

physician, and in particular from Boerhaave, his professor of Medicine at the University of Leyden, whose work—in particular his *Institutions de Médecine*, an 8 volume work published later between 1743 and 1750—La Mettrie translated and commented between 1735 and 1741. In his commentary of Boerhaave, La Mettrie affirmed:

“La physique expérimentale ne peut jamais nous tromper. (...) La plupart des bons auteurs ont le défaut de vouloir tout connaître par les causes. D’où il arrive qu’on perde de vue les faits pour se jeter dans les généralités, ou qu’on ajuste de son mieux les expériences avec la fable qu’on a imaginée, ou encore que d’un petit nombre de faits on ose en déduire des théorèmes d’une étendue sans bornes.”⁵⁶⁸

The elaboration of an experimental physics or physiology, as was the case with La Mettrie and later Diderot, was already a step beyond empiricism, as it implied a reconceptualization of the relationship between philosophy and science and not a simple epistemology.⁵⁶⁹ This re-accommodation of the two practices was initially inspired by Bacon who broke with the old hierarchy and argued that science was no longer to be thought of as necessarily emerging from pre-existing paradigms; that it was instead necessary to create those paradigms through experience. Scientific research progressively gained a level of autonomy by elaborating and correcting its own concepts, and there was no need for a subsidiary or tutelary science (philosophy). Yet if philosophy was no longer to provide an a priori framework for scientific enquiry—seeing as a science that could provide for itself the theory of its own practice as it develops through experience and observation—what should philosophy do? This separation was the beginning of a crisis of scientific legitimacy for philosophy. In this crisis materialist philosophers like La Mettrie saw an opportunity for a new beneficial kind of public philosophy to emerge. As Pepin explained, in experimental philosophy, “philosophie et science n’entretiennent plus les rapports que Descartes envisageait”, as in the new experimental we see “l’autonomisation de la science à l’égard d’une méthode et d’une ontologie préalablement construites sur un plan philosophique.”⁵⁷⁰ What interested La Mettrie and Diderot in the experimental scientists (Bacon, Harvey, Stahl, Boerhaave etc.) was their

568 Quoted in Jacques Richard, “Medicine, physique et métaphysique,” *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, D’Holbach*, ed. Sophie Audidière et al. (Paris: PUF, 2006) 25. For an account of La Mettrie’s intellectual relationship with Boerhaave see Wellman, *La Mettrie* 109-116 and Jacques Richard “Médecine, physique et métaphysique dans les oeuvres philosophiques de La Mettrie”. For a broader background of La Mettrie’s scientific influences, see Aram Vartanian, *La Mettrie's L'homme Machine: A Study in the Origins of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1960) 75-94.

569 Diderot, in his *De l’interprétation de la nature* (1753), published anonymously, analyzes the consequences of the “grande révolution dans les sciences” operated by new physics and the beginning of chemistry. If experimental physics have superseded, according to Diderot, rational physics, experimental philosophy should replace the so-called rational one: “XXIII. Nous avons distingué deux sortes de philosophies, l’expérimentale et la rationnelle. L’une a les yeux bandés, marche toujours en tâtonnant, saisit tout ce qui lui tombe sous les mains, et rencontre à la fin des choses précieuses. L’autre recueille ces matières précieuses, et tâche de s’en former un flambeau; mais ce flambeau prétendu lui a, jusqu’à présent, moins servi que le tâtonnement à sa rivale, et cela devait être. L’expérience multiplie ses mouvemens à l’infini; elle est sans cesse en action; elle met à chercher des phénomènes tout le temps que la raison emploie à chercher des analogies. La philosophie expérimentale ne sait ni ce qui lui viendra, ni ce qui ne lui viendra pas de son travail; mais elle travaille sans relâche. Au contraire, la philosophie rationnelle pèse les possibilités, prononce et s’arrête tout court.” Diderot, *De l’interprétation de la nature, Oeuvres Philosophiques*, ed. Vernière, (Paris: Garnier, 1961) 192-193.

570 Pepin, “L’épistémologie expérimentale des Lumières” 48.

bold method to gain a scientific autonomy because they constituted “des modèles de découvertes scientifiques construisant leur démarche sans la recevoir ou appliquer un système préalable.”⁵⁷¹ So they sought to apply the same method for philosophy in order to free it from the external and internal weight of theology: enlightenment philosophy itself should function analogously to experimental science, no longer departing from pre-established principles or concepts (that is to say metaphysical ones), but on the contrary deriving his theoretical elements only from experience and observation. This elaboration of the tasks ahead to reconstitute a truly enlightening and independent philosophy, present in La Mettrie and Diderot, really exceeded the scope of any empiricist epistemology as they referred to a project for philosophy as a whole, as a distinctive practice beyond any scientific endeavor.

This was not the only difference between materialism and radical empiricism. Beyond the acceptance of the independence of science and the inspiration to pursue a similar path, there was, at least in La Mettrie, a very conscious effort to separate philosophy from science, to preserve independence for philosophical discourse and to consider its specific contribution to the intellectual field. Firstly, this separation had the significance of establishing an independence from the new threat: rationalism, which would evolve into positivism a century later. Materialist philosophers rejected the idea that an independent critical philosophy needed to be founded or grounded in a science and opposed the new scientific paradigm which was embraced by some Enlightenment philosophers (Leibniz, D'Alembert, Condorcet) and began to replace God in the 17th century mostly in an effort to refound an independent philosophy: mathematics. The new philosophy should start in Nature and function *like* a science, but a science of a very specific kind, more precisely taking Medicine as a scientific model:

“La Philosophie, aux recherches de laquelle tout est soumis, est soumise elle-même à la Nature, comme une fille à sa Mère. Elle a de cela en commun avec la vraie Médecine, qu'elle se fait honneur de cet esclavage, qu'elle n'en connaît point d'autre, et n'en entend point d'autre voix. Tout ce qui n'est pas puisé dans le sein même de la Nature, tout ce qui n'est pas Phénomènes, Causes, Effets, Science des choses en un mot, ne regarde en rien la Philosophie, et vient d'une source qui lui est étrangère.”⁵⁷²

What philosophy should borrow from medical science was its method and relation to nature, while the two types of discourse ought to diverge with respect to their goals. What is the difference, then, between materialism and empiricism? A common answer today is to claim that empiricism is just an epistemology (a theory of knowledge), of the “ways of ideas” and sometimes also a psychology (a science of the mental operations), while remaining somehow agnostic regarding the essence of the world. It cares about the *how* and not about the *what*. Maybe a more useful way to distinguish empiricism and

571 Pepin, “L'épistémologie expérimentale des Lumières” 48. For a more detailed account of the innovations in experimental physiology. See Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 65-98; Pierre Vignais and Paulette Vignais “The birth of the experimental method in the 17th and 18th centuries” *Discovering Life, Manufacturing Life: How the Experimental Method Shaped Life Sciences* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010) 49-87; Aram Vartanian, “Trembley's polyp, La Mettrie, and eighteenth-century French materialism.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 11.3 (1950): 259-286.

572 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire, Oeuvres Philosophiques* 1 10-11.

materialism would be to locate this difference in the scope or *portée* of the scientific revolution in the practice of philosophy in the 18th century. Materialism was not *only* an empiricism, because it went beyond the epistemological domain and applied this experimental method to the other spheres of philosophy, including morals, politics and metaphysics, thus producing a completely new philosophy, a new interpretation of the world, and the possibility of a new social function. I would argue then that the difference between materialism and empiricism has to do both with the relation and the distinction between *philosophy* and *science*, which have different purposes and ways of functioning.⁵⁷³

Materialist philosophy's attempt to differentiate itself from science has been theorized both by Althusser (and the Marxist thinkers like Macherey) and by Adorno. For Althusser, philosophy always “lag[ged] behind” science”; that is to say that it was constantly stimulated by scientific innovation and the production of new objective models of rationality to read the world.⁵⁷⁴ Adorno, in “The Actuality of Philosophy” was not so much interested in philosophy’s delayed temporality (as was the case with Althusser), but on philosophy’s freedom to interpret the natural world while departing from a scientific understanding of it.⁵⁷⁵

“Philosophy will be able to understand the material content and concretion of problems only within the present standing of the separate sciences. It will also not be allowed to raise itself above such sciences by accepting their results as finished and meditating upon them from a safe distance. Rather, philosophic problems will lie always, and in a certain sense irredeemably, locked within the most specific questions of the separate sciences. Philosophy distinguished itself from science not from a higher level of generality (...) the central difference lies far more in that the separate sciences accept their findings, at least their final and deepest findings, as indestructible and static, whereas philosophy perceives the first finding which it lights upon as a sign that needs unriddling. Plainly put: the idea of science is research; that of philosophy interpretation.”⁵⁷⁶

The empiricist epistemology is the philosophical translation and reformulation of the new scientific discoveries of modern physics for the already existing theories and concepts of knowledge. Materialism goes beyond this gesture in a similar or analogous form of critique to all the concepts of philosophy, including questioning the very foundations of philosophy. It borrows from science a method but makes it its own and derives a whole new method of philosophy. For Adorno materialism is not philosophy

573 Some of La Mettrie’s critics, like Vartanian, equated philosophy and science in La Mettrie. See Aram Vartanian, *Science and Humanism in the French Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: Rookwood, 1999) 45-91.

574 “La philosophie est toujours liée aux sciences. La philosophie est née (chez Platon) avec l’ouverture du continent-Mathématique. Elle a été transformée (chez Descartes) par l’ouverture du continent Physique. Elle est aujourd’hui révolutionnée par l’ouverture du continent histoire par Marx. (...) Les transformations de la philosophie sont toujours le contre coup de grandes découvertes scientifiques. Pour l’essentiel, elles viennent donc après coup.” Louis Althusser, *Positions* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1976) 40.

575 Theodor W Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy.” *Telos* 31 (1977): 120-133.

576 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy” 126.

reduced to science, nor a mere study of nature for the sake of truth, but a new human interpretation of the world as a whole. Materialism is first of all a *philosophy* and this is also Moutaux's reading of La Mettrie:

“Le matérialisme de La Mettrie sera donc une philosophie, et non une science. De l'‘analogie’ entre l'organisation animale et l'organisation humaine, et de la détermination de penser comme faculté sensitive, on peut conclure au matérialisme. Et la conclusion est solide. Elle n'implique pas, cependant, une connaissance positive de la manière dont la matière pense, au sens où, par exemple, la connaissance du mécanisme d'horlogerie permet de savoir comment la matière peut marquer les heures.”⁵⁷⁷

In a Materialist Way

If materialism is neither an ontology nor an epistemology, then what can be said about it? How to theorize or even grasp such a philosophy if the existing philosophical categories we use to classify and encapsulate philosophical discourse are rejected by its philosophy? We should start to consider, with the help of Macherey, that materialist philosophy is not just a philosophical project of its own but also a way of reading and treating philosophical discourse. His distinction between doing philosophy *in a materialist way* (*en matérialiste*) and being “a Materialist” or doing a “materialist philosophy” is useful to approach La Mettrie and 18th century French materialism as a whole. In his essay “En matérialiste,” Macherey argued “faire de la philosophie en matérialiste, ce n'est pas du tout la même chose que de faire une philosophie ‘matérialiste’.”⁵⁷⁸ In the second case materialism is a fixed category, almost a substance or a qualification that defines the object of affiliation of philosophy. In the first case, materialism is a way of doing philosophy, a form of intervening in the philosophical field, which of course is linked to a methodology, but not to a doctrine.

To be “a Materialist” usually means to be attached to a particular trend or school, or to become a “*sectateur d'une doctrine*” called “materialism”. As Macherey indicated: What is the problem with doing a “materialist philosophy”? To qualify a philosophy of “materialist”, or to affirm the existence of a Materialism as a fixed philosophy, as has been the case since the 19th century institutional interpretation of this philosophy is to fixate the meaning of such a philosophy from the outside (either as a theory of substance or as a psychological or scientific discourse). It is also a way to implicitly fixate the object of such a philosophy, limiting its power and scope, to the study of matter or the *material* world as the privileged object of such a philosophy. And this is usually done by also establishing a priori a corpus of reference or a set of theses to the exercise of philosophical activity. And it is not that philosophy loses its purity when it becomes determined by or attached to an object or doctrine, but rather that there is almost a

⁵⁷⁷ Moutaux, *Ecrits sur les matérialistes* 98. La Mettrie, in many occasions insists in this incompleteness of the philosophical point of view: “C'est par cette file d'observations et de vérités qu'on parvient à lier à la matière l'admirable propriété de penser, sans qu'on en puisse voir les liens, parce que le sujet de cet attribut nous est essentiellement inconnu.” *La Mettrie L'Homme-machine*, 116.

⁵⁷⁸ Pierre Macherey, “En matérialiste,” *Histoires de dinosaure: Faire de la philosophie, 1965-1997* (Paris: PUF, 1999) 87.

contradiction between doing philosophy *in a materialist way*, which insists in the actuality, the present and material nature of the practice of philosophy, inscribed in a time and place, and the affiliation or qualification a priori of its practice (be it by being tied to Materialism, Idealism, Scholasticism or any a priori qualification).⁵⁷⁹ Thus I propose to consider with Macherey:

"que le matérialisme soit, non pas une doctrine, une théorie, un savoir, mais un mode d'intervention, une "position" philosophique, c'est-à-dire une certaine manière de se poser dans le champ de la philosophie. Une position n'est pas la théorie d'un objet donné, le discours dans lequel un tel objet se représente et se constitue en même temps, mais la manifestation, l'affirmation d'une orientation, d'une tendance, traversant, non la réalité, qui n'est pas un "objet" pour la philosophie (...) mais le champ philosophique, appréhendé dans la complexité concrète de ses conflits internes comme lieu spécifique de cette intervention."⁵⁸⁰

Once all the preconceptions are dispelled, one then could not fail to ask if there are some common features or criteria that will allow identifying the materialist way of doing philosophy. And this is maybe one of the most difficult questions, to which I will give, initially two seemingly contradictory answers: that there is a materialist tendency and that there is not.

The first answer, which seems the most orthodox one within materialist philosophy and, in particular, contemporary Marxism, is that of course there is a history of materialism and which is the history of a particular trend within philosophy. The notion of tendency here is to be thought as a transversal trend that crosses through the sky of philosophy with a particular historical, social and political directionality—something like an arrow. This trend does not have to do, in my view, with a history of the philosophies that study matter or the material world, but with those who apply a “materialist method”. Yet beyond the question of the method to derive knowledge, the hypothesis is a materialist current in philosophy could be identified by the social function of philosophical discourse, as the method is always aimed at accomplishing something, in this case a certain kind of social and political critique in relation with science. For Althusser and the early Macherey, both being amongst the few materialist and Marxist philosophers to have theorized the social function of materialist philosophy, materialist philosophy is chiefly distinguishable by defending a scientific point of view over things against a prevailing ideological or religious one, one founded on prejudices: “It is materialist philosophy that draws this dividing-line, in order to protect scientific practice against the assaults of idealist philosophy, the scientific against the assaults of the ideology of the ideological.”⁵⁸¹

579 In this sense, Idealism is no better than Materialism as it takes as an a-priori object of philosophical meditation things of which we are not sure of their existence. It is even more complicated methodologically as it systematically transforms all ideas into things, separated from reality and makes a doctrine out of this gesture. For Macherey, Engels' failure to produce a real “materialist philosophy” in his *Dialectics of Nature*, (failure which was reproduced by Stalinist and Marxist-Leninist philosophy) springs out of the incomprehension of the very nature of philosophy as a social activity.

580 Macherey, “En matérialiste,” *Histoires de dinosaure* 89.

581 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 2001) 37-38. Macherey identified in the Enlightenment field of philosophy, from an abstract point of view, two major ideological forces

It is possible to read La Mettrie's philosophy, I argue, as a materialist one in this particular sense, even as the first public modern materialist philosophy in the still emerging bourgeois intellectual sphere, for most of his work of critique was precisely to develop the social and political consequences out of the new scientific theories of discoveries, which is something that scientific discourse does not by itself. In short, he used science and ideology in the political sphere (attacking the foundations of religion, of Christian morality, of political authority, of the unfounded social power of particular corporations, like that of physicians, etc.). However he did that without producing a new science or a new ideology to replace the old one. In this original moment of the emergence of materialism, it was less the conservation or preservation of the scientificity of philosophy than the affirmation of its liberatory conclusions and the opening of an indeterminate world of possibilities that characterized the early modern materialist position.

Yet there is another interpretation of early modern materialism, that is to say of the emergence of materialism as a public use of reason, that of unrestrained public critique or *parrhesia*, which prevents materialism from being identified to a particular set of theses or a doctrine, and it was only to present a new social function of philosophy. And this is more of a reading in the style of Adorno and the later Macherey. The specificity of La Mettrie and Enlightenment materialism would be to develop more of a negative tendency of critique, one exploring of the "negative powers" of philosophy, focused on undoing concepts, notions, and forms of subjectivity, instead of proposing any positive thesis or programmatic statements. In this one could argue that as soon as the materialist tendency becomes solidified into an organized trend, identifiable by a fixed corpus of authors and texts and a doctrine, it would cease to be materialist in the particular sense that early modern philosophy was. This view is based on *genetic* notion of the materialist position, as it was constituted and labeled as such by its enemies, sometimes in unexpected issues and ways. As a negative tendency, materialism is revealed by its public practice of philosophy; it is almost the result of an external determination, its symptom is that it frees or liberates all its unknown potential of critique. This second view of materialism claims to be itself a materialist standpoint on materialism, which instead of considering philosophy from within, trying to locate the materialist trend in a particular content, approaches philosophy from its outside, like an attitude or *prise de position*. It is a "tendency" not in the sense of partisan battle cry for a philosophical program but in the sense it manages to unleash what could be called an inner "tendency" of philosophy, a potentiality of philosophical practice.

What then the materialist unleashed in or from philosophy? First it frees philosophy from any particular object. Contrary to science, philosophy does not meditate on a pre-established "philosophical" object, one that would be philosophical by nature.⁵⁸²

revealed themselves as opposed to each other for the first time in history: that which carried inside philosophy the methodology of theology (spiritualism), and that which insisted in carrying only that of science against that of theology (materialism). Of course, in the reality of the singular *prise de positions* it is difficult to find any pure instantiation of any of them, even amongst materialists. See Pierre Macherey, "L'Histoire de la philosophie considérée comme une lutte de tendances," *Histoires de dinosaure* 35-64.

582 Macherey departs from Althusser's conception of philosophy, in particular in "Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants", that he summarizes in the following way: "la philosophie n'a pas d'objet, entendons pas d'objet extérieur, ce qui veut dire que la philosophie est à elle-même son propre objet, donc que son discours, son drôle de discours, ne parle de rien d'autre que d'elle-même, sous la forme d'une interminable ruminantion qui la ramène sans

It chooses and makes its own object, potentially any object, worthy of philosophical, critical, rational, almost “scientific” consideration. Precisely the freedom inherent in philosophy is that “*le philosophique*” does not exist anywhere, it is not given as such, but it is produced at each instance: it is always in the present. Materialism was an attempt in the 18th century to make philosophy in the present without the concepts from the past, free from the weight of conceptual and ideological tradition.

What philosophical discourse constitutes as a philosophical object—that is to say as an object of critical thought—is also what is not forever defined but up for debate and contesting definitions and interpretations. Philosophy creates problematic objects—objects that spark polemical discussions—because it simultaneously creates its object(s) and the positions (or the possibility for such positions) for the philosophical positions upon these objects of its own creation. In contrast to art, this creation and positioning is not only tied to the power of imagination and creativity, but first of all to a scientific method.

The concepts of soul, matter, body, morals, remorse, guilt, legitimacy, etc. are not treated in philosophy the same way as they are in science. In the latter they are solely an object of inquiry; in the former they are objects of discussion and definition based (or not) on the scientific inquiry or interpretations of it. What brings Macherey and La Mettrie together in the materialist attitude in philosophy is that they share particular position in this process of interpretation: that concepts and definitions should be derived from reality, in an experimental sense, a reality that is always in the making and therefore social by definition, a reality be commonly experienced and publicly shown or demonstrated. In this sense, the materialist position or attitude stands in total opposition to the religious one inside philosophy, the one that operates with preexisting, almost “private,” concepts that cannot be explained outside of philosophy.

3. Natural Philosophy or Philosophy as a Point of View

Against both Mechanism and Scholasticism, La Mettrie proposed to redefine philosophy as “natural philosophy” or “natural history”. In this section I explore how La Mettrie developed this new relationship of philosophy to nature and his internal reorganization and reconceptualization of philosophy. On the one hand La Mettrie used the epistemological revolution initiated by Locke not only to trace the origins of all our ideas but also to invert the relation between physics and metaphysics established by Scholasticism; that is, to transform the internal organization of philosophy. Philosophy was now, modeling its method on that of science, to derive all of its concepts from nature. Instead of physics just being *a part of* philosophy, a defined area or object of study, the natural and scientific method would have to give a whole new methodology to philosophy. Yet if philosophy and science should have an analogous method, these two discourses were be differentiated by their purpose and effect. In La Mettrie, the natural world ceased to be the “object” of philosophy, and becomes its starting point, its point of view. Materialism was first a synonym of a crossroad between experimental science and

cesse à soi, sans issue vers le dehors.” Pierre Macherey, “Althusser et le concept de philosophie spontanée des savants” Lecture, Groupe d’études “La philosophie au sens large.” Savoirs Textes et Langage UMR 6183, CNRS Universités Lille 1 and Lille 3. 2008.

philosophy, a methodological revolution and a break with Cartesianism, but with La Mettrie it exceeded it by becoming a philosophical point of view on all the types of discourses of society, including science and of course, philosophy. Moreover, by finding its foundations in nature, reason was no longer understood as existing “outside” of nature, but rather as being an integral part of it. The “parts” of La Mettrie’s philosophy no longer flowed from the formal categorization of the uses of reason applied to different objects: metaphysics as the foundations of rationality, logic as the rules for the use of reason, morals as the rational criteria for action, aesthetics as the rational treatment of sensibility and physics as a rational theory of the natural world etc. La Mettrie’s philosophical system proposed instead a single point of view and object for philosophy: Nature.

On the other hand, La Mettrie also opposed Cartesianism and mechanist philosophy, which, although it pretended to find its concepts in nature and science, still had a metaphysical conception of both reason and science: reason was an innate gift or faculty which could not be derived from matter or sensation, and only be grounded “on itself”; and science needed to be secured by relying always on mathematical principles. Against Descartes, La Mettrie framed his philosophical attitude as belonging to the “clandestine” spinozist current of philosopher who sought to “naturalize” not only ideas but human reason and subjectivity itself, breaking the illusion maintained by rationalists that reason was a special intellectual power or point of view that came from or was to be grounded elsewhere, outside physical nature. Yet La Mettrie sought not only to “naturalize” reason, following Spinoza’s path, but also all rational discourses in society: his most obvious goal in his *Discours Préliminaire* (1750) is the typification of the different types of discourses: “la Morale”, “la Politique”, “les Loix”, “la Science”, “la Philosophie”, “la Théologie”.⁵⁸³ By doing so, he made the existence of philosophical discourse a problem rather than a evidence.

If philosophy was no longer the necessary voice of Reason or God or the Truth, what, then, was philosophy? What point of view did it represent? How was it different from science or moral discourse? In the *Discours Préliminaire* (1750) La Mettrie gave us two negative definitions of philosophical discourse (what philosophy is not), and only in *Discours sur le Bonheur*, which he did not dare to publish in his final compilation of *Oeuvres Philosophiques* but which appeared in three different versions between 1748 and 1751, he proposed one version of what philosophy could or should be.⁵⁸⁴ I start here with the latter, philosophy as a form of therapeutic discourse, a medicine of the soul.

What distinguishes La Mettrie was that the radical character of his return to nature compared to other Enlightenment philosophers. His goal was not just to provide philosophy with a natural *method*, but also a natural *existential purpose*. It might have

583 In the rest of my chapter I will capitalize Science, Theology, Politics etc when I am referring to them as these types or categories of discourse in the LaMettrian sense. There is a difficulty translating La Mettrie’s use of “la Morale” into English. The two conventional existing options (“ethics” and “Moral philosophy”) are problematic: because there is an important difference between ethics as a philosophical practice, mainly formulated by hellenistic philosophy and reappropriated by some currents of the Enlightenment, and the constitution of a normative branch of “moral” philosophy within Scholasticism. And while La Mettrie supports the first one, he severely criticizes the latter. While in general, “Moral Philosophy” is a more accurate translation, it can create confusion in regards to the DP of La Mettrie, as La Mettrie was trying to separate “la Morale” from Philosophy. There is a more unusual use of the term “morals” to talk about moral rules and values; it is the one I will use sometimes here.

584 On the different editions and variants on the *Discours sur le Bonheur* or *Anti-Sénèque*, see the critical edition by John Falvey.

become apparent by now, that La Mettrie was drawing from the Epicurean tradition of philosophy as a medicine of the soul in which he wants to inscribe his own philosophical project. In this sense he was a true inheritor of the clandestine current of Epicurean philosophy that had been labeled as “libertine”. He did not only develop a new epistemology, that is to say, a different science of knowledge, by deriving it from nature and experience (following the Lockean postulate in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*), he also reinterpreted the meaning and relevance of Epicurean philosophy in the 18th century, in the context of the crisis of philosophy. La Mettrie was the first in the Enlightenment to publicly assert, within the Enlightenment the *existential* goals of philosophy, beyond all the debates about philosophy’s scientificity or the scope of its critique. Ultimately philosophy was theorized as a “natural discourse” in this existential dimension, and this is why, for La Mettrie, philosophy could not be reduced to a science nor to a moralistic or political tool.

Philosophy as a Medicine of the Soul

The specificity of medical science is that it aims at healing, and intervening in the natural body to restore its health. Philosophy should be considered an analog to medicine because its existential purpose should not be to merely restate a scientific conception of the organization of matter or the correlation between mind and body phenomena *for themselves*. Truth for the sake of truth alone is the point of view of scientific discourse. Indeed, why would philosophy need to repeat science? La Mettrie did not understand philosophy’s intrinsic connection to nature and science as motivated only by pure pedagogical goals, those of making modern physics and its philosophical consequences available to a wider literate world without scientific education. This divulging conception of Enlightenment philosophy was developed by key figures like Fontenelle, in particular in his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686), Voltaire and Mme du Châtelet in their *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton* (1738) or even D’Alembert in his approach to the *Encyclopédie*. They proposed a very specific meaning for the Enlightenment (that of the dissemination of scientific knowledge for the sole sake of knowledge) which was competing in the 18th century with an utilitarian conception of philosophy: the one that argued that philosophy should establish the theoretical rational grounds that would explain and justify moral rules, qualifying good and bad behaviors, becoming a theory of the necessary political practice to rule and organize society.

La Mettrie did not ultimately share any of these existential goals for philosophy, even though he did not necessarily disagree with them. For him the existential purpose of philosophy as a specific use of reason, as or theoretical practice, was neither purely scientific nor utilitarian. Philosophy should not seek only the discovery of the truth for itself, not the discovery of truth to rule over or regulate better the human world, but the discovery of the truth *for human happiness*. This means that there is a political and not solely a moral intentionality in his overall philosophical endeavor, as for La Mettrie the question of happiness was a political one because it was ultimately social and not an individual enterprise.⁵⁸⁵ It has to do with the laws, education, and moral rules that

585 The ambiguity of La Mettrie’s position will lie in the social content given to the collective problem of Enlightenment as a search for happiness, as he seemed to rely on the absolute monarchy to accomplish such a change.

organize social life, and not only as a set of prescriptions for human conduct. This political intentionality was, however, of a very particular kind: a *therapeutic* one. This is one of the singularities of La Mettrie's philosophical endeavor within the Enlightenment, to conceive philosophy as having a therapeutic political goal. As he advanced his career, he concentrated his efforts less on debating theories of knowledge and metaphysics (while weighing in the debates he considered important), and more on defining as much as possible the purpose of philosophy, and the position it should take in regards to Moral Philosophy and Politics, as these two dimensions are key to human happiness.

The idea that philosophy should remove the main causes of human suffering to achieve happiness was shared by many ancient philosophical currents or sects, though each one of them proposed a different method and paradigm for doing so. It was the Epicurean one that developed more explicitly the analogy with medicine, suggesting, as Tsouna pointed out, "philosophical therapy is an ongoing activity integrated into the context of ethical praxis."⁵⁸⁶ As O'Keefe noted, quoting Porphyre who was reporting the teachings of Epicurus (as most of his writings have been lost):

"the Epicureans take the analogy very strictly: nobody thinks that surgery or cough syrup are good per se, apart from their promotion of bodily health, so too with argumentation and psychic health – "Empty is the argument of the philosopher which heals no human disease; for just as there is no benefit in medicine if it does not drive out bodily diseases, so there is no benefit in philosophy if it does drive out the disease of the mind" (Porphyry to Marcella 31 (IG I-214)) trans. adapted from IG."⁵⁸⁷

This deep meaning of philosophy as a therapeutic, psychiatric practice, where the meaning or the content of the argument is not to be found only in what it says literally, but what it does to our souls, is present in La Mettrie. And this is also the meaning of the constant analogy between philosophy and medicine that characterized all of his work. His references to Epicurus went beyond his very much scorned *L'École de la Volupté* or his *Art de Jouir*, that is to say the provocative references to the search for pleasure and the absence of pain, characteristic of the "libertine" literature. In his *Discours sur le bonheur*, while keeping these considerations, La Mettrie puts them aside in order to resuscitate and reaffirm what he considered to become the main goal of philosophy: to be a therapeutic practice of and for the soul.⁵⁸⁸ While the task of philosophy to heal the individual soul was already present in the *Homme Machine*, the social and educational role of philosophy was formulated more openly in the *Discours Préliminaire*.⁵⁸⁹

586 Voula Tsouna, "Epicurean therapeutic strategies." *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* Ed. James Warren (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 249. See also d Jean Salem, "Philosophie et Medicine" *L'Éthique d'Épicure* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1989) 9-20.

587 Tim O'Keefe, *Epicureanism* (Berkeley: University of California, 2010) 134.

588 "J'ai voulu avec Epicure ou ses Sectateurs, augmenter la somme des Biens, en sentant partout le goût délicieux des plaisirs, des Amours, et en un mot de toutes les voluptés." Julien offray de La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur*, Ed. John Falvey (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1975) 114.

589 The Epicurean subtext, or rather the reappropriation of Epicurus and Lucretius, mediated by the scientific practice of medicine, structures La Mettrie's philosophical endeavor from the start: "Mais tout cède au grand Art de guérir. Le Médecin est le seul Philosophe qui mérite de sa Patrie; il paraît comme les frères d'Hélène dans les tempêtes de la vie. Quelle Magie, quel Enchantement! Sa seule vue calme le sang, rend la paix à une âme agitée et fait renaître la douce espérance au coeur des malheureux mortels." La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 62.

The opening lines of the *Discours sur le Bonheur* clearly states that while philosophers always worried about happiness, they had contending definitions of it: “ici, c’est la volupté de l’esprit attaché à la recherche, ou enchanté de la possession de la vérité; là enfin c’est le contentement de l’esprit, le motif et la fin de toutes nos actions, auquel Epicure a donné encore le nom de volupté, nom dangereusement équivoque.”⁵⁹⁰ Part of the *Discours sur le Bonheur* was devoted, precisely, to the elucidation of the true nature of human happiness, actualizing its meaning in the 18th century, restating that human happiness has always been the natural goal of philosophical practice, until scholastic philosophy took over and deviated it, subordinating philosophy to Christian religion and not to human happiness on earth. In his *Discours sur le Bonheur*, La Mettrie wanted to reassert that framework of philosophy, that of identifying “là où gît le bonheur de la vie” and of exposing “la chaîne des vérités nécessaires au bonheur,” or its “mechanism,” concluding that:⁵⁹¹ “La Philosophie bien réglée conduit à l’amour de la vie, dont nous éloigne son fanatisme (car elle a le sien): mais enfin elle nous apprend à mourir, quand l’heure est venue.”⁵⁹² La Mettrie develops the Epicurean analogy of the philosopher as a *medecin de l’âme*:

“L’Ame à sa commotion, comme le corps; la fortune peut la bouleverser à son gré; mais c’est une maladie qui n’est pas sans remèdes. Epicure, Sénèque, Epictète, Marc-Aurèle, Montaigne etc. voilà mes Medecins dans l’adversité! Après une violente chute, le sentiment s’affaïsse avec les fibres du cerveau; pour le relever, il faut rétablir par la saignée et autres remèdes les ressorts étouffés. Il en est de même ici. La force, la grandeur, l’Héroïsme de ces Ecrivains passe dans l’Ame étonnée, comme une espèce de Cardiaque qui la soutient et la restaure, pour ainsi dire dans les faiblesses de l’infortune.”⁵⁹³

One might be surprised by the interchangeability of the spiritual and material determinations, as a philosophical critique of prejudices can have in the soul the effect of a “saignée” that purifies the blood from bacteria, or an illuminating explanation can elevate the soul and give life back to a sunken brain.

In his important book on Epicurean ethics, Salem compares the Epicurean conception of philosophy more precisely to *psychiatry*. I think his definition of Epicurean philosophy perfectly applies to La Mettrie: “La philosophie est par vocation un ensemble de procédés fébriles, antalgiques, analgésiques: combattre la douleur- telle est sa fonction essentielle. Vide est donc le discours philosophique s’il n’a quelque pouvoir de guérison.”⁵⁹⁴ But I think more importantly, Salem has shown masterfully, by contrasting the Epicurean and Platonic medical philosophies, the connection between the psychiatric conception of philosophy and materialism:

590 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 121.

591 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 122.

592 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 169-170.

593 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 165.

594 Salem, *L’Ethique d’Epicure* 19-20.

“Assimiler la philosophie à une purge du coeur (organe dans lequel les épicuriens localisent le principe des émotions et des fonctions intellectuelles), c’est, somme toute, la définit comme une psychiatrie. Point n’est besoin d’amputation dans un système qui rejette tout dualisme, si ce n’est celui des atomes et du vide,- autrement dit celui de l’être et du non-être. Platon philosophe du scalpel, son éthique est chirurgicale; Epicure décharge les âmes, sa parole est libération. La purification platonicienne, héritière sans nul doute de la tradition orphico-pythagorique, se veut scission d’avec la chair. Les émotions, assure le Socrate du Phédon, sont comme autant de clous qui rivent indûment l’âme au corps: toute libération est nécessairement mortification. (...) Chez Epicure, tout au contraire, c’est bien plutôt notre faculté de dé-raisonner qui doit se soumettre à ce que prescrit la nature, c’est à dire, finalement, au corps. Le plaisir, comme la douleur, sont des critères de vérité, au même titre que les sensations; et c’est ce qui y est ajouté par l’opinion (...) qui seul peut obscurcir ces données immédiates et causer le malheur des hommes: recouvrer la santé, c’est, par conséquent, s’imprégner de la vraie doctrine et, du même coup, mieux rejeter les craintes et les opinions vaines qui encombrant notre poitrine.”⁵⁹⁵

Indeed, from the point of view of the natural world, because mind and body are not separated but the same living thing made of atoms, the only possible healing philosophy could provide is by acting upon human ideas.⁵⁹⁶ It would be to penetrate the human body through its mind, going to the origins of the fears and anxieties through discourses and conversations, as the ultimate causes of most of our worries are in our head. Therapeutic conversation was indeed one of the important practices of Epicurean philosophy between the master and the student (*parrhesia*), who eventually would become friends, as friendship was also a therapeutic philosophical connection. But the conversation about fears was not enough, and therefore philosophy must introduce science to sustain and ground its practice. Theoretical wisdom was to help us understand the principles and causes at work in the natural world so we can dispel false myths and fears. Remaining ignorant about the functioning of nature was thus an obstacle for true happiness.⁵⁹⁷ La Mettrie embraced the most advanced science of his time (experimental physiology) upon which he models the method of philosophy. He saw in science not only a rationalization of the natural world, but also a new method to refound a philosophy that since the scholastic period has lost its way. If he subordinates the use of philosophy to the attainment of happiness, contrary to Epicurus and thought the philosopher must be both a scientist and a philosopher, as for him medicine was not only an art, but an art founded in

595 Salem, *L’Ethique d’Epicure* 20.

596 “C’est parce que l’épicurisme caractérise le composé humain (à l’instar de tout composé) comme un mixte d’atomes et de vide et qu’il conçoit tout agir ou pâtir exclusivement comme un transfert d’atomes, que la méditation peut y être définie comme une assimilation au sens propre. Dire, c’est perdre de la substance; lire, c’est se repaître de mots; écouter, c’est boire des paroles.” Salem, *L’Ethique d’Epicure* 17.

597 “Epicurean physics is largely devoted to dispelling any traces of divine influence from the workings of the world, because fear of the gods is one of the main impediments to happiness.” O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* 108.

science.

The Negative Work of Philosophy: Separation of Philosophy and Morals

One of the La Mettrie's starting points for refounding philosophy was to accomplish, through a critical intervention, the separation of philosophical discourse from what he considered to be its worst enemy or antonym which had nonetheless colonized its field: moral discourse or morals, as this was the main source of fears, worries, anxiety and also political oppression. This separation that is both possible and urgent in the midst of the dire crisis of philosophy, where numerous conceptions of philosophy's relationship to morals were circulating and competing. For Scholasticism of institutionalized philosophy, "morals" (or moral philosophy) were considered an integral part of philosophy (together with metaphysics, logic and physics). This conception was the result of a reappropriation of Aristotle by the Christian University, in particular through Thomas Aquinas who managed, in the 13th century, to combine Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology in his *Summa theologiae*. In Scholastic philosophy Aristotelian ethics, which originally was the praxis of philosophy aimed at achieving human happiness, was transformed into a moral dogma that legitimized Christian values and social oppression of desire and after the 17th century to absolutism. La Mettrie thus combated "la Morale" as a form of social discourse which was opposed to the theoretical goals of philosophy. In this sense Lamettrian materialism was also a break with 17th classic philosophy, even with its more scientific component, Cartesianism which still considered that philosophy should play a role in regulating moral behavior.⁵⁹⁸

598 Descartes presented a semi-break in relation to institutional philosophy, but his conception was also one that carried in itself, unconsciously, the assumption that philosophy should establish rules for moral conduct, even if "provisional" ones. While there is no room for morals concerns in the *Règles pour la direction de l'esprit* (1628-1629), Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* (1637) did set a provisional set of guidelines to orient practical behavior, which consisted of four basic rules, most of them predicating prudence, and the conformity to the already existing rules, which meant not to go against the social and political tide: "La première était d'obéir aux lois et aux coutumes de mon pays, retenant constamment la religion en laquelle Dieu m'a fait la grâce d'être instruit dès mon enfance, et me gouvernant en toute autre chose suivant les opinions les plus modérées et les plus éloignées de l'excès qui fussent communément reçues en pratique par les mieux sensés de ceux avec lesquels j'aurais à vivre. (...) Ma seconde maxime était d'être le plus ferme et le plus résolu en mes actions que je pourrais, et de ne suivre pas moins constamment les opinions les plus douteuses lorsque je m'y serais une fois déterminé, que si elles eussent été très assurées. (...) Ma troisième maxime était de tâcher toujours plutôt à me vaincre que la fortune, et à changer mes désirs que l'ordre du monde, et généralement de m'accoutumer à croire qu'il n'y a rien qui soit entièrement en notre pouvoir que nos pensées, en sorte qu'après que nous avons fait notre mieux touchant les choses qui nous sont extérieures, tout ce qui manque de nous réussir est au regard de nous absolument impossible. (...) Enfin, pour conclusion de cette morale, je m'avisai de faire une revue sur les diverses occupations qu'ont les hommes en cette vie, pour tâcher à faire choix de la meilleure; et, sans que je veuille rien dire de celles des autres, je pensai que je ne pouvais mieux que de continuer en celle-là même où je me trouvais, c'est-à-dire que d'employer toute ma vie à cultiver ma raison, et m'avancer autant que je pourrais en la connaissance de la vérité, suivant la méthode que je m'étais prescrite." René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (1623) (Paris: Gallimard, Folio essais, 1991) 16. Cartesianism was indeed was a modern variant of Stoicism. Nine years later, in his *Passions de l'âme*, he developed his stoic morality, this time based on a scientific account of how passions and desires are the product of the body. The role of reason was, according to Descartes, to discriminate between good and bad passions, to encourage the former ones and repress or control the latter. This could be summed up into a conception of successful moral behaviour as the triumph of an internal legislator (reason) and a strong internal policeman (will). In this sense, Descartes left the door open for two alternative positions of the *philosophe* around morals. Either the philosopher should try to understand, scientifically the origin of moral impulses, practicing the study of natural philosophy within its contained borders, or he should assume a normative role of philosophy by developing the power of reason in establishing and dictating criteria for moral behavior, criteria that should be shared and generalized, and that should not contradict the existing customs and laws. Most of the Enlightenment figures, at least the ones that came to dominate both the field and intellectual history, took one of the two options, yet position of La Mettrie was, for sure,

La Mettrie's central reflection on the goals and powers of philosophy in relation to morals is conducted mainly in the *Discours Préliminaire* of 1750, which was one of his most important texts.⁵⁹⁹ It was the overall introduction to his complete works, the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle de l'homme*, published a year before his death. As Markovits pointed out, the title of the *discours*, which mirrors D'Alembert's endeavour showed "qu'il y a quelque chose comme une Encyclopédie dans le projet de La Mettrie".⁶⁰⁰ This text is a guideline to reread and an invitation to reinterpret his previous works that were republished in 1751. The major shift was to be found in a reordering of his works where "the point of view of philosophy" appeared then to be chiefly concerned with establishing its critical boundaries with morals and politics, before even entering what was usually considered the "real" philosophical debates, those of metaphysics and physics.

The *Discours Préliminaire* asserted something even more important, and a real change in relation to La Mettrie's initial conceptualization of the crisis of philosophy and its relation to science and metaphysics: it was an explicitly Epicurean critique of metaphysics, and positioned itself in the field as clearly guided by a therapeutical goal, and not by a purely intellectual one. In many ways La Mettrie transforms the critique of metaphysics in a critique of the social powers of discourse, mapping out what today we could call the field of ideology. The negative work of philosophy on itself was comparable then to one of auto-purification: "Tout ce qui n'est pas puisé dans le sein même de la Nature (...) ne regarde en rien la Philosophie, et vient d'une source qui lui est étrangère. Telle est la Morale."⁶⁰¹ This was the departing point of the *DP*, delineating what belonged to the field of philosophy, and what should be set aside. Philosophy must first purge itself so it could purge the soul, as La Mettrie assessment is that Scholasticism had contaminated philosophical discourse with foreign elements and inverted its social function. This introspective purging was indeed a *preliminary* philosophical exercise in order to attain a *natural point of view*. What was to be excluded by the initial purge? All sorts of things: God and all religions, moral rules, political discourses, esthetic criteria, but also metaphysical propositions that are established apriori. In other words what is excluded as everything our imagination had created but did not exist really in the world.

When in the *DP* La Mettrie argued for stopping treating moral norms as being "naturally" part of philosophical discourse, he was proposing to take a step back and clarify first the tasks and methods of philosophy to draw a methodological dividing line between philosophy and other discourses, in particular to Morals or Moral Philosophy

a distinctive one who attempted to overcome this autonomy.

599 This idea about the necessity of clarifying first the stance of philosophy in relation to morality, the Church and political institutions that La Mettrie put forward in 1750 can be found in the different version of a key previous text he wrote: the *Discours sur le Bonheur* the first version of which appeared in 1748, the last in 1751. Unfortunately, the *Discours sur le bonheur* was not included in the edition of his complete works, and most critics agree that this was probably because the inclusion of such a text would have upset his then-patron Frederic II de Prusse, who disagreed with it.

600 Francine Markovits, *Le Décalogue sceptique: l'universel en question au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Hermann, 2011) 197.

601 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 10-11.

and indirectly to Politics because these discourses were seen for La Mettrie as opposing the realization of human happiness.

What is the specificity of moral discourse? While philosophy takes the (imaginary) point of view of nature on things, a point of view where there is no final causality, no intentions or justifications, no norms or prescriptions, trying to model and embrace it, presenting what should be simply a *description* of man and nature; “la Morale” on the opposite tried to shape its object, it is always already an intervention, a prescription to the natural world, before this world has even been understood, described, assimilated:

"De là encore il n'est pas surprenant que la Philosophie ne conduise point à la Morale, pour se joindre à elle, pour prendre son parti, et l'appuyer de ses propres forces. Mais il ne faut pas croire pour cela qu'elle nous y conduise, comme à l'Ennemi, pour l'exterminer; si elle marche à elle, le flambeau à la main, c'est pour la reconnaître en quelque sorte, et juger de sang froid de la différence essentielle de leurs intérêts."⁶⁰²

Part of the critical work of naturalizing discourses was to reduce them to what they truly are—words—and break the spell of the self-representation or idealization of what they tried to be: the expression of a higher thing, real entities in themselves. Thus neither virtue nor vice “exist” in nature: “Comme philosophe, je dis que le vice et la vertu, ne sont en soi que des mots, rien de plus.”⁶⁰³ To state that was a clarification and a philosophical intervention, a materialist one.

Moral ideas, such as virtue or vice, could seem to some to be natural facts or derived from nature itself. At least this is what the dominant ideology of the Old Regime attempted to achieve. When moralists like Nicole or Malebranche stated that some men are evil by nature, they were in fact implying that evilness existed in nature, that it was a thing one should be able to isolate and study, for example, from a scientific point of view. The goal of natural philosophy for La Mettrie was to demonstrate that moral ideas did not exist in nature as things, as a given, like rocks did; they only existed as and in discourse, a prescriptive one.

Thus, to summarize, the primary role of philosophy was to analyze and clarify that fundamental division: what is from the order of nature (what exists as a natural given) and what is from the order of discourse (what exist as a social and artificial production). If we were to exaggerate a bit, we could say that La Mettrie creates two big containers to start the purification of philosophy: one branded “Philosophy” where all discourses that have to do with nature (even wrong ones) in the form of experiences and observations should be thrown in, and then a provisional huge trash can called “Morals and al”: where everything that does not come from nature—that is to say everything which is both artificial and social—should be provisionally discarded.

This initial intervention in the field of philosophy was accomplished in the Lamettrian philosophical text itself as a sort of public *dissection*. La Mettrie the philosopher opened up not the body or brain, but the mass of social discourses floating around, in order to separate, in his text, what belonged to different discursive orders, and organize them according to the the natural, scientific or materialist criteria (here, the three

602 La Mettrie, Discours Préliminaire 12.

603 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 115.

are synonyms). In his text, these dissections often took the form of establishing the delimitation of categories which were defined through numerous analogies, so the reader could “see” what he was talking about (what goes where) without ever reifying any category, as these were ultimately only functional ones, subordinated to the therapeutic goal of happiness. Here is an example of La Mettrie's use of analogy as his textual scalpel: "Autant les choses sont différentes des mœurs, le sentiment des Lois, et la vérité, de toute convention arbitraire, autant la Philosophie est différente de la Morale; ou, si l'on veut, autant la Morale de la Nature (car elle a la sienne) diffère de celle qu'un Art admirable a sagement inventée."⁶⁰⁴ If we had to conclude this first point, we could say philosophy must be purged from moral conceptions inherited from society, which have become a mold, a second nature: "mauvais moule encore pour former un Philosophe, celui des préjugés et des erreurs qui sont la base fondamentale de la Société!"⁶⁰⁵ Once the philosopher had cleared his or her mind and opinions from the social and artificial ones, which can only be done by operating on philosophical discourse to remove from its textual body its foreign agents, the following thing to do was to deepen the study of natural science, in order to actually understand how the material world really functioned.

Materialist Natural History Against “Natural Law”

La Mettrie's *histoire naturelle* did not limit itself to highlighting this opposition of the natural to the super-natural. It was not just a naturalization of all phenomena, but foremost an operation on the existing discourses and a deep critique of the powers of these ideological productions, which had been inaugurated by Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and his critique of the Bible.⁶⁰⁶ As a natural history of discourses, materialist philosophy showed that “morals” and “soul” did not exist in nature as such, but were social constructions serving particular (and not universal) social interests and political goals. The fact that La Mettrie was a materialist philosopher did not mean he undermined the material reality of words and ideas; on the contrary, he attributed to discourse, or what we would today call ideology, a key role in establishing social domination. In response to ideology La Mettrie's materialism sought to transform

604 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 12.

605 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 13.

606 Tosel summarized very clearly the nature and method of Spinoza's critique: “For Spinoza, the Bible does not contain any supernatural mystery in which one ought to believe without any reason except its allegedly divine nature. An interpretation of this text should be based on the same method as the method employed with regard to nature: ‘The correct method of interpreting nature consists above all in constructing a natural history (*historia naturae*), from which we derive the definition of natural things, as from certain data. Likewise, to interpret Scripture, we need to assemble a genuine history (*historia sincera*) of it and to deduce the thinking of the Bible's authors by valid inferences from this history, as from certain data and principles.’ Spinoza conceives of the biblical text as an individual whose body – the letters – must be grasped in their literality and whose soul or spirit is the immanent meaning.” Andre Tosel, “Spinoza or the Other Critique,” *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. Ruth Sonderegger and Karin de Boer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 34. As Markovits pointed out, the La Mettrie's *histoire naturelle* was a double-edged sword, as it allowed to think “le double échange des déterminations entre la nature et l'homme, c'est-à-dire le double fait de naturaliser les faits sociaux et d'historiciser (si l'on peut dire) les phénomènes naturels, désigne deux démarches symétriques qui ne vont pas l'une sans l'autre et pourraient caractériser une forme de matérialisme.” Markovits, *Décalogue Sceptique* 193-194.

philosophy into a critical force against ideology or the use of discourse for social and political domination. Building on Spinoza's heritage, he sought to demonstrate that the idea of a subject or substratum was a fiction (as he proposed, in a provocative manner in his *Homme-Machine*), a necessary one to establish as set of artificial constructions: repressive moral rules and oppressive political institutions. The ultimate political mission of philosophy as social critique of discourse was exposed in the *Discours Préliminaire*: to unveil the connection between (perverted) philosophy and politics, between the metaphysics of the subject generated by Scholasticism and accepted by a portion of the Enlightenment, and foundations of Absolutism. Yet the work of Enlightenment philosophy would have been much easier if it did not have to battle, at the same time, with another current of the "moderate Enlightenment" which, departing from Locke and natural theories attempted to set new metaphysical grounds for the new philosophy in Nature.

Starting in the 17th century, natural law theory was originally formulated by Protestant philosophers—in particular by Grotius, who is said to be the "father of modern natural law"—and was later developed mostly by English (Hobbes, Locke and Cumberland) and German (Pufendorf, and to some extent Leibniz) thinkers, with the French exception of Barbeyrac and later Morelly.⁶⁰⁷ Despite the fact natural law mobilized a "secularizing" reference to nature in order to contest the Catholic authoritarian foundation of political power and thus absolutism (better represented by Ramsay or Bossuet), the natural law paradigm was not a radical invention. It was more of an attempt to question or radicalize the existing yet marginalized current of scholastic natural law, first articulated by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, and later by Suarez.⁶⁰⁸ The main critique by 17th century Protestants of the Scholastic theory of natural law was that "it seemed to presuppose a moral continuity and an interdependence between God and humanity,;" in contrast, their starting point was to be "a discontinuity which made it impossible to give a rational account of human morality by reference to God and his eternal law."⁶⁰⁹ However it is not clear that despite its assertions protestant natural law truly broke with Scholasticism and a metaphysical conception of law, as with Grotius or Pufendorf it still appealed to the authority of a "higher principle" to found law, be it Nature or another God, for it had the political task to refute skepticism and need to depart from something beyond the mere experience and immanence of the natural world, which was diverse, changing and contradictory. Derathé gave maybe the most lucid problematization of that political current:

607 For an introduction of natural law theories in early modern Europe, see Robert Derathé, "L'Etat de nature et la loi naturelle," *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1970) 125-171; Richard Tuck, "The 'modern' theory of natural law," *Languages of Political Thought in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: UK, 1987) 99-119; Knud Haakonssen, "Natural Law in the 17th Century," *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge UP, 1996) 15-62; and Tim Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press: UK, 2000). Another key and forgotten political philosopher of the French Enlightenment, Morelly, published the *Code de la nature, ou Le véritable esprit de ses lois de tout temps négligé ou méconnu* in 1755, which was until the early 20th century attributed to Diderot.

608 See Haakonssen, *Natural Law* 16-22.

609 Haakonssen, *Natural Law* 25.

“Toute la théorie du droit naturel repose sur l’affirmation qu’il existe indépendamment des lois civiles et antérieurement à toutes les conventions humaines, un ordre moral universel, une règle de justice immuable, la ‘loi naturelle’, à laquelle tout homme est tenu de se conformer dans ses rapports avec ses semblables. Cette loi, qui a son fondement dans la nature même de l’homme, est aussi immuable que les vérités éternelles et comme elle tient son autorité de la droite raison, elle s’impose également à tous les hommes. C’est d’ailleurs ce qui la distingue des lois positives et fait sa supériorité sur elles.”⁶¹⁰

With the growing popularity of this current inside the Enlightenment, it had then become extremely important and urgent for La Mettrie to distinguish his “materialist” natural history from the theory of natural law, which were not simply two different approaches to the same “object”, nature, but two opposed social relations to it which were established by philosophical discourse. Natural law theories, like the ones that Locke, Barbeyrac or Morelly developed, inspired by Grotius and Burlamaqui, always ended up making some social and artificial rules appear as natural or derived from nature, which in turn were reified. It would be a wrong turn for philosophy to become a theory of natural law, as it would transform itself in a new dogma, a new *religion of nature* instead of a description of how nature operates. This was the pitfall La Mettrie wanted to avoid, because philosophy would lose simultaneously its specificity and its emancipatory power. Even the most “radical” or “progressive” natural law formulation, given its form and implicit reification of nature as a higher and separated entity, could be copied, reappropriated and absorbed by political and theological discourse. In this sense La Mettrie foresaw the most immediate reaction to apologetic discourse to Enlightenment philosophy, which was the emergence of a Christian and Catholic Enlightenment which began to reformulate the same old dogma but this time ground on a new metaphysical ground, removed from the scope of critique: Nature, instead of God.⁶¹¹ By slipping from the *histoire naturelle* to a natural law theory, philosophy would cease to be this rampart against the power of the Church and that of the Monarchy it wanted to be. This is why, from the opening of his *Discours Préliminaire*, La Mettrie argued against this particular kind of philosophy—the Trojan horse of theology inside the Enlightenment. He expressed his deep “mépris” for such philosophical theories which were seen as opening the door for a confusion of theology (an artificial point of view) and philosophy (a natural one):

“Ouvrez les yeux; vous verrez affichés de toutes parts:
‘Preuves de l’existence de Dieu par les merveilles de la Nature.
‘Preuves de l’immortalité de l’Âme par la Géométrie et l’Algèbre.
‘La religion prouvée par les faits.
‘Théologie Physique.

610 Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 151-152.

611 This idealist trend (incarnated in Condorcet, Destutt de Tracy etc), which secularized religious discourse, imported its functioning into the Enlightenment movement, and opposed materialism was the one which recurred to natural law in order to formulate “natural rights of men” coming out of the French Revolution, a set of rights which, as we know today, remained purely formal, and which hide some fundamental exclusions (like women, blacks and even initially restricted active citizenship to property).

Et tant d'autres livres semblables. Lisez-les, sans autre préparation, vous serez persuadé que la Philosophie est par elle-même favorable à la Religion et à la Morale, et qu'enfin l'étude de la Nature est le plus court chemin pour arriver, tant à la connaissance de son adorable Auteur, qu'à l'intelligence des vérités morales et révélées."⁶¹²

Beyond the particular content of natural law propositions, the problem was its form, as it recreated a concept of Nature, and thus of Law as a transcendental point of view on civil society, a point of view that could not be questioned from the standpoint of human experience or present observation. It became a new ideology of power, a way of reasoning functioning in an analogous way to theology, as even its most appealing current, that of English contractualism (Locke, Hobbes), colluded, as Derathe noted, "le probleme du fondement de l'Etat ... avec celui de son origine", meaning the normative and the historical perspectives on power.⁶¹³ For La Mettrie, such a theory confirmed the idea that there are "intentions" in nature, or laws that could be interpreted as final causes: "Si la Religion eût pu parler le langage de la Raison, Nicole, cette belle plume du siècle passé, qui l'a si bien contrefait, le lui eût fait tenir."⁶¹⁴ Accepting natural law theories was ultimately giving an opportunity to religion to speak the "same language" as reason. What was presented by Locke and others as an advance of an independent point of view of philosophy over religion and morals was in fact a step back.

Natural law theories changed the principle of reasoning, but they did not change the form and logic of theological discourse; instead, they replicated it, allowing for theology to easily counterfeit philosophy, and making even more difficult for the public to discriminate between natural, materialist philosophy and its new religious counterfeit. To be truly emancipatory, philosophy not only had to change its *foundations* inherited from Scholasticism (from God to human reason and nature), it needed to overthrow and subvert its *methodology* and form in order to fulfill its desire social function of ideological critique in the public sphere. The *natural history* of morals was instead a materialist historicization of moral discourses:

"Les Hommes ayant formé le projet de vivre ensemble, il a fallu former un Système de moeurs politiques, pour la sûreté de ce commerce: Et comme ce sont des Animaux indociles, difficiles à dompter, et courent spontanément au Bien-être per fas et nefas, ceux qui par leur sagesse et leur génie ont été dignes d'être placés à la tête des autres, ont sagement appelé la Religion au secours de Règles et de Loix, trop froides et trop sensées, pour pouvoir prendre une Autorité absolue sur l'impétueuse imagination d'un Peuple turbulent et frivole."⁶¹⁵

Natural philosophy showed that moral values did not derive from metaphysical principles but from physical ones, the physical facts that organize social life: politics, "La

612 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 9-10.

613 Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 126.

614 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 35.

615 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 11.

Morale tire son Origine de la Politique.”⁶¹⁶ Then, if morals were derived from politics, any moral system was also a political one, or at least designed to serve political interests. Thus La Mettrie not only denounced the political instrumentalization of moral values and debates, but he wanted to show in a more fundamental way “la Morale” as a category of discourse that constructs imaginary identities is both the condition and the result of any political society. This origin of morality should be told as a *history*, for most of the time it was presented as a fact or given of nature by the very discourses that dictate moral rules and by the same gesture legitimize their claims and assert their authority by simultaneously dehistoricizing themselves. Materialist philosophy functioned in the opposite manner of that of theology and natural law: the purpose of the *histoire naturelle* was to tell not the *history* of constitution of morals as facts but instead as ideas or discourses, interrogating their social power using always the point of view of nature, a scientific one.

La Mettrie and Rousseau: The Crossroads of Two Uses of Natural History and Materialist Critique

To better understand La Mettrie’s natural history of morals, I propose to very briefly think through his philosophy in analogy to Rousseau’s own history of the origin of humanity and morality. Hopefully both their common and distinctive features will appear more clearly. La Mettrie’s position both anticipated Rousseau’s as the *Discours sur le Bonheur* and the *Discours Préliminaire* were published before Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754), and provided a slightly different version of a natural history of men and morals. It is useful to make this analogy because this is the main text by Rousseau that has many times been used by its commentators to qualify him as a “matérialiste,” and not without reason.

Like La Mettrie, Rousseau wanted to go back to adopt a natural point of view to understand human morality separating the natural from the artificial, and understood the difficulty of the task of delineating an imaginary state of nature: “Car ce n'est pas une légère entreprise de démêler ce qu'il y a d'originaire et d'artificiel dans la nature actuelle de l'homme, et de bien connaître un état qui n'existe plus, qui n'a peut-être point existé, qui probablement n'existera jamais, et dont il est pourtant nécessaire d'avoir des notions justes pour bien juger de notre état présent.”⁶¹⁷ The main difficulty, in doing the *histoire naturelle* was to manage to separate the social from the natural, that is to say not to import into the natural world social conception. If Rousseau assessed that “les philosophes qui ont examiné les fondements de la société ont tous senti la nécessité de remonter jusqu'à l'état de nature, mais aucun d'eux n'y est arrivé” it was because “tous, parlant sans cesse de besoin, d'avidité, d'oppression, de désirs, et d'orgueil, ont transporté à l'état de nature des idées qu'ils avaient prises dans la société. Ils parlaient de l'homme sauvage, et ils peignaient l'homme civil.”⁶¹⁸

616 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 11.

617 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754) Ed. Jean-Marie Tremblay (Québec, 2002) 12.

618 Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* 19.

Rousseau also wanted to look at society and its moral and political values from the standpoint of nature, and also assign to philosophy the task to separate what is natural from what is social. This work is particularly urgent for him because natural law theorists (like Grotius, Pufendorf, Barbeyrac or Burlamaqui) have a tendency to assign to nature behaviors which are social.⁶¹⁹ And Rousseau, like La Mettrie, stated that in the natural state of mankind, before the emergence of society there was neither vice nor virtue: “il paraît d'abord que les hommes dans cet état n'ayant entre eux aucune sorte de relation morale, ni de devoirs connus, ne pouvaient être ni bons ni méchants, et n'avaient ni vices ni vertus.”⁶²⁰ To some extent, one could argue that Rousseau pushed further the materialist critique of natural law, which led him to polemicize on this issue with Diderot and his contradictory stance on the existence of a “droit naturel.”⁶²¹

But if they shared the materialist methodology of naturalizing moral discourse, and a common materialist opposition to natural law, their respective philosophical interventions differed in two points: while La Mettrie limited his to exploring the negative dimensions of critique, Rousseau thought philosophy had to propose new and better political foundations for a social morality and a new source of legitimacy for political institutions, and thus nature which for La Mettrie was the realm of facts and experiences, and also of an immanent *potentia* (*puissance*) clear of any intrinsic value or intentions, was to become for Rousseau a normative source to examine and refound civil society. In fact the whole goal of the *Contrat Social* was to recover, beyond the materialist critique, a sort of natural right to regulate social relations: “les droits individuels ou le droit naturel ne sont donc pas anéantis par le contrat social, on les retrouve au sein de l'Etat, mais transformés ou rétablis par la raison.”⁶²²

For Rousseau political philosophy not only needed to accomplish the critique of the unfounded preconception and forms of social authority, but it had also to propose a way out to the political crisis of European despotic regimes. The *Second Discours* was then the preparation of, as well as logically completed by, the *Contrat Social*. His perspective, when looking back at nature, is always in the back of his head, a normative: which laws are the best? which are the fairest? how to ground political authority? etc. A whole set of questions that La Mettrie would never dare approach.

Rousseau had the faith that a better understanding of man in his natural state will be the key to find the best political arrangement in the civil state: “Mais tant que nous ne connaissons point l'homme naturel, c'est en vain que nous voudrions déterminer la loi qu'il a reçue ou celle qui convient le mieux à sa constitution.”⁶²³ Rousseau's goal was to understand *l'homme naturel* not for himself, but in order to grasp the true natural law, in

619 On Rousseau's relation with natural law theory see Robert Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1970) 7-171 and Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008) 113-135.

620 Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* 30.

621 See Roger Masters, *La Philosophie politique de Rousseau*, trad. Gérard Colonna D'Istria and Jean-Pierre Guillot (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2002) 303-315.

622 Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 171.

623 Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* 13.

order to correct the misconceptions perpetuated by the defenders of natural law theories.⁶²⁴ He was not interested at all in all the “livres scientifiques qui ne nous apprennent qu'à voir les hommes tels qu'ils se sont faits” nor in the “expériences” required to understand natural man, that is not the kind of nature he is interested in nature as it can prescribe a law for social life, *a natural law*.⁶²⁵

Both authors agreed that before the emergence of social bonds, man was nothing more than a being “stupide et borné” rejecting any idea of a “natural sociability”.⁶²⁶ According to Rousseau: “telle fut la condition de l'homme naissant; telle fut la vie d'un animal borné d'abord aux pures sensations, et profitant à peine des dons que lui offrait la nature, loin de songer à lui rien arracher,” leading “une vie simple et solitaire, des besoins très bornés.”⁶²⁷ As he wrote to Beaumont: “Dans cet état l'homme ne connoît que lui; il ne voit son bien être opposé ni conforme à celui de personne; il ne hait ni n'aime rien borné au seul instinct physique il est nul il est bête c'est ce que j'ai fait voir dans mon *Discours sur l'inégalité*.”⁶²⁸ Rousseau however opposed materialists (Helvetius in particular) who explained the origin of human sociability as derived from human needs, mostly physical ones, and their need to come together to fulfill them. The Genevois abhorred such a deterministic origin of human society and resorted to a “natural virtue”, human piety or weakness, depending if you take the *Second Discours* or the *Emile*, which Derathé called an “identité de nature” of human species.⁶²⁹

For La Mettrie, the depiction of “natural man” was in fact more the depiction of an animal, that of the proper of animal, not of mankind, as humanity begins with social life, and more concretely with language.⁶³⁰ Before language and social bounds, man was an animal:

“Des Animaux à l'Homme, la transition n'est pas violente; les vrais Philosophes en conviendront. Qu'était l'Homme, avant l'invention des Mots et la connaissance des Langues? Un Animal de son espèce, qui avec beaucoup moins d'instinct naturel, que les autres, dont alors il ne se croirait pas Roi, n'était distingué du Singe et des autres Animaux, que comme le

624 “C'est cette ignorance de la nature de l'homme qui jette tant d'incertitude et d'obscurité sur la véritable définition du droit naturel : car l'idée du droit, dit M. Burlamaqui, et plus encore celle du droit naturel, sont manifestement des idées relatives à la nature de l'homme.” Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* 13.

625 “Quelles expériences seraient nécessaires pour parvenir à connaître l'homme naturel ; et quels sont les moyens de faire ces expériences au sein de la société ? Loin d'entreprendre de résoudre ce problème, je crois en avoir assez médité le sujet, pour oser répondre d'avance que les plus grands philosophes ne seront pas trop bons pour diriger ces expériences, ni les plus puissants.” Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* 12.

626 On the debates around natural sociability, see Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 142-151.

627 Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* 37, 39.

628 Lettre à M de Beaumont. 18 novembre 1762. Qtd in Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 163.

629 See Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 146-150.

630 “Si chacun eût pu vivre seul et uniquement pour soi, il y aurait eu des hommes, et point d'humanité; des vices, ou ce qu'on appelle ainsi, et point de remords: par la raison qu'il n'y a point d'Animalité (pour employer ce mot dans un sens barbare) entre les Animaux qui ne sont occupés, chacun que de son individu, et qui, sans le plaisir vénérien, n'auraient presque aucun commerce entr'eux.” La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 144.

Singe l'est lui-même; je veux dire par une physionomie qui annonçait plus de discernement."⁶³¹

The qualitative dividing line for La Mettrie was the one that divides animality and humanity, and not between a natural and social man, as humanity was immediately and necessarily social, for it was constituted by the social and therefore political bounds necessary to fulfill human needs and desires. For La Mettrie, to have an animal life was not a derogatory status, just a different form of life. By underlining the difference between animal and properly human life, La Mettrie's goal was not so much to hierarchize them as to show, as Markovits noted, that: "l'éthique n'est pas le propre de l'homme."⁶³²

From animal to man there was a qualitative transition, but not a "violent" one, in the sense that from a strictly natural point of view, one that would exclude the artificial formation of social life, the human species and the most advanced monkey were not structurally different.⁶³³ The qualitative difference was that of language and education, which for La Mettrie were intrinsically linked.

Rousseau's natural history in both his discourse on inequality and language were the preliminary critical work for his *Contrat social*, for he wanted to produce a political effect by countering Hobbes's "materialist" and fatal conclusions: the need of a strong and repressive state to control and coerce mankind, which was doomed to be "naturally" evil, biased, pushed by its desires of jealousy, selfishness and revenge. La Mettrie, however, had previously articulated another response to Hobbes: of course morality was foreign to nature, as it was the product of education. But Hobbes was right that if we were to judge the "natural man" by our current standards, we could only conclude that he was evil. But Hobbes did not understand the thickness of the social bond and the powers of education:

"En général les hommes sont nés méchants; sans l'éducation, il y en aurait peu de bons; et encore avec ce secours, y en a-t-il beaucoup plus des uns que des autres. L'éducation seule a donc amélioré l'organisation; c'est elle qui a tourné les hommes au profit et à l'avantage des hommes; elle les a montés comme une horloge, au ton qui pût servir, au degré le plus utile. Telle est l'origine de la vertu; le Bien public en est la source et l'objet."⁶³⁴

Morals, this necessary creation of society, aimed at preserving the "public good", but were nonetheless made out of "pure imagination", that is to say that they do not correspond to anything which really in nature: "La nécessité des liaisons de la vie, a donc été celle de l'établissement des vertus et des vices, dont l'origine est par conséquent d'institution politique. Ce fondement de la société, quoique de pure imagination, est si

631 La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 78.

632 Markovits, *Décatalogue sceptique* 198.

633 "(...) la similitude de la structure et des opérations du Singe est telle que je ne doute presque point, si on exerçait parfaitement cet Animal, qu'on ne vint enfin à bout de lui apprendre à prononcer, et par conséquence à savoir une langue. Alors ce ne serait plus un Homme Sauvage, ni un Homme manqué; ce serait un Homme parfait, un petit Homme de Ville, avec autant d'étoffe ou de muscles que nous mêmes, pour penser et profiter de son éducation." La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 78.

634 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 139.

solide, si nécessaire, que sans lui tout l'édifice, ne pouvant se soutenir, croule et tombe en ruine."⁶³⁵

It is a paradox then, that the keystone of social life, the moral education of mankind, which constituted the base of society and the guarantee of its cohesion, relied on such a weak foundation, an artificial (and not natural) bound of imagination. As I show later in this chapter, for La Mettrie, the social powers of imagination are far greater than the social powers of reflective discourse, the kind of discourse philosophy wants to produce. So even if philosophy is grounded in nature, it has a greater chance to entice and convince men. Nature has no social power of its own, besides that of being and constantly acting through individuals.

Following La Mettrie's *Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, imagination belonged to a faculty of the body as it modifies the soul; it started in the body which was already a modification of the "sensitive soul", for La Mettrie rejected dualism and stated that there is a material continuity between physical and mental phenomena. Imagination produced a combination of different and incomplete sensations, a mental image or picture that did not exist in reality, but which seems a likely idea, a "perception d'une idée produite par des causes internes, et semblable à quelqu'une des idées que les causes externes avaient coutume de faire naître."⁶³⁶ The social bound of education, produced by imagination, was to be considered a fake imitation of an external idea or a ghost, something like a mental trick. Although imagination produced a similar "disposition physique" in the brain as the one produced by an external cause, it was in fact caused by some part of the body and senses themselves, by the internal workings of the living organism: "c'est pourquoi les objets de l'imagination sont appelés phantômes ou spectres."⁶³⁷ Under the light of this materialist critique, the foundations of society appeared quite weak and fragile. And the demystifying effects of the philosophical natural history could be quite unsettling for the political and moral institutions lying upon them. What was clear is that as the natural history of morality progresses, unveiling the true, material, origin of ideas, the very foundations of society are exposed in a double sense, stripped from their veil, and subject of critique: "Voilà ce que me dicte la Philosophie: elle m'apprend que Caton est sans vertu, et Catilina sans vice. L'Amour du Bien public me dicte autre chose. Je déplore le sort de l'Humanité d'être, pour ainsi dire en d'aussi mauvaises mains que les siennes."⁶³⁸

On the Materialist Use of Natural History

If I have chosen to begin this chapter by the natural history of morals before getting to the natural history of the soul, operating against the historical order of production of La Mettrie's works, it is because this is the order La Mettrie established in his final *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, also titled *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle de l'homme*, published in 1751, the year of his sudden death, which presented a new

635 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 144.

636 La Mettrie, *Traité de l'âme* 175.

637 La Mettrie, *Traité de l'âme* 175.

638 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 199.

conception and reappropriation of the genre of the natural history.⁶³⁹

The genre of natural history has its first origins in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, but also Aristotle's *History of Animals*. Natural history has usually been understood as "l'histoire des choses de la nature," and while that might be true for its first expressions in ancient philosophy, in the 16th century the sudden emergence of a "new" and more diverse nature a result of the first European colonial expansion, reactivated the use of this scientific form of classification and explanation of natural diversity, which began to formulate new problems for science, like the origin and diversity of natural species.⁶⁴⁰ However the genre of the Renaissance naturalists was quickly appropriated by theological discourse, as it became the case also in the Enlightenment with the Abbé Pluche's multi-volume *Spectacle de la nature* (1732).

Enlightenment philosophers appropriated this genre in two different directions: as a means for experimental science and as a critique of religion. The latter applied natural history to a different object, the production of human beliefs, and developed natural histories of supernatural phenomenons, as was the case with John Trenchard's *Natural history of Superstition* (1709) or Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757).⁶⁴¹ Thus, in the 18th century the method of natural history mutated again and extended its scope to religious phenomena (superstition, miracles etc) and religion in general, framing them, as Hoquet reminded us, "non plus comme les manifestations d'une transcendance mais en les renvoyant à la nature humaine comme à leur source. Faire l'histoire naturelle de la religion, c'est souligner que les différentes attitudes religieuses trouvent leur origine dans les passions et les conduites de l'homme."⁶⁴² The other appropriation had to do with Bacon's project of developing an inductive natural history, which only found an echo in the 18th century with Buffon.⁶⁴³ Overall we can say that with Corneanu that "the very notion of 'natural history' underwent a series of such radical changes during the

639 For a detailed contextualization and a study of the *Discours Préliminaire*, see Ann Thomson, *Materialism and Society in the Mid-eighteenth Century: La Mettrie's Discours Préliminaire* (Geneva: Droz, 1981).

640 Thierry Hoquet, "L'histoire naturelle est-elle une science de la nature?" *Corpus* 40 (2002): 117. As Llana points out, due perhaps to a renewed interest in Aristotle's biological writings and no doubt to the "discovery" of the flora and fauna in the "new world," a revival of interest in natural history occurred in the sixteenth century, as indicated by the works of William Turner (1508-1568), Pierre Belon (1517-1564), Guillaume Rondelet (1507-1566), Leonhard Fuchs (1501-66), Konrad Gesner (1516- 1565), Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605), and Andreas Cesalpino (1519-1603). With a critical eye, writers undertook new catalogs of the natural world, but worked very much in the spirit of Pliny or Aristotle." James Llana "Natural History and the 'Encyclopédie'," *Journal of the History of Biology* 33.1 (2000) 2.

641 See Michel Malherbe, "Hume's Natural History of Religion" *Hume Studies* 21.2 (1995): 255-274.

642 Hoquet, "L'histoire naturelle" 121.

643 As Malherbe noted: "Bacon had vindicated the idea of an inductive natural history, which would collect and order any kind of phenomena—natural or artificial—provided this material was the basis for the discovery of causes. A fact is not a positive reality that stands alone; it is an effect, and every effect calls for a cause. This inductive natural history is not only the collation of unanalyzed and undiscussed facts; it is also the first step towards scientific explanation. All knowledge begins with the senses. But the sensible world is not the scientific world, i.e., the world which, being known to be true, is the real world. Thus, the method of natural history must order and classify phenomena in a way that is favorable to the invention of causal explanation and to the discovery of abstract natures. Description is the beginning of explanation. Ordering and classifying are the first acts of an evolutive method that is essentially inductive." Michel Malherbe, "Hume's Natural History" 257. See also Peter Anstey, "Francis Bacon and the Classification of Natural History," *Early Science and Medicine* 17.1/2 (2012): 11-31.

sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it is highly unlikely that anyone could produce a comprehensive definition of the genre without ending up with epistemological cartoons.”⁶⁴⁴

In the ancient world natural history used to be simply the science of collection of things, which had to establish a description or enumeration of the things found in a particular place or particular part of nature, it was "une science liée à la description."⁶⁴⁵ More precisely it comes from the ancient organization of medical science and naturalist discourse which was eventually separated since the Middle Ages into two separate disciplines: history and philosophy, or as Hoquet put it "d'un côté la recherche d'un comment, de l'autre celle du pourquoi."⁶⁴⁶ In the 18th century, the philosophical equivalent of Buffon's descriptive natural history would be Newton's natural philosophy *Principes mathématiques de la philosophie naturelle*. La Mettrie's reinterpretation of the natural history genre in fact attempted to bridge this gap or separation between history and philosophy—the how and the why—as for him natural philosophy should attempt to show that both were in fact the same thing, that the explanation of natural manifestations should be looked in nature itself, applying the scientific method, but nature did not provide any explanation beyond its manifestations. His natural philosophy had little to do with Newtonism, which established the principles to explain nature outside of it (in mathematics and ultimately God), but he also wanted to distinguish his approach from Buffon. As Malherbe pointed out, Buffon “was only concerned with natural philosophy and included the history of man only insofar as man could be studied as an animal endowed with particular properties, living in a certain terrestrial environment;” his goal was to do a natural history, establishing the particular kind of “physical truths” (by distinction to mathematical truths) of what could be known. La Mettrie's departed from a philosophical, and not a naturalist perspective, and resorted to the genre of natural history in order to unveil or critique the knowledge necessary for his neo-Epicurean project. He insisted he was not doing a purely scientific history or description, but a philosophical one, a critical intervention in the public sphere oriented by the existential goal of achieving human happiness, which required first to combat all of the discourses which aimed at perpetuating human oppression and repression of desire by recurring to discourses or fables, of nature, sometimes even claiming a scientific base.

La Mettrie was interested in history because of its attitude of restraint towards interpretation, and he emphasized in his natural philosophy the mode of *description* over that of *explanation* in order to combat the philosophies of external causality and of a supposed intentionality of nature. Interpretation of the natural world was an activity that belonged to the reader, to the public sphere as a whole, and not to the philosopher. History as a science in the early modern period still had little to do with a systematical chronological discourse; it enclosed a variety of discursive modes brought together by the drive towards description. It did not suppose a hierarchy of the events or factors of interpretation, nor a chronological organization, as this was the result of a 19th century

644 Sorana Corneanu, Guido Giglioni and Dana Jalobeanu “Introduction: The Place of Natural History in Francis Bacon's Philosophy” *Early Science and Medicine* 17.1/2 (2012) 8.

645 Hoquet, “L'histoire naturelle” 124.

646 Hoquet, “L'histoire naturelle” 137.

transformation of the discipline.⁶⁴⁷ But beyond this genre of unintentional description of facts, maybe what La Mettrie borrowed from the ancient medical origins of “natural history” was Dioscorides alternative model for natural history to Pliny’s:

"Pliny's contemporary, the Greek physician Dioscorides (ca. 40–80), offered yet another model of what natural history could be. *De materia medica* (On Medical Material), one of the most successful and enduring herbals of antiquity, emphasized the importance of understanding the natural world in light of its medicinal efficacy. Dioscorides' treatise described approximately 550 plants and provided succinct descriptions of the virtues of Mediterranean plants in curing various ailments. Implicitly, it suggested that any description of nature should always be in the service of medicine, making greater knowledge of nature a precondition to the improvement of health."⁶⁴⁸

In his short, philosophical itinerary La Mettrie managed to re-evaluate the method of the natural history in order to integrate it to his materialist project of philosophical critique. It was first articulated in his *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (1745) and also in his next major work *L'Homme-Machine* (1748). Yet in his 1751 edition of his *Oeuvres Philosophiques* La Mettrie reorganized most of his previous works (claiming the authorship of many of them for the first time) presented as “*six mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle de l'homme*”. What is clear then, from this new organization, which borrowed the term “*mémoires*” from the Academic genre, probably as a parody, is that the focus of the *histoire naturelle* had moved slightly: from the “*histoire naturelle de l'âme*” (title of his first work in 1745 now re-baptized “*Traité de l'âme*”) to the “*histoire naturelle de l'homme*.” Of course this shift needs to be put in the context also of the publication of the first volumes of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* in 1749.

The new order of the essays in the compilation also went in that direction: the *DP* established the basis for a natural history of moral values and political institutions, like law, which are never fully developed but explicitly contained, the first *mémoire* is the *Homme-machine*, a natural history of man, and only in the third position we find the natural history of the soul. Of course the *Discours Préliminaire* (and its counterpart the *Discours sur le Bonheur*) could only appear to the reader as a parallel or implicit natural history of morals *by analogy* of the other ones, in particular the *Histoire Naturelle de l'Âme*, which are explicitly developed in the *Mémoires*; and the whole *Oeuvres* were to be read as a knitted system of analogies. And this probably would only occur at the second reading of the book or after some reflection. As a piece of natural history the *DP* aimed to unveil the vacuity of the rational foundation of moral rules and political institutions, and also showed the true nature of the ideological discourses that attempt to legitimate the existing order. The opening *Discours* wanted to give the reader the particular point of view to read the following texts, which were not to be read simply as scientific pieces, as Plinian or Buffonian essays of natural history, but as philosophical ones, that is, as deconstructions of the different discursive and ideological mechanisms at

647 This was the “weakness” of the natural history genre according to Gusdorf who characterized it as “une attitude de réserve épistémologique” where “on se contentera de recanter les êtres vivants avec la plus grande exactitude possible, sans fonder d'hypothèses, en renonçant à toute explication” which interested La Mettrie. Georges Gusdorf, *Dieu, la nature, l'homme, au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Payot, 1972) 301.

648 Paula Findlen, “Natural History,” ed. Path Katharine and Lorraine Danston, *Cambridge History of Science, Volume 3: Early Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 4.

play to perpetuate political and moral domination, a deconstruction which appealed to science, nature and experience, and not to passions or metaphysics.

This new logical order for the natural histories imprinted by the *DP* moving the focus from metaphysics to politics, from the question of the soul to that of morals and law, suggests, indeed, a second dimension of the natural history of the soul and all the metaphysical debates (contained in the three first pieces: the *Traité*, the *Homme-machine* and the *Abrégé*). Why should a philosopher bother with all these debates concerning the substantial and immortal nature of the human soul? The first answer to this question, which we saw in the *Discours sur le bonheur*, was that those debates only have a meaning inasmuch as they produce a therapeutic effect, destroying false and imaginary representations, combatting the poison of remorse and guilt which ruin human life. In the *DP*, La Mettrie seemed to indicate another utility of philosophical critique of Christian metaphysics, a more political one: the naturalization of the soul by philosophical discourse goes against the “naturalization” of the intentional subject, and operated against the logic of the reason of State (*raison d’Etat*) and the constitution of a centralized political power which controlling its citizens morally and politically. La Mettrie fixed the cap of early modern materialist philosophy, by clarifying its political project: ungrounding moral unhappiness and political subjugation, by questioning the kind of subject that the State needed and that Christian metaphysics, in collaboration with Scholasticism and public law, produced and reproduced daily. As we saw, for Althusser, materialist philosophy opposed the ideological work of political discourse by bringing science into the discussion. One of the main ideological constructions of the modern State was that of the responsible subject, and this was only possible because state ideology “transforme les individus en sujets,” by making the political-discursive category “subject” exist and function.⁶⁴⁹ Lamettrian natural history was not a defense of science for science or curiosity’s sake; it used scientific methods and of the study of nature to produce a critical and political intervention in the public sphere. As Markovits suggested, the keystone of La Mettrie’s materialist critique of moral and theological discourse, which was hidden and only visible after this second rereading, was that beneath the attack to the substantial nature of the soul, and the genealogy of human faculties from sensorial perception lay a challenge to the idea of human’s strictly rational intentionality: “Naturaliser le principe intérieur et spirituel, ce n’est pas seulement récuser le dualisme ontologique, c’est d’abord penser l’intentionnalité, la conscience, le subjectif en termes de nature, c’est à dire en démontrer les dispositifs, en analyser les structures comme des effets de discours et non comme le principe de la pensée.”⁶⁵⁰

The order of discourse here, the fact that the natural history of morality precedes that of the soul, suggested that the conception of a substantial soul put forward both by the Christian orthodoxy and the lawmakers of the Absolute Monarchy was not the starting point of philosophy (the true metaphysical grounds) as it pretended to be, but the end result of political project. The uses of philosophy in the *Discours Preliminaire* appeared as subordinated to clear political goals, as it was the case with establishing an

649 Louis Althusser, *Sur la reproduction*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1995) 305.

650 Markovits, *Décalogue sceptique* 194.

independent soul, that is the siege of Reason, in order to assign moral and political responsibilities to our actions, in this life (so the law can judge and convict) and in the “future” life, as religion suggests: “La Politique, entourée de ses Ministres, va criant dans les places publiques, dans les Chaires, et presque sur les toits: Le corps n’est rien, l’Âme est tout; Mortels, sauvez-vous, quoiqu’il vous en coûte.”⁶⁵¹

That idea of intention, which was the idea of a “subject”, as a stable ontology or substratum that lies beneath our actions, as its ultimate cause, was for La Mettrie a fiction, a product of the political imagination. Human *subjects* clearly delineated as the moral and political equivalents of substantial souls in the public sphere of exchange, did not exist in nature. Only facts, actions, and experiences, species and individual organism existed.⁶⁵² The role of materialist philosophy was to deconstruct this fiction of a rational soul separated and independent from its bodily functions, sensations and desires:

“Enfin rien de si borné que l’empire de l’Âme sur le corps et rien de si étendu que l’empire du corps sur l’Âme. Non seulement l’Âme ne connoît pas les muscles qui lui obéissent, et quel est son pouvoir volontaire sur les organes vitaux; mais elle n’en exerce jamais d’arbitraire sur ces mêmes organes. Que dis-je! elle ne fait pas même si la volonté est la cause efficiente des actions musculuses, ou simplement une cause occasionnelle, mise en jeu par certaines dispositions internes du cerveau, qui agissent sur la volonté la remuent secrètement, et la déterminent de quelque manière que ce soit.”⁶⁵³

La Mettrie’s position started thus from a similar assessment to that in Rousseau’s opening of the *Contract Social*: “L’homme est né libre et partout il les dans les fers”, for La Mettrie man was born to be happy and everywhere he was suffering and tortured by guilt. Throughout his *Mémoires* he attempted to develop a different methodology for philosophy and a particular use of natural history to restore the possibility of human happiness. Maybe La Mettrie represented in the Enlightenment what Althusser identified as “le commencement d’un discours scientifique (sans sujet) sur l’idéologie”.⁶⁵⁴ His materialization of the soul in the *Homme-machine* was just a response to the denaturalization and dematerialization of subjects operated by the discourses of power, mainly religion. Without openly and directly challenging the absolutist monarchy’s legitimacy, as did Rousseau, La Mettrie put forward a philosophical method and a logic of discourse that operated completely against the necessary logic of the Christian and Absolutist discourses. Of course, La Mettrie’s materialist philosophy was and continues to be a dense mediation by which to read and interpret reality, and one which requires a careful reader because its philosophy adopts a very indirect formulation at that it same time went to the foundations of moral and political power and explained how they continued to be held in place, revealing not only their rhetorical procedures but how their

651 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 17.

652 Part of the education necessary for social life is the belief, through an act of imagination, in the existence of a rational subject of imputation of actions, a subject that acts as the radical beginning of a chain of causes and not one that acts in the midst of a natural chain of natural effects—that is a soul in a body—because this radical causality or intentionality of all our actions is what justifies that we should be responsible for them, not only in our natural life, but also in the one to come.

653 La Mettrie, *Traité de l’âme* 195-196.

654 Althusser, *Sur la reproduction* 305.

fictions had been anchored and naturalized by philosophy through discourses of intentionality, substances, ontology and metaphysics.

A “Morale Naturelle”?

One could ask if philosophy, besides unveiling the social and political origin of morals, had a positive contribution to make. This was maybe one of the most difficult points of materialist philosophy in relation to morality, for while all materialist philosophers agreed that there was a need for a philosophical critique of religious and later “bourgeois” morality, they were less united when it came to formulating if there was something like a “morale naturelle” in the first place. For La Mettrie philosophy departed from nature not to judge the social world, but instead to explain it; it observed the world from the standpoint experience and observation. And as in physics or chemistry, experience and observation showed some regularities and connections in the needs of human behavior, like a tendency towards pleasure and a fear of pain. Yet, in contrast to Rousseau who thought that an alliance between science and politics was necessary in order to establish the best political institutions, La Mettrie refused to grant any normative or positive function to philosophy.

La Mettrie’s materialism shared with Diderot’s the conviction that it was not philosophy, but rather humanity as a whole through public deliberation, who should establish laws and moral rules. Philosophy was only to accomplish the negative work of critique, opening the field up for discussion and establishing a natural point of view on the matter. In fact one could even argue that for La Mettrie a philosophy that would preach a particular morality would in fact cease to be so and thus become a religion, despite its intentions and the content of its doctrine:

“Ce n’est point aux Philosophes qu’elle (la vertu) été réservée. Tout Esprit de parti, toute secte, tout fanatisme lui tourne le dos. Elle a été donnée ou plutôt enseignée à tous. Soyons hommes seulement, et nous y trouverons la vertu; ce n’est point dans les Temples, c’est dans notre coeur qu’elle habite. Ce n’est point je ne sais quelle loi naturelle, que la Nature méconnaît; ce sont les plus sages des hommes qui l’y ont gravée, et en ont jeté les plus solides fondements.”⁶⁵⁵

If philosophy had human happiness as its goal, it was not because there was a “secret intention” of nature that wanted us to be happy, a secret intention of which the philosopher had a special knowledge, or because the philosopher knew better than others how to read nature. It was rather due to the fact that since the Greek antiquity most men had agreed that an impartial observation of human behavior leads to a single scientific conclusion: that our actions tend to provide us a greater happiness, that all living beings are animated, as Spinoza argued in the *Ethics*, by a *conatus* a desire to persevere in the existence.

For La Mettrie, if one were to push to talk about a “Morale naturelle”, it would be of a very different kind from that which philosophers had traditionally presented, as it would be a conclusion from the observation of nature, and not an imaginary “natural law”. In *La Volupté* (1745), La Mettrie began to formulate his particular conception of

655 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 139.

what a natural morality, or rather ethics, would look like, but he never dwelled on or developed his intuitions further. Later in the *Homme-machine*, La Mettrie tried to explain how the “Loi Naturelle,” provided one could conceive such a contradictory “law”, was different from all theories of natural law and human morality previously presented by the jurists and philosophers:

“Comment définirions-nous la Loi Naturelle? C’est un sentiment, qui nous apprend ce que nous ne devons pas faire, par ce que nous ne voudrions pas qu’on nous fit. (...) Vous voyez que la Loi Naturelle n’est qu’un sentiment intime, qui appartient encore à l’imagination, comme tous les autres, parmi lesquels on compte la pensée. Par conséquent elle ne suppose évidemment ni éducation, ni révélation, ni Législateur, à moins qu’on ne veuille la confondre avec les Lois Civiles, à la manière ridicule des Théologiens.”⁶⁵⁶

The statement that a law could derive from an internal feeling is at least paradoxical, as the law is precisely what is socially and collectively established and has nothing to do with nature. In this regard, both La Mettrie and Rousseau agree on the separation of the two kinds of discourses, the scientific and the normative, but in the *Homme-machine* he still inhabited the language and conceptual apparatus of his philosophical enemies and necessary counterparts, Cartesianism and Newtonism. Later in the text he clarified the meaning of this “natural law” by providing a clearly Spinozist content: “natural morality” expressed itself in each individual creation of nature at any moment, in the form of an “inner feeling,” whose form of manifestation was pleasure: “il y a tant de plaisir à faire du bien, à sentir, à reconnaître celui qu’on reçoit, tant de contentement à pratiquer la vertu, à être doux, humain, tendre, charitable, compatissant et généreux.”⁶⁵⁷ His argument, which was both against the analytical (Locke, Pufendorf) and the genetic (Rousseau, Condillac) attempts to recover *l’homme à l’état de nature* and thus the “origin” of natural virtue, was that nature was already acting around us, that it expresses itself through our feeling. La Mettrie’s materialism in relation to ethics was nothing more than a development of Spinoza’s idea of nature’s self activity, its immanent principle of elucidation as the “nature naturante” which could be explained by its sole effects. The obstacle to virtue were not passions, but the whole ideological and discursive apparatus (be it from the Church, State or philosophy) which were contriving the natural action of nature in human beings and avoiding us to see and feel the activity of nature in us.

Nonetheless La Mettrie abandoned the expression of “Loi Naturelle” in the *Discours Préliminaire* because of the confusion generated by the use of the word “loi.” He replaced “loi” with the expression “Morale de la Nature, ou de la Philosophie”, which is “aussi différente de celle de la Religion et de la Politique (...) que la Nature l’est de l’Art. Diamétralement opposées, jusqu’à se tourner le dos.”⁶⁵⁸ The natural moral feeling was to be understood as a fact of nature, completely opposed to any moral law or judgment, and which manifested itself through physical means, not discursive ones: “La

656 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 93.

657 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 94.

658 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 13.

Religion est la boussole de l'une: le plaisir est celle de l'autre en tant qu'elle sent; la vérité, en tant qu'elle pense."⁶⁵⁹

Therefore, natural virtue, following Epicurus, would be nothing more than the voice of nature expressing itself through natural means—that is to say pleasure.⁶⁶⁰ Criminals, for La Mettrie, were to be thought of as humans who were physically or psychically disturbed for “[ils]ne sentent pas la Nature,” but in their case, La Mettrie, no additional punishment was necessary for already being punished by nature:

“Tyrans malheureux et indignes du jour, (ils) ont beau se faire un cruel plaisir de leur Barbarie, il est de smoments calmes et de réflexion, où la Conscience vengeresse s’élève, dépose contr’eux, et les condamne à Petre presque sans cesse déchirés de ses propres mains. Qui tourmente les Hommes, est tourmenté par lui-même; et les maux qu’il sentira, seront la juste mesure de ceux qu’il aura fait.”⁶⁶¹

One could imagine the scandal provoked by such affirmations, which were later appropriated and developed by Sade towards quite a different end—hat of making a public apology for crime and cruelty. For La Mettrie wrongdoing already carried a natural punishment, a charge of consciousness, so why should there be a need for a religious dogma to do so? It had to be that such an ideological dogma had another goal, which was to associate pleasure to guilt, to smother the manifestation of nature, the universal desire to pursue one’s happiness. All of La Mettries’s references to a sort of natural morals or ethics aimed to explain the vacuity and harm caused by the religious moral rules, first as unnecessary for social, collective life, and secondly as useless for, as remorse never prevented nor avoided crimes (those who are determined to crimes will accomplish them anyways), “les remords sont en soi, philosophiquement parlant, aussi inutiles après, que pendant et avant le crime,” it only poisoned the existence of virtuous citizens.⁶⁶² “Mais s’ils (les remords) nuisent aux bons et à la vertu, s’ils en corrompent les fruits, sans pouvoir servir de frein à la méchanceté, ne s’ensuit-il pas qu’en général ils sont moins utiles au genre humain, et comme le plus funeste présent de l’éducation?”⁶⁶³ Philosophy must therefore lead an open campaign against the Christian dogma of remorse, as when it comes to establish the necessary moral rules for social life it must only accept those which, from a natural point of view, are useful for society.⁶⁶⁴ “voilà

659 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 12.

660 “Epicurus is unusual in insisting that the virtues are only instrumental goods, good only for the sake of pleasure they produce, instead of being good for their own sake. Likewise, philosophy itself is needed to attain pleasure, but has no intrinsic value.” O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* 108.

661 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 92.

662 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 154. Indeed not only did remorse not provide the social benefit that it was claimed to, but it was harmful. As if we do the right thing because of pleasure, following our natural instinct that precedes any rules, the ideology of remorse associated to pleasure will only take the pleasure away from the good actions, and then diminish them. For the “honnête gens”, remorse is this “fâcheuse sensation (...) laquelle véritablement par le poison qu’elle répand sur toutes les autres, tue le plaisir d’être, et fait tous les jours le malheur de la vie.” La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 155.

663 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 154.

664 For philosophy to support and defend the theory of remorse by the means of the “natural law” would be

notre vertu; tout ce qui est utile à la société en est une; le reste est son fantôme.”⁶⁶⁵
Christian morality was not.

3. La Mettrie, a Modern Epicurean

The political character of early modern philosophy was the result of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere and the new possibilities for the public practice of philosophy. However with new possibilities also came new responsibilities for philosophy. The formation of a secular tribunal of reason had to confront a set of social and political matters beyond the well-known combat of superstition and tyranny: how wide, socially speaking was to be the scope of the Enlightenment? Should philosophy attempt to reach the people? Was the ultimate social purpose of philosophical practice a matter of personal enrichment or a collective practice of critique and political transformation?

In this section I argue that La Mettrie was able to develop the embryo of what became a distinctive materialist answer to these questions by developing a modern version of Epicureanism- a reinterpretation qualitatively different from the Hellenistic one. His was not a simple revival of the ancient Epicurean practice of philosophy, nor it was, like for 17th century trend of clandestine Epicurean philosophers (like Gassendi, Cyrano or Le Vayer) a practice confined to the periphery of the public sphere, cultivating secret social networks, reducing philosophy to a private sociability of friendship. The difference had to do with the fact that La Mettrie was the first Epicurean to fully embrace this new public character of philosophy, and attempted to inhabit the center of an active public sphere increasingly polarized by the threat and possibilities of philosophy in the 1740s and 1750s. By doing so he reversed the social relation of the philosopher with the public sphere established in traditional Epicureanism but rescued and reinterpreted its values and message. Part of this re-interpretation had to do with dealing with the particular contradictions and the challenges of philosophy's new social function of “enlightening” or emancipation in a marginal enlightened-elite sphere and a largely uneducated society. But although La Mettrie’s materialist commitment to “make his philosophy public” and to serve humanity was clear, his trajectory was not one free of contradictions, limitations or blind spots, all of which must be explored.

The Reversal of Epicurus

“Il est doux, quand la vaste mer est troublée par les vents, de contempler du rivage la détresse d’un autre; non qu’on se plaise à voir souffrir, mais par la douceur de sentir de quels maux on est exempt. Il est doux encore d’assister aux grandes luttes de la guerre se développant dans les plaines, sans prendre sa part du danger.”⁶⁶⁶

humiliating and worthless: “La bonne philosophie se déshonorerait en pure perte, en réalisant des spectres qui n’effrayent que les plus honnêtes gens.” La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 155.

665 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 150.

666 Lucrèce *De natura rerum*, (Trad. Henri Joseph Guillaume Patin, 1876) 51.

As Blumenberg pointed out, the pleasure inherent in the spectacle of a shipwreck “has nothing to do with a relationship among men, between those who suffer and those who do not; it has to do with the relationship between philosophers and reality; it has to do with the advantage gained through Epicurus’s philosophy, the possession of an inviolable, solid ground for one’s view of the world.”⁶⁶⁷ Indeed, it was from the steadiness of his own self-consciousness “against the whirl of atoms out of which everything that he observes is constituted, including himself,” that the Epicurean philosopher derives pleasure.⁶⁶⁸ With Epicurus, pleasure springs out of the contemplation of the spectacle of natural disorder and chaos and no longer, as was the case with Plato, out of the contemplation of any natural order. The Epicurean philosophical gesture was to function as a virtual shield, protecting the philosopher from the random and unpredictable manifestations of nature, from mythical and fictional fears.

Philosophy was no longer conceived as a pure epistemological impulse toward the knowledge of and identification with the orderly “Truth” but rather as a spiritual practice of grounding and detachment. Salem has related this “distanced” conception of human happiness to the historical context where Epicurus, and later Lucretius, were practicing philosophy, which led the former to make of philosophy a “vertu impolitique.”⁶⁶⁹ As the Hellenistic philosopher reportedly affirmed: “le sage n’abordera pas les affaires publiques, à moins de circonstances exceptionnelles.”⁶⁷⁰ Epicurus, writing a century after Plato and Aristotle, (in the 4th century B.C.) was a witness to the social and political collapse of the Athenian democracy and the regime of the free associated cities. He thought that the abstention from participating in the political life of the city in crisis was the surest bet for happiness: “la sécurité la plus sûre naît de la vie tranquille à l’écart de la foule.”⁶⁷¹ To public affairs Epicurus opposes then the development of philosophical friendship through private circles, far away from the public agora.

From this conception of the philosopher removed from social life, Blumenberg concluded that Epicurus and Lucretius “embodied in the sage himself something of the image of their gods.”⁶⁷² The philosopher should wisely stand on the shore, avoid seafaring, and be content with his or her existence. Because seafaring came with unnecessary fears, those created by natural forces that exceed our power and threaten us, it was more secure to stay on the shore, on the ground of reason, in the philosophical garden far away from Athens. The philosopher was to take an impassioned and impersonal point of view on things, including on human affairs, that is analogous to the one of ancient Gods, that is to say detached from human life.

Throughout the 18th century, Blumenberg argues, this isolationist view of the

667 Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1997) 26.

668 Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator* 26.

669 Salem, *L’Ethique d’Epicure* 133.

670 Salem, *L’Ethique d’Epicure* 141.

671 Salem, *L’Ethique d’Epicure* 141.

672 Salem, *L’Ethique d’Epicure* 27.

philosopher is progressively abandoned as philosophical practice begins to inhabit massively the bourgeois public sphere. In this sense, La Mettrie was a full participant in the Enlightenment conception of the inevitability of some degree of “shipwreckness” in our lives. As Blumenberg put it: “one of the fundamental ideas of the Enlightenment [is] that shipwreck is the price that must be paid in order to avoid that complete calming of the sea winds that would make worldly commerce impossible.”⁶⁷³ The critic was pointing at this key turning point in the history of philosophy which was the Enlightenment, the act of the becoming public of philosophy, which now needed to consider its own social role and purpose, as it ceased to be, as I have shown, a matter of individual practice and was now practiced in a common and shared public sphere.

La Mettrie, however, did not abandon Epicureanism in order to embrace a more common utilitarian or scientific conception of philosophy or human happiness. In this sense Mauzi simplified the Enlightenment field by arguing that the philosopher had to embrace either a scientific or an aristocratic paradigm of happiness.⁶⁷⁴ La Mettrie, being as he claimed to be a real follower of Epicurus, parted from this conception of subtraction from public life and the majoritarian Enlightenment embrace of a neo-Stoic conception of happiness. The recurrence of the metaphors of seafaring and travel in his work attempted to represent, alternatively, the philosophical itinerary as a pleasurable, as it was possible to both embrace and de-dramatize the instabilities and vicissitudes of modern life. His embrace of the public instability philosophical practice thus went beyond a mere rhetorical gesture, the metaphor of shipwreck, in his work, had a true philosophical meaning, as it referred back to his fundamental conception of happiness as *accidental*.

Without embracing the accidents and risks of social existence and public life, true happiness could never be reached. What changed radically in the early modern capitalist period is not the therapeutic function of Epicurean philosophy, but the social conditions of its exercise. In this sense, I argue that La Mettrie did not operate a total break but rather a re-evaluation of Epicurean philosophy.

La Mettrie accepted the new public and therefore risky nature of philosophy not only in a metaphorical way, but also in a real one, to some extent. For him existential happiness was to be found in the contingent and the accidental. At least, such was the conclusion of his *Discours sur le bonheur*: where next to the *essential* happiness, the organic kind of happiness for which he had been pleading, which consisted of health, pleasures, absence of pains and education, La Mettrie noted an *accidental* occurrence of happiness, which deserved a greater attention: “le Bonheur organique ne peut être

673 Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator* 29.

674 While correctly claiming that the Enlightenment was perceived by enlightened elite not only to be the century of philosophy but also that of happiness, Mauzi presented a rather schematic tableau of the different alternatives, opposing the “bonheur philosophique”, which for him “repose tout entire sur le postulat qu’une science du bonheur est possible,” to the “bonheur mondain”, which was “éthique” and “émane d’un idéal, non d’une vérité,” as this arbitrary binary division completely ignored the Epicurean tradition which was a philosophical tradition but did not claim to establish, as the Stoics, a science of happiness. Robert Mauzi, *L’Idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises Au XVIII^e Siècle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1960) 216, 217. La Mettrie’s metaphor of philosophical happiness as a boat trip was opposed to the attempts to develop a science of happiness like Ladvoat (*Entretien sur un nouveau système de morale et de physique*, 1721) and Lévésque de Pouilly (*Théorie des sentiments agréables*, 1747) proposed, but also from the neo-Stoic apology of immobility or *ataraxia* and restricted participation in the public sphere, proposed by Fontenelle, and later D’Alembert and a whole trend of the “moderate” Enlightenment. For a good account of Fontenelle’s theory of immobility and tranquility see Mauzi, *L’Idée du bonheur* 222-227.

essentiellement augmenté que par certaines révolutions fort rares, produites par des causes externes, ou internes; par une fortune imprévue, par exemple, qui agirait sur les Organes et le changerait en mieux; ou semblable à une maladie.”⁶⁷⁵ Only these accidents, understood as the products of luck or, to be more precise as a *clinamen*, an unforeseen deviation of the atom in Epicurean and Lucretian physics could provide this higher kind of pleasure: “quoique le Bonheur soit rarement augmenté essentiellement, il l’est souvent accidentellement, et le malheur même sert à l’éguiser.”⁶⁷⁶ What La Mettrie pointed out was that beyond the material planning of happiness, the accidental and unintentional events in nature and human existence, which had been completely ignored and disregarded as an inferior reality by Scholasticism, were to be the moment of manifestation of “pure nature”, and thus the moment of the unpredictable definition of our happiness. Accidents were the rare occasion to reconnect with our own nature, beyond social and “rational” constraints. The accidental was the abrupt emergence of a rupture in human experience of nature and regularity: by introducing discontinuity it also forced a break of customs in rational thinking and sensorial perceptions, creating a moment of unexpected “freedom” where one can *modulate* the feeling of happiness and therefore even increase it. True happiness, the one we could notice and feel, was paradoxically to be found, or rather felt, in those particular moments: “ces moments heureux que la Nature nous donne”.⁶⁷⁷ In this modern materialist view happiness exceeded physical and mental satisfaction and the bounds of organic needs. It gained with La Mettrie almost a meta-physical dimension while remaining natural. In these modulations of the feeling of pleasure we suddenly perceive “le plaisir de vivre”, or our existential happiness:

“parce que les accidents, dont j’ai parlé, sont nécessaires au Bonheur de presque tous les hommes; parce qu’il nous faut chercher au dehors, ce qui nous manque au dedans; parce que l’homme le mieux organisé, est souvent forcé de changer d’ingrâtes sensations, en de plus agréables; parce que le Philosophe même est obligé de se fuir, pour se retrouver; qu’on ne goûte jamais mieux la Sagesse, qu’après s’être un peu livré à la folie, et qu’enfin le plaisir de vivre ne peut ordinairement subsister, qu’autant que les diverses Voluptés et dissipations de la vie l’entretiennent.”⁶⁷⁸

Happiness became an existential texture of moments, which could be modulated and graduated but not scheduled or provoked. Happiness was not anymore a clear objective one could pursue or structure a life around- it was coextensive of seafaring. These sudden moments of accidental happiness lead us to dissipation, to our own dispersion, waste, *almost to* our disappearance. A dissipation in an unpredictably pleasing feeling or sensation which allows us to lose ourselves and find, when we gather ourselves back, a meaning for our existence. Here is the most fundamental equality within Humanity in its relation to happiness: this shared condition of finding pleasure and

675 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 209.

676 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 209.

677 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 211.

678 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 210.

happiness in the accidental, the irregular, the deviation from the established path to which we are all equally exposed.

La Mettrie's embrace of the metaphorical shipwreck and his challenging definition of happiness was thus a conscious response to the new social status of philosophy in the 18th century—a status for which philosophers were not initially prepared and struggled for a whole century to recognize. Philosophical activity was no longer protected from human passions, social contradictions, economic pressures and political persecutions; it was in the midst of all of them, because of its social displacement towards the urban centers, the eye of the commercial and political storm. Part of the philosopher's resistance was to accept that they needed to take the risk of ending in a shipwreck, as the conditions and goals of philosophy no longer depended on reason, nor were they a matter of individual practice. Reason will not always triumph and correct arguments will not always be the most persuasive ones, the fate of modern philosophy in the public sphere, that of being constantly overpowered by its enemy forces, was the flip side of the claim and conquest of an internal autonomy and independence from theology and religion; an independence which was gained at the price of a sudden and brutal exposure of philosophy to social, economic and political life. There was no more university, garden, academy or protected space for philosophy. Thus, the mere gesture of philosophical critique of prejudices and erroneous ideas acquired a whole new different meaning in this new context that it had had in the ancient sects or within the medieval university. Blumenberg, though, did not mention La Mettrie in his essay, but he did refer to Fontenelle, Voltaire and Galiani as examples of this notable shift in the Enlightenment conception of the social role of the philosopher. In fact he noted and developed the same shift in philosophy in the 18th century that has been explained from an external or social perspective by Habermas and Gumbrecht.

In La Mettrie's reinterpretation of Lucretius and Epicurus, which sets him apart from the one of Voltaire and Diderot, philosophy continued, well and truly, to be the harbor of the philosopher, his "port tranquille," but this should not be a reason to refrain from seafaring, from engaging in political and social life; on the contrary it should be an added guarantee that the shipwreck can be avoided:

"Le tonnerre est loin; laissons gronder, et marchons d'un pas ferme à la Vérité; rien ne doit enchaîner dans un Philosophe la liberté de penser; si c'est une folie, c'est celle des grandes âmes: pourvu qu'elles s'élèvent, elles ne craignent point de tomber.

Qui sacrifie les dons précieux du génie, à une vertu politique, triviale, et bornée, comme elles le sont toutes, peut bien dire qu'il a reçu son Esprit en stupide Instinct, et son Ame en sordide intérêt. Qu'il s'en vante, au reste, si bon lui semble; Pour moi, disciple de la Nature, Ami de la seule Vérité, dont le seul fantôme me fait plus de plaisir, que toutes les erreurs qui mènent à la fortune; moi qui ai mieux aimé me perdre au grand jour par mon peu de génie, que de me sauver, et même de m'enrichir dans l'obscurité par la prudence; Philosophe généreux, je ne refuserai point mon hommage aux charmes qui m'on séduit. Plus la mer est couverte d'écueils, et fameuse en naufrages, plus je penserai qu'il est beau d'y chercher l'immortalité au travers de tant de périls."⁶⁷⁹

679 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 44-45.

For La Mettrie, the risk of failure, the disorder and the possibility of shipwreck imbedded in the public practice of philosophy were unavoidable. It was not a matter of choice: the social conditions of philosophy had changed and transformed the meaning of its practice. The Enlightenment philosopher was already on the ship, almost born in it, “déjà embarqué” along with his fellow citizens in the same social and historical adventure.⁶⁸⁰ There was no point therefore to long for a return to an imaginary original harbor that was unknown, or to build an imaginary one (Reason, Nature, Mathematics etc.) to “ground” reason and intention. It was almost the fate of philosophy to be political, as if through the social transformation of the printed press and commercial capitalism the rise of the bourgeois public intellectual sphere had inevitably become a part of the modern *polis*, at the center of its economic and political activities, and not a separated activity and form of subjectivity, as it was in the previous century when philosophy became an aristocratic oppositional practice. In such a new social context, a philosophy that was only concerned about individual happiness—as was the case with the libertine ideal, it was as if the philosopher could remain, with his fellow friends, on the outskirts of Athens—was not departing from the new social reality of philosophy, its public and *social* nature, and was therefore a mystified form of philosophy.

Of course, the participation in public debate and the practice of philosophical critique had its political downside. This was not the issue at debate, and La Mettrie did not have to be told twice: he had to seek refuge in Holland in the Fall of 1746 after the Parliament of Paris condemned the *Histoire Naturelle de l’Ame* (and also Diderot’s *Pensées philosophiques*) to be burned for being “scandaleux, contraires à la religion et aux bonnes moeurs”⁶⁸¹. The book would cost him his position as medical officer in the French Army where he served beginning in 1742.⁶⁸² The next year, and in response to this double humiliation of repression he wrote the satirical comedy *La Faculté Vengée* and the *Homme-Machine* (1747), but the publication of the latter, even though anonymously, was censored by the Consistory of the Church of Leyden, so in 1748 he finally accepted the protection of Frederick, King of Prussia, and fled to Berlin.

La Mettrie confronted some of his contemporaries who, in the midst of the transformation of philosophy, sought refuge in new variants of stoicism and sought to reconstruct a protected space for philosophy. From the materialist perspective LM defended, any sacrifice of philosophy’s enlightening mission because of the risks

680 La Mettrie assumed the irremediable and unsettling political character of philosophy as an independent *prise de position* in the public sphere. It may be political, it may not. The question is how. The analogy that comes to mind is, of course, that of Pascal, and his feeling of being “déjà embarqué”, as he put it, in relation to the question of God. The metaphysical question of the existence of God is so weighty in its implications that it is impossible not to take a position once the question posed. The philosopher must decide, but in many ways the answer is indicated: for Pascal, in the face of losing infinity and immortality, the choice of believing in God seems obvious. The materialist position also states that we are already engaged in the world, that the commitment to truth is a no-brainer, but for very different reasons: reasons that are material and not metaphysical. The necessity to take a position in relation to truth spreads from the search of human happiness, which is to be found in this world as it has a material base (and not a metaphysical one) and only comes in a collective form. Whereas in the *pari pascalien* philosophy conversion can save one’s individual soul, for La Mettrie human happiness comes in a collective form.

681 See the *Arrêt de la Cour du Parlement de Paris* from July 7th 1746.

682 There is a debate around this issue of whether La Mettrie was fired or he quit just after his protector, the Duc de Grammont, died. In a *Supplément à l’ouvrage de Pénélope* La Mettrie states that he quit, and that he it was slander to say he had been fired. What is true is that both the medical and ecclesiastical powers were against him.

embedded in this gained publicity was a mistake. A philosopher who was first worried about political virtue, or becoming wealthy or socially accepted, was to lose his or her differential and defining character of proposing a natural point of view. For La Mettrie the philosopher's commitment to truth was to be, socially speaking, an *absolute* one, separate from personal and social considerations and pressures. Thus philosophers who consciously hid or modified what they knew to be true, and justified doing so in the name of the traditional philosophical virtue of prudence, were abandoning the existential purpose of philosophy. On multiple occasions La Mettrie contrasted classical *prudence* to philosophical courage, a virtue he always defended and praised. If in Ancient philosophy, prudence and courage were two different yet compatible virtues that should guide human behavior and more particularly the philosopher's, the emergence of a bourgeois intellectual sphere in the 18th century broke this harmony and put face to face the private and the public use of reason. This qualitative change transformed these two virtues into two opposed philosophical positions, deepening the crisis of philosophy where several paths would again open. I argue that the difference between a "radical" and a "moderate" Enlightenment has to do less with particular thesis upheld by those philosophers than with the way they inhabited the public sphere. Under a Catholic and tyrannical monarchy, a public practice of an independent philosophy cannot have it both ways: to tell the whole truth and to stay out of trouble.

La Mettrie was well aware that this tension between prudence and courage was not new, as it was already present in Hellenistic philosophy, but not to the point of dilemma. This was for him the main difference between Epicureanism and Stoicism, as Stoicism elevated prudence as a maxim or principle above courage. La Mettrie's modern Epicureanism inverted this relation in order to definitely negate Stoicism by subordinating prudence to courage. Philosophical courage would then be a distinctive trait of the identified "materialist" or radical position. La Mettrie's *Discours sur le Bonheur* (1748) appeared as a modern and public vindication of Epicureanism against Stoicism, and more particularly against the figure of Seneca, as it was published first under the title *Anti-Sénèque ou le Souverain Bien*. The philosophical courage is evoked with the metaphor of embarking and sailing away:

"J'apprends à voguer, à lutter; je deviens pilote, ou Athlète avec ceux qui le sont. Pour ne pas faire naufrage, ou n'être pas terrassé, il ne faut que savoir se servir des avirons, ou des muscles de sa Raison (quand elle en a). C'est par le courage qu'on peut sortir vainqueur du combat. Telle est la ressource des gens de lettres interdite à ceux qui ne les cultivent point les sciences et cèdent cependant à celle de tant d'ignorants bien organisés."⁶⁸³

We could say that with La Mettrie, philosophy is, as Bourdieu described sociology, "un sport de combat", or at least it was to be according to the materialist *prise de position*. It is not minor that he ended also his final *Discours Préliminaire* (1750) with similar meditations, and while he recognizes without neither shame nor regret his own "naufrage," he ended his introduction to his works with an exhortation to his reader to engage in a similar adventure like a "Navigateur ... sûr de la Protection de Neptune, entend gronder les flots."⁶⁸⁴

683 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 166.

684 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 48, 49. "Mon Naufrage, et tous les malheurs qui l'ont suivi, sont au reste faciles

The Social Mission of the Philosopher

“De tous côtés, de celui de l’erreur même comme de la vérité, la philosophie a donc encore une fois une influence sur le Bien Public, influence le plus souvent indirecte à la vérité; mais si considérable, qu’on peut dire que, comme elle est la Clé de la Nature et des Sciences, la gloire de l’Esprit, elle est aussi le flambeau de la Raison, des loix, et de l’humanité.

Faisons nous donc honneur de porter un flambeau utile à ceux qui le portent, comme à ceux qu’il éclaire.”⁶⁸⁵

I have claimed that La Mettrie became a modern Epicurean, and that his reinterpretation of ancient philosophy represented a break and reversal not only with Greek antiquity but with his “early enlightenment” predecessors: the Epicurean libertines. This reversal had to do with transforming philosophy from a “vertu impolitique”, borrowing Salem’s expression, into a political virtue, that of pursuing consciously a social project of enlightenment. For La Mettrie to be a materialist was to choose not a doctrine but a practice of philosophy that would commit itself to the public defense of the truth, if necessary over any personal interests of the philosopher.⁶⁸⁶ The materialist had to be distinguished from the *sophiste* and the *charlatan* who sold philosophy for money and thus ideology for philosophy. In fact, La Mettrie’s positioning in the public sphere as a philosopher was a transposition of his political positioning as a doctor during his previous years of education and profession (1730-1745). It was based on a refusal to transform philosophy into a commodity, which would have put the content and form of philosophy in the hands of the desires of consumers, instead of being able to shape these desires is clearly explained in the “Preface” of the *Ouvrage de Pénélope*. Philosophy, like medicine, cannot heal if it is subordinated to produce immediate pleasure for the reader or for the producer; it must have a delayed effect on both sides and this is why it requires courage:

"Je m'abuse peut-être d'imaginer que l'Art de tromper ne soit pas toujours le plus sûr moyen de réussir; le succès de tant de charlatans dépose contre moi, et il n'est pas étonnant que la vanité, qui soutient ses préjugés et ses petites opinions au péril même de la vie, préfère des Esprits souples, qui ne cherchent qu'à s'accommoder à ces opinions même, pour attraper l'argent du vulgaire, peu capable d'en sentir le peu de fondement."⁶⁸⁷

à oublier dans un port aussi glorieux et aussi digne d’un Philosophe: j’y bois à long traits l’oubli de tous les dangers que j’ai courus.” La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 48. By “naufrage” La Mettrie is surely referring to the multiple persecutions he was the victim of because of his two initial writings.

685 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 41.

686 His philosophy also took a position against those philosophers who, like Voltaire and D’Alembert, not only sought institutional refuge in the Académie Française patroned by an absolute despot, but did so at the price of hiding some truths, silencing some opinions, or not really publicizing them (in a written, universal, form) in the name of “prudence”. He had the sense that the opinions that prompted censorship by institutional powers, which accumulated and were condensed under the rubric of “materialism” were precisely the ones which mattered and needed to be publicly articulated most.

687 Julien Offray La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope; ou, Machiavel en medecine* ([Aletheius Demetrius] 3 vols., Berlin

Nonetheless, La Mettrie also opposed the easy logic of personal “sacrifice”, as a variant of Christian ideology of martyrdom, which was equally an obstacle to happiness.⁶⁸⁸ The enlightenment philosopher did not have, from a philosophical perspective, a social interest of his or her own, his or her interest was not separate from humanity's as a whole; rather, it is subsumed by it even though both interests do not always perfectly and happily correspond. The goal of materialist philosophy was first to clarify theoretically this identity of goals and make it conscious for the reader/philosopher so he or she could see then in each circumstance, which was the most effective ways to achieve them. This was the view presented in the *Discours sur le bonheur*: “Uniquement occupé à bien remplir le cercle étroit de la vie, on se trouve d’autant plus heureux qu’on vit non seulement pour soi, mais pour sa patrie, pour son Roi et en général pour l’humanité qu’on se fait gloire de servir. On fait le bonheur de la société avec le sien propre. Toutes les vertus consistent à bien mériter d’elle, comme nous allons l’expliquer.”⁶⁸⁹ This was, of course, an extremely optimistic assessment of the challenge: that the “cercle étroit” of private material life could be easily superposed with the larger one of the public sphere, and the even larger one of humanity. La Mettrie did not foresee that the new relation between the material sphere and the public, cultural and political one was not one of concentric circles, but rather one based on contradictions, erasures, etc. The *Discours Préliminaire* was less optimistic, and La Mettrie issued something which read more like a warning than a proclamation: “Quelle lumière affreuse serait celle de la Philosophie, si elle n’éclairait les uns, qui sont en si petit nombre, que pour la perte et la ruine des autres, qui composent presque tout l’univers.”⁶⁹⁰

Although La Mettrie was not fully aware of the nature of the unfolding economic and social transformation which was the development of capitalism and the rise of a separate public sphere, this did not mean that his commitment to Enlightenment is to be judged naive or quickly outmoded; it was not rooted in a correct sociological appreciation of the dynamics between the philosopher and society as a whole, but upon the political claim of a universal right to happiness—a claim which had been carried like a torch by Epicurean philosophers since antiquity: “Dans ce système fondé sur la Nature et la Raison, le Bonheur sera pour les ignorants et pour les pauvres, comme pour les savants et les riches: il y en aura pour tous les états; et ce qui va révolter les Esprits prévenus, pour les méchants comme pour les bons.”⁶⁹¹ Happiness was not to be restricted to circle of

[i.e. Leyden Elie Luzac] 1748-509) 1:54.

688 “Les lois les plus injustes ont la force en main; il n’y a qu’un fou qui ose les braver. La loi de Nature, faite avant toutes autres lois, nous dicte de leur livrer plutôt la vérité que nos corps... La vérité, comme tout bon parti (c’est encore l’idée de mon aimable Philosophe, et de celui de la Nature) doit se soutenir jusques au feu, mais exclusivement. Les lois les plus injustes ont la force en main; il n’y a qu’un fou qui ose les braver. La loi de Nature, faite avant toutes les autres lois, nous dicte de leur livrer plutôt la vérité, que nos corps: et la Politique, de sacrifier ses propres lois, que la Patrie. Par conséquent la Patrie est autant au-dessus des lois, que les lois sont au-dessus de la justice et de l’équité; par conséquent tout s’absorbe, et s’engloutit en quelque sorte dans l’intérêt général de la société pour qui tout a été fait.” La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 140.

689 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 138.

690 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 16.

691 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 125.

philosophical friends or students, or to the initiated enlightened minds inhabiting the urban centers—it was a right of humanity as a whole. The modern Epicurus was, in his navigation, already bound to the rest of *humanity*, sharing the ship. Yet the particular form of subjective universality materialist philosophy offered was one that comprehended a plurality of forms, and not a ready-made standard, as it was ultimately based on a materialist nominalism.

4. The Philosopher, the People and the New Public Status of Philosophy

The Construction of a Philosophical Character Through Publication: La Mettrie, the Anonymous, Clandestine and Inconsistent

The first challenge for the new “public philosopher” was that of fulfilling both the philosophical mission of enlightening and at the same time serving at a minimum his or her personal well-being. La Mettrie attempted to address this quandary by creating and developing a particular “literary character” of the philosopher through rhetorical and publication practices, like many of his fellow predecessors and contemporaries. His singularity, in this regard, is maybe that he was working *à rebours* of his own century, questioning the very idea of philosophical authorship instead of trying to delineate a legitimate author figure that could claim rights. In the work’s title pages, prefaces, dedications and in the philosophical texts themselves La Mettrie constructed a fictional persona of the philosopher which was marked by a particular use of anonymity and inconsistency or self-contradiction, which allowed him not only to speak out publicly while managing, to some degree, to stay out of trouble.

This character, which I consider a literary one, as it was constructed in an imaginary textual world, was highly theatrical. It was construction through a careful practice of publication and publicizing of their own work, as there were “différentes manières de rendre public,” each one carrying a different meaning. Furthermore, for La Mettrie the materiality of the book, and in particular the first pages, a highly codified genre, which presented an instance of public presentation and representation.⁶⁹² It is maybe useful to remember that La Mettrie’s first “non scientific publications” were satirical plays and comedies, inspired by Molière, which aimed to publicly shame and ridicule charlatans who passed as doctors.

Although La Mettrie was not the first to use of such techniques of literary disguise, I argue that the kind of philosophical character he developed—the “inconsistent clandestine” and the “persifleur anonyme”—cannot be reduced solely to a *social strategy* of enlightening—a way of hiding to avoid censorship and escape persecution, a simple means to an end, even if it was partially so. His publication strategy had foremost, I argue, a philosophical meaning of its own: to achieve a philosophical kind of anonymity, a fictitious dissolution of the subject of imputation starting with the author figure, proposing an impersonal materialist voice that could constellate with past “materialist” philosophies (which became thus revealed as such) and make itself freely available for future appropriations.

692 Christian Jouhaud and Alain Viala, *De la publication: entre Renaissance et Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 2002) 5.

The meaning of the different forms of publication of philosophical texts in the early modern period has been widely ignored by the historians of philosophy. Markovits is maybe one of the few notable exceptions, in particular in one of her first essays on La Mettrie, “La Mettrie, l’anonyme et le sceptique” (1987).⁶⁹³ Yet, as Jouhaud pointed out, “chaque action de publication, révélant par son accomplissement l’espace de publicité dont elle subit les contraintes, le construit comme sa raison d’être, l’invente comme son horizon, l’imagine comme son presupposé.”⁶⁹⁴ La Mettrie published most of his philosophical essays anonymously, and it was only in 1751, the year of his accidental death, when he published his *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, that he claimed authorship of most of this philosophical production for the first time. The only works he initially published under his own name were medical ones—most of them translations of Boerhaave—written during his university period and through which he made himself a “name” first as a doctor.⁶⁹⁵ The ones he published anonymously or with pseudonyms were of two kinds: philosophical pieces and political satires against the doctors and their social power. I will focus mostly on the former.⁶⁹⁶

It is important to relativize, or better to contextualize, first the notions of *anonymity* and *clandestinity* in 18th century France to avoid operating with rather contemporary assumptions on this matter. As Moureau reminds us “depuis la fin du XVIIIe siècle, la règle de l’édition française est de porter le nom de l’auteur sur la page de titre. Auparavant, la règle était de ne pas l’indiquer,” concluding that “l’anonymat, même théorique, est donc le cas général de la période.”⁶⁹⁷ By law, the book had to identify its content but not the author on the cover page. Even if today we tend to forget it, many key books in the history of European philosophy were in fact published anonymously: Descartes’s *Discours de la méthode* (1637), Malebranche’s first editions of the *Recherche sur la vérité* (1674-75), Arnauld and Nicole’s *Logique, ou l’art de penser* (1662), Spinoza’s *Traité théologico-politique* (1670), Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) and even Leibniz’s *Essais de théodicée* (1710).⁶⁹⁸ The situation was such that one needs, as Mori suggested, to reverse the logic: “à la fin du XVIIe siècle, un auteur doit se justifier vis-à-

693 Francine Markovits, “La Mettrie, l’anonyme et le sceptique” *Corpus Revue de philosophie* 8-9 (1987): 83-105.

694 Jouhaud, *De la publication* 10.

695 By 1745, La Mettrie had published at least three medical works under his name: *Traité du vertige* (1738) *Traité de la petite vérole* (1740) and *Observations de médecine pratique* (1743). But he was mostly known for the translation of Boerhaave’s medical works, mainly the *Institutions de médecine* (1740-1747) and the *Abregé de la theorie chimique* (1741).

696 Here is a list of them: *Essai sur l’esprit et les beaux esprits* (Amsterdam), 1740 anonymous; *Saint Cosme Vengé*, 1744 (Strasbourg) anonymous; *Politique du medecin de Machiavel* (Amsterdam) no date but 1746, published under the name Dr. Fum-Ho-Ha, this work was condemned by the arrêt du Parlement de Paris 9 juillet 1746; *La Faculté Vengée*, Comédie en 3 actes, 1747 under the name “Mr. *** Docteur Régent de la Faculté de Paris” (1747) and finally *Ouvrage de Penelope; ou, Machiavel en médecine* (1748) with the name Aletheius Demetrius.

697 François Moureau, “Illustres anonymes: auteurs feints et clandestinité aux XVIIIe siècle” *La Lettre Clandestine* 8 (1999) 55.

698 Gianluca Mori, “Anonymat et stratégies de communication: le cas de Pierre Bayle” *La Lettre Clandestine* 8 (1999) 20.

vis du public non pas parce qu'il fait paraître un ouvrage anonyme, mais parce qu'il veut 'mettre son nom' au frontispice de son livre," as was the case of Bayle in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697).⁶⁹⁹ This level of anonymity was what I would call a formal one, for even if the name of the author was not indicated on the cover page, there was, within the *République des lettres*, a constant game of "chasse à l'auteur", to unveil and find out who was behind each publication, and anonymity was often unveiled and became public knowledge amongst the learned elites.

By the middle of the 18th century this situation began to change in the direction of having more and more authors claiming authorship. From this perspective, the most notable fact that should be considered regarding La Mettrie's publication ways is that he chose to break what was a formal anonymity in 1751 (not that he published his other works anonymously), and by the same gesture affirmed, through the kind of assemblage which was his *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, a more radical one: the negation of the idea of a philosophical *author*, that is to say of an authority hidden beneath the text which was the guarantee of its internal coherence and rational consistency and had the ultimate key to its interpretation.

In fact, more than anonymity per se, what should be approached through the issue of publication is what the scholarship has called "clandestinity"—a certain relationship with the law. It was not until recently that the very notion of clandestinity has been revealed as a rather contemporary notion, as the term itself was only used in the 18th century in a very particular legal cases, particularly that of clandestine marriage.⁷⁰⁰ Moureau then rightly asked:

"Que peut-on qualifier de clandestin dans l'univers de papier de la France du XVIIIe siècle? Tout écrit imprimé qui n'est pas passé par l'examen d'une censure civile pour les laïcs (chancellerie) ou ecclésiastique (nihil obstat) pour les clercs relève de la clandestinité idéologique. La clandestinité administrative est d'autre sorte: elle concerne le mépris du droit de copie accordée à une instance légitime, auteur ou librairie, par l'autorité politique régulatrice. Les contrefaçons et les impressions sous fausse adresse sont du ressort de cette clandestinité, qui connaît d'ailleurs des degrés entre l'illicite et le tolérable."⁷⁰¹

La Mettrie's publication style and his subversion of the author figure was built by means of a play on the codes of publication in order to represent a certain form of intellectual clandestinity. For example, his first work, the *Histoire Naturelle de l'Ame*

699 Mori, "Anonymat et stratégies de communication" 19.

700 "Si l'on consulte les recueils juridiques thématiques du XVIIIe siècle, la notion de clandestinité ne renvoie - malheureusement pour nous qu'au mariage ... clandestin, délit qui détruit ou vicie l'ordre social dans ses formes élémentaires que sont la famille et la transmission du patrimoine." François Moureau, "Espaces du clandestin dans l'univers du livre," *La plume et le plomb Espaces de l'imprimé et du manuscrit au siècle des Lumières*, ed. François Moureau (Paris: PUPS, 2006) 29. Idem dans le Dictionnaire de l'Académie of 1718, which only notes two cases: the clandestine marriage and the clandestine assembly, both done "en cachette et contre les lois".

701 Moureau "Espaces du clandestin dans l'univers du livre" 29-30. For an account of the kinds of clandestine literature circulating in France throughout the 18th century, see Barbara de Negroni, *Lectures interdites: le travail des censeurs au XVIIIe siècle: 1723-1774* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) and Françoise Weil, *Livres interdits, livres persécutés 1720-1770* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999).

(1745), published in Holland, was presented as “traduit de l’anglais de M. Charp, par feu M. H** de l’Académie des sciences”, that is to say with an imaginary English author and translated—and therefore somehow sanctioned—by the Académie.⁷⁰² La Mettrie’s idea to present his work as “translated from English” is an idea I believe he borrowed from Bayle, who published his *Commentaire philosophique* (1686) as “traduit de l’anglais du Sieur Jean Fox de Bruggs par M.J.F”. It is a way, as Mori suggested, for Bayle to “captiver l’attention du lecteur par la nouveauté du produit et d’exploiter la renommée de profondeur philosophique - et de liberté d’esprit - que l’on attribue aux écrivains d’Outre-Manche.”⁷⁰³ Here La Mettrie, of course, was also playing with the imaginary of England as the birthplace of both scientific and radical philosophy (and in many ways of materialism).

In a similar way, the cover page of the *Histoire Naturelle* also contained an unattributed Latin quote, which was a truncated verse from the sixth book of Lucretius *De Rerum natura* which, if taken fully, would read as follows: “the soul, then, depends essentially upon the organs of the body, with which it is formed, grows, decreases”. This key reference to Lucretius is nevertheless cryptographic as neither the author nor the work are referenced.⁷⁰⁴ This publication strategy was therefore insinuating—or at least playing with—two contradictory things: the official accepted code of legitimate philosophy (the Académie des Sciences) and the distanced and hidden reference to the two “sources” of subversive, materialist, philosophy: England and Lucretius.

In 1748, the *Homme-Machine* was published in Leyde by the printer Elie Luzac, this time with no author mentioned. But what was interesting is that on the cover page, even though there was no author, La Mettrie included an epigraphy by Voltaire, so the latter’s name would appear on it. The epigraphy read: “Est-ce là ce Raison de l’Essence Suprême, / Que l’on nous peint si lumineux?/ Est-ce là cet Esprit survivant à nous même?/ Il naît avec nos sens, croit, s’affaiblit comme eux/ Helas! Il périra de meme.” The *Homme-machine* appeared then to have been almost “authored” by Voltaire, the Enlightenment philosopher who by 1748 had gained most notoriety and also who

702 M** was very likely M. Hunauld, and physician and member of the Académie des Sciences, La Mettrie’s former teacher whom he admired very much, probably amongst other things because in 1726 Hunauld dared to publish an anonymous pamphlet (*Dissertation en forme de lettres au sujet des ouvrages de l’auteur d’un livre sur les maladies des os*) attacking a fellow *académicien* and surgeon, M. Petit, accusing him of plagiarism and intellectual incompetence, reigniting the contentious battle between physicians and surgeons, and the pretensions of the latter to have medical knowledge on all issues. Hunauld died in 1742 and this reference in La Mettrie’s first philosophical work is probably to be read as an homage to him. The *Histoire Naturelle* was also initially dedicated to Maupertuis, probably because of the impact of his *Venus Physique* (1747), a scientific work where Maupertuis discussed freely the different theories of reproduction and therefore of the origin of life, without any regard for religious dogma, adopting almost a materialist perspective on the matter. The dedication was eliminated in the 1751 edition surely after Maupertuis’s publication of a rather conservative *Essai de philosophie morale* (1749) which truly disappointed La Mettrie.

703 Mori, “Anonymat et stratégies de communication” 26. Further, the trick of referencing a prestigious dead personality, as La Mettrie did with Hunauld, was later borrowed by Voltaire (who published *Dîner du comte de Boulainvilliers* in 1768 under that of Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe, a defunct libertine), and more notably by D’Holbach who published his *Système de la Nature* in 1770 under the name of Jean-Baptiste de Mirabeau, former secretary of the Académie Française, deceased 10 years earlier. This became a “trend” in the 1760s and 1770s. Moureau, “Illustres anonymes” 59. Regarding Voltaire’s use of anonymity in publication see Nicholas Cronk “Voltaire and the Posture of Anonymity” *MLN* 126.4 (2011): 768-784.

704 The original epigraphy in Latin as it reads on the cover of the book: “Participem lethi quoque convenit esse”.

supported Newtonism and Deist positions, which the enlightened public knew La Mettrie had previously combated. Furthermore, the quote La Mettrie selected, which sustained the materialist thesis of the mortality of the soul, made of Voltaire a materialist in spite of himself, and produced a confusion of Voltaire's and La Mettrie's voices. The text also appeared as partially authored by Luzac, whose name appeared on the cover page and who, in his much criticized "avertissement de l'imprimeur," did not forget to remind the reader that "on sera peut-être surpris que j'aie osé mettre mon nom à un livre aussi hardi que celui-ci."⁷⁰⁵ Further, the *HM* was followed by a satirical dedication to Haller "Professeur en medecine A Gottingue", which starts the following way:

"Ceci n'est point une Dédicace,; vous êtes fort au-dessus de tous les Eloges que je pourrais vous donner; et je ne connais rien de si inutile, ni de si fade, si ce n'est un Discours Académique. Ce n'est point une exposition de la nouvelle Méthode que j'ai suivie pour relever un sujet usé et rabattu.... C'est le plaisir que j'ai eu à composer cet ouvrage dont je veux parler; c'est moi-Même, et non mon livre que je vous adresse, pour m'éclairer sur la nature de cette sublime Volupté de l'Etude."⁷⁰⁶

In this preface La Mettrie is addressing the nature of the philosophical genre he wanted: not a pure scientific or academic production, but rather one that gave him a great deal of "pleasure" to write. He is trying to outline a new materialist and philosophical *ethos* based also on the pleasure of the writer, and not only that of the reader (as it was in the classical tradition which Horace condensed in the formula "docere et placere", to teach and to please). Through these two key works, La Mettrie profiled a particular philosophical character which was marked by hidden allusions to his personal itinerary, leaving clear markers of his identity, while separating his persona from the La Mettrie philosopher: hiding in playful way markers of his authorship (mainly through the particular references to Hunault, the rebellious academician; and Haller, his personal enemy) was only a way to separate in an even more clear way his embodied persona from a textual philosophical voice which was no longer his own, but only constructed through multiple references to different materialist thesis and references: Lucretius, Voltaire, Maupertuis, England, Bayle. La Mettrie, the person, appeared in the anecdotal for those who could see it, while La Mettrie the philosopher was not clearly identifiable, as the reader found instead a carefully constituted constellation of philosophical references later called "materialist" philosophy.

What La Mettrie was proposing to the reader was also a new way to relate to the philosophical tradition and to the multiplicity of voices that were proliferating in the public sphere, voices which were embedded in texts and thus separated materially from their "authors". If authors did not exist, then neither did philosophical *côteries* or sociabilities, personal alliances and rivalries, then all that was left were the bare ideas in a text, thereby freeing the reader to to agree or disagree with such an such idea, without

⁷⁰⁵ La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 55. Indeed, this *avertissement* cost Luzac a great number of attacks. See Pierre Roques, "Examen de l'Avertissement de l'Imprimeur qui a publié le Livre intitulé, L'Homme Machine" *Nouvelle Bibliothèque Germanique* [Amsterdam] 5 (Octob.1748-Décemb 1749): 328-357.

⁷⁰⁶ La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 57. This satirical dedication is indeed a revenge, as Albrecht von Halle, besides being a Swiss devoted Evangelical Protestant, had publicly outed La Mettrie as the authors of the *Politique des Medecins*, causing a great deal of trouble for the latter.

having to fully embrace or reject a philosophical sect and its doctrine.

The fictional authorial character of La Mettrie was not only marked by anonymity and irony, but also by a high dose of voluntary self-contradiction, as La Mettrie made almost a habit of writing small texts or pamphlets criticizing himself in the third person. For example, against his own *Homme Machine* he wrote the *L'Homme-plus-que-machine* (1748) whose authorship, even though it was ambiguously claimed by his editor Elie Luzac, is believed to be, by the most reliable scholars, that of La Mettrie himself.⁷⁰⁷ The title was itself ironic, given that the main critique to La Mettrie's materialism was that he turned men into "only" matter. By choosing such a "counter-title" "l'homme-plus-que machine" La Mettrie revealed of what unsettled La Mettrie's opponents: that man could not only be a mere machine, he had to be something more, and thus, what should be for La Mettrie's adversaries the essence of man (the immaterial soul) was turned into a mere "supplement": "plus que machine", showing that the whole debate had to do with this little plus of human pride, a psychological need to be more than an animal and closer to an imaginary God, more than with a real scientific debate. The subtitle of *L'Homme-plus-que-machine*, was "ouvrage qui sert à réfuter les principaux arguments sur lesquels on fonde le matérialisme". La Mettrie then used the name of his printer to publish this satirical self-critique. Another example was the new edition La Mettrie gave in 1747 to the *Histoire Naturelle*, still published as authored by Charp but this time preceded by a "Lettre critique de Mr de La Mettrie sur l'Histoire naturelle de l'âme à Madame la Marquise du Châtelet".

I read this publication practice (present other in forms throughout his work) as an attempt to develop a distinctive philosophical subjectivity, which sets him apart from other Enlightenment philosophers who, while remaining formally anonymous in most of their publications, wanted to be "recognized", or at least "recognizable," by the coherence of their systems or by their style, as it was the case of Voltaire who, as Cronk correctly assessed, "created a style of authorship that made him the most famous writer in Europe and turned his name into a brand for a certain style for writing and thinking."⁷⁰⁸ This was not the case with La Mettrie; his conception of philosophical "authorship" was motivated first by pleasure from and a desire to writing, writing as a practice of giving a shape to one's ideas and imagining other ones—he borrowed from Montaigne conception of philosophy as an essay—and second and foremost the attempt to erase any stable substratum or subject, a notion which he borrowed from Spinoza. It was not by accident if in the *Système d'Epicure*, La Mettrie spoke so often in the first person and ended up confessing: "J'ai entrepris de me peindre dans mes Ecrits, comme Montaigne a fait sans ses Essais. Pourquoi ne pourroit-on pas se traiter soi-même? Ce sujet en vaut bien un autre, où l'on voit moins clair: Et lorsqu'on a dit une fois que c'est de soi qu'on a voulu parler, l'excuse est faite, ou plutôt on n'en doit point."⁷⁰⁹

In such a literary game there would not be, properly speaking, a Lamettrian materialism, a materialist philosophy particular to La Mettrie, because he constantly contradicts himself and there is no stable subject to which one can input materialist theses, nor was there a single thesis or doctrine upheld and "defended" by the text, but

707 Markovits, *Décatalogue sceptique* 256-257.

708 Nicholas Cronk, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009) i.

709 La Mettrie, *Système d'Epicure, Oeuvres Philosophiques 1*, 380.

rather a series of mutating hypothesis. There was rather a materialist philosophy or voice: as we find similar positions in Lucretius, Voltaire, Maupertuis, Luzac... and La Mettrie. In this sense La Mettrie created an imaginary non-subjective and transhistorical philosophical voice, that of materialism. His goal was to dissociate his philosophical hypothesis from his own persona by both accentuating the individuality and desire of his particular persona and the abstract character of his philosophy.

How to understand La Mettrie's taste for self contradiction within his own philosophical work? As Markovits pointed out, far from being a frivolous game, this rhetorical strategy, which was used or theorized more openly in the Preface of the *Ouvrage de Pénélope*, had a political meaning, that of doing and undoing; that is, questioning the legitimacy and credibility of the juridical subject of imputation or substratum. The title of the work itself is very telling: the philosopher is compared to *Odyssey's* Penelope, who undoes at night what she does during the day, who composed an "ouvrage" rather than a simple book. The first four parts of the work pretended to take the side of Machiavel, embodied in the community of the medical faculty, exaggerating the cynical functioning of their discourse in order to "faire voir combien le Machiavelisme est détestable, en faisant semblant de l'approuver et de le conseiller."⁷¹⁰ The last one was a pure Anti-Machiavel, where the "vraie Religion du Medecin" appeared, which was simply his knowledge, science and care.⁷¹¹ The first bloc was the one where the Machiavelic position delivers the apology for its doctrine: "Machiavel donne les maximes les plus détestables: il les donne très sérieusement, et chez lui la Morale est toujours sacrifiée à la Politique."⁷¹² The second position was equally problematic as it accomplished the reverse operation: politics were constantly moralized, naturalized and justified by religious discourse. La Mettrie then equally rejected two kinds of social discourses: that of "Esprit", "Imagination", "ruses", "charlatanerie", "folies", "vices peints en beau" and that of "savoir", "probité" and "bonne foi", to show they function together, that the cynical power of the State needs the glue of belief and superstition proved by religion in order to hold together. But the goal was also to make one side reflect on the other, like a mirror arrangement, to show how the social puzzle worked, and what the result of this social division of discourse was. To avoid both cynicism and preaching he wanted to "montrer ce qu'il faut faire dans le miroir de ce que font certains machiavelistes."⁷¹³

His was a fantasy of a philosophy that could function this *dispositif* of montage, a machine where the different characters, each embodying different logics of discourse, destroy one another, as the reflecting images each one provides of the other do not work or complement each other but rather question the discursive logic of the adversary: "Pourquoi aurais-je du fiel contre les Medecins? Ils m'ont servi, en faisant jouer cette machine sacrée et terrible, qui par des ressorts dévotement cruels semble être tombée du

710 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:51.

711 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:52.

712 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:47.

713 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:50.

Ciel aux enfers, pour troubler le repos des plus tranquilles Habitans de la terre.”⁷¹⁴ A machine which in the *Ouvrage the Penelope* was the theatrical scene of medical discourses and later in his *Oeuvres philosophiques* was materialist philosophy itself. His ideal strategy in both cases was to set, in the imaginary space of his philosophical text, the two dominant social orders to work against each other, not with the hope they would annihilate each other but that philosophical fiction and representation could produce an illumination for the reader, from the totalizing alliance of political and religious discourse, would break the political spell constructed by the privileged orders.

La Mettrie’s effort to annihilate the substratum was part of an effort to relocate the source and coherence of discourse outside of the subject, where it belonged: in the natural world. It was also, if one reads the construction of a contradictory philosophical voice throughout his work next to the deconstruction of opposed points of view in the *Ouvrage the Penelope* (those of Machiavel and Anti-Machiavel) an interrogation of the proper function of the philosophical voice in such a disjointed world. The materialist philosopher should not seek the reader’s adherence to inspire belief, nor should he despise him or her by embracing a cynical positions (do what I say but not what I do)- he ought to avoid the twin evils of political and religious discourse. This double negation or distancing could only be achieved by embracing inconsistency not as a failure to coherence, but as constant displacement of what could be called the mirror of philosophy, and by a dose of irony or humor, starting by self-deprecation, and above all what today we call theatricality. A common trait of the cyclical and religious embrace of philosophy was precisely its seriousness. To the materialist philosophy, on the contrary, “il lui paraît plaisant de vivre, plaisant d’être le jouet de lui-même, de faire un rôle aussi comique, et de se croire un personnage important.”⁷¹⁵ La Mettrie’s avowed “ton plaisant et railleur” is then a key component to the theatrical operation necessary for the performance of philosophy:

"Je n'ai affecté de prendre le ton plaisant et railleur, je n'ai chargé les couleurs du Tableau, que pour frapper les Esprits d'une plus vive lumière, et leur mieux montrer par un grand contraste les voies de la droiture et de la probité. J'ai mis sur la scène, j'ai fait briller le vice et le manège le plu raffiné! Pourquoi? Pour faire voir qu'ils n'en peuvent imposer sous les plus spécieux dehors, et que c'est à leur clinquant qu'on les reconnaît.”⁷¹⁶

La Mettrie’s perceived anonymity and inconsistency was in fact the capacity of the materialist voice to articulate different positions: “voilà bien des personnages qu’il m’a fallu jouer.”⁷¹⁷ Through his texts the philosopher becomes the skillful ventriloquist of other social discourses: “Un Machiaveliste pare par ma bouche dans les quatre premières parties” without identifying with them, but rather setting them at a distance so the reader can reflect on them; his humor and irony allow the reader to take a “natural

714 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:40-41.

715 La Mettrie, *Système d’Épicure* 369.

716 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:48.

717 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:53.

point of view on them”, instead of being the prisoner of their particular spell.⁷¹⁸ And with some skill, it can even develop a sort of Brechtian philosophical theater:

“Si je conseille d’imiter les ruses et les tromperies des fourbes, qu’on se souvienne que je mets ces conseils dans la bouche de Machiavel, que c’est lui qui parle dans tout le Machiavelisme. *Si quelquefois il ne soutient pas tout-à-fait son personnage, je l’ai fait exprès* pour faire sentir, que tel est le visible caractère de la vérité, qu’elle ne peut se masquer, et qu’on la dévoile même, en cherchant à la couvrir.”⁷¹⁹ [Emphasis added]

The materialist text thus seeks a connivance with the reader, not his or her fidelity and good faith. It does not seek to produce a philosophical conversion but a representation, to enlighten through a form of literary and rhetorical performance: “Le public ouvrira enfin les yeux, et chacun examinant le vrai médecin aux signes que je donne, pour le distinguer du faux, me fera l’honneur (il est doux de s’en flatter) de mettre le sien, pour ainsi dire, dans mon creuset, ou de le peser dans sa balance.”⁷²⁰

Enlightenment and People: Setting the Context

The second challenge of public philosophy had to do precisely with the relation that it established with its public. There was, without a doubt, a gap between the construction of a public of readers and the conceptualization of the people, as they did not overlap: philosophy was becoming public without becoming popular, signaling one of the fundamental contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere. As Cowans noted “the increasingly frequent invocation of public opinion in the late eighteenth century eventually raised the question of exactly whose opinions counted as part of this new force,” as it became apparent that in the construction of a public opinion as a “disembodied, abstract phenomenon”, as an impersonal tribunal to which the new public philosophy was addressed, the people (in all its forms of theorization) was in the danger of being virtual and practically erased from the conversation.⁷²¹

Before getting to the polemic context where philosophers positioned themselves, it is important to begin by establishing that in literary and philosophical literature, “the people” was first of all a category of knowledge, and a negative one at that: “popular” was since the Renaissance the equivalent of “ignorant,” “coarse,” and “superstitious.” This conception was explained and substantiated in the very influential Charron’s *De la Sagesse* (1601), and his delineation of three different “classes” of “esprits”, which are social categories of knowledge: first “celle d’en bas,” “les petits, foibles et comme brutaux, tous voisins des bestes,” “abandonnés à la rouille et stupidité,” “de ceux là ne faut faire mise ny recepte, et ne s’en peust dresser ny établir une compagnie constante, car ils ne peuvent pas seulement suffire pour eux mesmes en leur particulier, et faut qu’ils

718 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:52.

719 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:48-49.

720 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 1:53-54.

721 Jon Cowans, *To Speak for the People: Public Opinion and the Problem of Legitimacy in the French Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 14.

soient tousjours en la tutelle d'autrui: c'est le commun et bas peuple," ; second "celle d'en haut sont les grands et très rares esprits," "esprits bien nés forts et vigoureux: de ceux icy ne s'en pourroit bastir en tous les siecles une republique entiere," and finally "celle du milieu", who "sont tous les mediocres", and more importantly "de ceux icy est composé presque tout le monde."⁷²² For Charron, who was in many ways a disciple of Montaigne, the majority of the population belongs to this middle category, that of mediocrity. Therefore if there was undoubtedly a hierarchy of minds in Charron's schema, this did not correspond to the existing social order of the *Ancien Régime*, as privileged orders, in particular the clergy and some of the nobles, were to be found in the "mediocre" batch, as were most of the people.⁷²³

This conception was the one libertine and 17th century philosophers at large inherited, that of people as an epistemological category, not necessarily a social and political one—although the legal and political field, in authors like Bossuet and Loyseau, had already developed a political conception of "the people" which will be the ancestor of the "nation."⁷²⁴ It was later developed in the famous essay by the Abbé Sieyès *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-Etat?* (1789), but also the less known text by Brissot *Observations d'un republicain sur les differents systemes d'administrations provinciales* (1788).⁷²⁵

722 Pierre Charron, *De la Sagesse* (Bordeaux, 1601) 66, 67. Charron points to five "distinctions" that explain the diversity of minds: "La premiere naturelle, et essentielle ,et universelle de tout l'homme, esprit et corps. La seconde naturelle et essentielle principalement; et aucunement acquise, de la force et suffisance de l'esprit. La tierce accidentale de l'estat, condition et devoir, tirée de la superiorité et inferiorité. La quatriesme accidentale de la condition et profession de vie. La cinquiesme et derniere des faveurs et desfaveurs de la nature, et de la fortune." Charron, *De la Sagesse* 198.

723 Later in his book, in the XLVth chapter, Charron offers a second formulation of this distinction: "Cette seconde distinction, qui regarde l'esprit et la suffisance, n'est si apparente et perceptible comme les autres, et vient tant du naturel que de l'acquit; selon laquelle ya trois sortes de gens au monde comme trois classes et degrés d'esprits. En l'un et le plus bas sont les esprits foibles et plats, de basse et petite capacité, nais pour obeir, servir et estre menés, qui en effect sont simplement hommes. Au second et moyen estage sont ceux qui sont de mediocre jugement, font profession de suffisance, science, habileté: mais qui ne se sentent et ne se jugent pas assez, s'arrestent à ce que l'on tient communement et l'on leur baille du premier coup, sans davantage s'enquerir de la verité et source des choses, voire pensent qu'il ne l'est pas permis: et ne regardent point plus loin que là où ils se trouvent; pensent que partout est ainsi, ou doit estre; que si c'est autrement, ils faillent et sont barbares. Ils s'asservissent aux opinions et loix municipales du lieu où ils se trouvent deslors qu'ils sont esclous, non seulement par observance et usage, ce que tous doivent faire, mais encore de cueur et d'ame, et pensent que ce que l'on croit en leur village est la vraye touche de verité (cecy ne s'entend de la verité divine revelée, ny de religion), c'est la seule, ou bien la meilleure reigle de bien vivre. Ces gens sont de l'eschole et du ressort d'Aristote, affirmatifs, positifs, dogmatistes, qui regardent plus l'utilité que la verité, ce qui est propre à l'usage et trafic du monde, qu'à ce qui est bon et vray en soy. En cette classe ya très grand nombre et diversité de degrés; les principaux et plus habiles d'entr'eux gouvernent le monde, et ont les commandemens en main. Au troisieme et plus haut estage sont les hommes doués d'un esprit vif et clair, jugement fort, ferme et solide, qui ne se contentent d'un ouy dire, ne s'arrestent aux opinions communes et recues, ne se laissent gagner et preoccuper à la creance publique, de laquelle ils ne s'estonnent point, sçachant qu'il ya plusieurs bourdes, faulsetés et impostures receues au monde avec approbation et applaudissement, voire adoration et reverence publique: mais examinent toutes choses qui se proposent, sondent meurement, et cherchent sans passion les causes motifs et ressorts jusques à la racine, aimant mieux doubter et tenir en suspens leur creance, que par une trop molle et lasche facilité, ou legereté, ou precipitation de jugement, se paistre de faulseté, et affirmer ou se tenir assureés de chose de laquelle ils ne peuvent avoir raison certaine. Ceux-cy sont en petit nombre de l'eschole et ressort de Socrales et Platon, modestes, sobres, retenus, considerant plus la verité et realité des choses que l'utilité; et s'ils sont bien nais, ayant avec ce dessus la probité et le reiglement des mœurs, ils sont vrayement sages et tels que nous cherchons icy." Charron, *De la Sagesse*, 206-207.

724 Cowans, *To Speak for the People* 20-22.

725 See, for example, Charles Loyseau *Traité des ordres et simples dignités* (1610), and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet,

Nevertheless it was not until the second half of the 18th century that the question of the social division of labor became problematized with the emergence political economy, and thus a social or sociological conception of the people (as *plebs*, synonymous of popular *class*) penetrated philosophical debates. This happened in particular in the texts by Turgot in the 1750s and also in the significant text by Abbé Coyer, “Sur la nature du peuple” (1755), and of course in the *Encyclopédie*, with the articles “Peuple” by Jaucourt and “Population” and “Populaire” by Damilaville.⁷²⁶ Commenting on this evolution Cowans unveiled a latent paradox, one constitutive of the bourgeois public sphere: “If people, understood as the nation, were starting to become a political subject in the rhetoric of the upper classes, the people as plebs were hardly likely to do so given elites’ generally negative perceptions of that group.”⁷²⁷

How did Enlightenment philosophers perceive or theorize their relation with the people? Let’s start by exposing what Mortier called “dilemme de la pensée du XVIIIe siècle,” in his excellent study “Ésoterisme et Lumières” and what Benitez more straightly framed as a contradiction between “la mission que le philosophe s’est donnée de répandre la vérité et ses proclamations élitistes.”⁷²⁸ The Enlightenment was the moment where “le peuple (...) se voit reconnaître le droit au savoir” but that did not go without any struggle, on the opposite.⁷²⁹ The argument developed by most critics is that there was a qualitative change in the relation between the philosophers of the people in the middle of the 18th century (precisely where La Mettrie’s philosophical production is concentrated, 1754-1751) moving from a rather elitist position to the prefiguration of a popular Enlightenment, best synthesized in Diderot’s famous exclamation in the *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature*, published anonymously in 1753, two years after the beginning of the publication of the *Encyclopédie*: “Hâtons-nous de rendre la philosophie populaire. Si nous voulons que les philosophes marchent en avant, approchons le peuple du point où en sont les philosophes. Diront-ils qu’il est des ouvrages qu’on ne mettra jamais à la portée du commun des esprits ? S’ils le disent, ils montreront seulement qu’ils ignorent ce que peuvent la bonne méthode et la longue habitude.”⁷³⁰

Mortier started from the assumption that “la tradition libertine, dès le début du XVIIIe siècle, s’affirme par le mépris du ‘vulgaire’, de la ‘populace’, incapable d’atteindre la vérité ou même de l’entendre, proie inévitable des pires superstitions.”⁷³¹

Politique tirée des propres paroles de l’Écriture Sainte (1709).

726 On this issue and the attitude of the *Encyclopédie* regarding popular enlightenment, see Veronique Le Ru “La valeur d’un mot d’ordre: rendre la philosophie populaire” *Popularité de la philosophie* ed. Philippe Beck and Denis Thourad (Fontenay-aux-Roses: ENS editions, 1995) 53-63.

727 Cowans, *To Speak for the People* 22.

728 Roland Mortier, *Clartés et ombres du siècle des Lumières, Études sur le 18e siècle littéraire*, (Genève: Droz, 1969) 60; and Miguel Benitez, “Lumières et élitisme dans les manuscrits clandestins,” *La Face cachée des Lumières: recherches sur les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l’âge classique* (Paris : Universitas ; Oxford : Voltaire Foundation, 1996) 199.

729 Benitez, “Lumières et élitisme dans les manuscrits clandestins” 204.

730 Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Vernière) 216.

731 Mortier, *Clartés et Ombres* 61-62.

This libertine tradition is embodied in Mortier in Naudé, Des Barreaux and La Mothe-Le-Vayer, in the construction of an aristocratic conception of truth through the cult of secrecy, the aversion for the “popular” and also fear of the consequences of a possible popular Enlightenment (which might lead to the questioning of the social privileges of such an aristocracy). Yet Benitez noted that clandestine literature was already a first step in the act of publicity, as it was nonetheless published and read (as most of the manuscripts were written to be published in some way), it just was printed and circulated without royal approval.⁷³²

For Mortier, the contradiction or dilemma of the philosophers regarding the publicity of the Enlightenment for the first half of the 18th century was best embodied in Fontenelle, who is “autant l’héritier des libertins que le premier des ‘philosophes,’” and showed simultaneously an enthusiastic optimism regarding the development and spreading of the Enlightenment and a fundamental anthropological pessimism regarding the possibility of enlightening the people.⁷³³ He summarized the following way Fontenelle’s thought, which is never systematized in such a clear way in his work: “il croit très fermement au progrès des sciences, des techniques et de la méthode rationnelle, mais [il] est également persuadé que l’homme est foncièrement incapable de se servir de cette même raison pour diriger sa vie et pour régler ses passions,” concluding that “l’objection de Fontenelle à la diffusion des lumières n’est pas d’ordre tactique ou d’ordre social, elle est d’ordre anthropologique, donc permanente et insurmontable.”⁷³⁴ Mortier showed that this skepticism regarding human nature was the product of the influence of the 17th century moralists, like Charron, but also Nicole, La Bruyère and La RocheFoucauld, who were very much influenced by Augustinism. For example, in his *Dialogues des Morts Anciens et Modernes*, Homer confesses to Esopus:

“Vous vous imaginez que l’esprit humain ne cherche que le vrai; détrompez vous. L’esprit humain et le faux sympathisent extrêmement. Si vous avez la vérité à dire, vous ferez fort bien de l’envelopper dans des fables; elle en plaira beaucoup plus. Si vous voulez dire des fables, elles pourront bien plaire, sans contenir aucune vérité. Ainsi, le vrai a besoin d’emprunter la figure du faux, pour être agréablement reçu dans l’esprit humain: mais le faux y entre bien sous sa propre figure; car c’est le lieu de sa naissance et de sa demeure ordinaire, et le vrai y est étranger.”⁷³⁵

In his famous and important essay, *De l’Origine des fables* (1724), Fontenelle asserted that the human mind tends to prefer marvelous tales and imaginary myths to

732 Mortier, *Clartés et Ombres* 63. See also Benitez: “la seule existence de cette littérature clandestine montre déjà le dessein de faire sortir le savoir du cercle restreint des coteries philosophiques.” Benitez, “Lumières et élitisme dans les manuscrits clandestins” 199.

733 For a detailed study of Fontenelle on this issue, see Roland Mortier “Fontenelle entre l’optimisme scientifique et le pessimisme anthropologique,” *Fontenelle, Actes du Colloque tenu à Rouen du 6 au 10 octobre 1987*, ed. Alain Niderst (Paris: PUF, 1989) 675-82.

734 Mortier, *Clartés et Ombres* 66, 67.

735 Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Oeuvres de Fontenelle, 8 Volumes* (Paris: Jean-François Bastien, 1790-1792) 1: 217-218.

logical and rational arguments, which permanently leads humanity to falsehood, as the origin of fables comes from “le fond de la nature humaine”.⁷³⁶ The tendency to fabulate, which explained the origins of many sorts of myths, tales, religion and even distorted histories, is inherent to human nature, and this fictional capacity had very much to do with the birth of philosophy in the first centuries. Fontenelle traced an historical evolution where fable and philosophy have for centuries gone hand by hand, and philosophy had become more and more rational, and less appealing to imagination, with the progress of sciences. This tendency to fabulate had to do with the natural desire of curiosity on the one hand but also with the universal tendency to explain “les choses inconnues de la nature par celles que nous avons devant les yeux et que nous transportons à la physique les idées que l’expérience nous fournit,” that is to say, to mediate the information of the sense by a construction of imagination and to of reason.⁷³⁷ But for Fontenelle, if primitive people were not to blame, because the science of their time was not evolved enough to produce any other kind of explanation, the problem was that “les hommes ont en quelque manière pris plaisir à se tromper eux mêmes,” and in the age of scientific enlightenment, they take pleasure to fabulate and lie to each other.⁷³⁸ Thus Fontenelle develops a rather pessimistic and paradoxical effect of the Enlightenment, that the more man knew they could know with certainty, the more he enjoy their fables: “Ne cherchons donc autre chose dans les fables que l’histoire des erreurs de l’esprit humain. Il en est moins capable dès qu’il sait à quel point il l’est. (...) Tous les hommes se ressemblent si fort, qu’il n’y a point de peuple dont les sottises ne nous doivent faire trembler.”⁷³⁹

Fontenelle never embraced the Machiavellian argument that fables (or religion) are useful to keep the people in the dark, using the power of imagination to reinforce social and political domination. To a lesser degree Bayle also shared this pessimism regarding people’s capacity to understand philosophy, though he never questioned the need to spread Enlightenment; on the contrary, he risked a great deal to do so. Fontenelle and Bayle were maybe the two philosophers who best situated the social problem of the Enlightenment as La Mettrie came to perceive and inherit it. What could be perceived as “elitism” in the part of La Mettrie was, in my view, closer to the remaining of this kind of “anthropological pessimism” than the expression of any aristocratic social position as it was clearly the case for Naudé, Des Barreaux or even later Grimm.

La Mettrie found himself at the turning point of the 18th-century rearticulation of the philosophers relation to the people, as it has been argued by Mortier, Chisick and Payne.⁷⁴⁰ La Mettrie thus inherited the problem of the advantages and disadvantage of the

736 Fontenelle, *Oeuvres de Fontenelle* 5:369.

737 Fontenelle, *Oeuvres de Fontenelle* 5:354.

738 Fontenelle, *Oeuvres de Fontenelle* 5:358. “Jusqu’ici les premiers hommes ont donné naissance aux fables sans qu’il y ait pour ainsi dire de leur faute. On est ignorant et on voit par conséquent bien des prodiges, on exagère naturellement les choses surprenantes, en les racontant elles se chargent encore de diverses faussetés en passant par plusieurs bouches il s’établit des espèces de systèmes de philosophie fort grossiers et fort absurdes mais il ne peut s’en établir d’autre.” Fontenelle, *Oeuvres de Fontenelle* 5:358.

739 Fontenelle, *Oeuvres de Fontenelle* 5:372.

740 For an introduction on the issue, see Jon Cowans “Public opinion and the people in Prerevolutionary France,” *To Speak for the People* 9-25; and Roland Mortier “The ‘Philosophes’ and Public Education” *Yale French Studies* 40, *Literature and Society: Eighteenth Century* (1968): 62- 76. For a deeper study see Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of*

publicity of knowledge which in the 1750s are reformulated more clearly as the question of the relation between the philosophers and their social mission of Enlightenment. Mortier notes an evolution and a major change in the attitude to the intellectual elite regarding the issue of diffusion of philosophy: “l’ère de la prudence, des tergiversations, de la dissimulation leur semble, après 1750, définitivement révolue: la vérité ne saurait nuire à personne et il n’est point de sagesse ‘réservée,’” a new moment where the philosophes “ne font aucune exception à ce qui leur paraît un principe fondamental,” even though this commitment was not an unanimous one, and some marginal voices resisted.⁷⁴¹

Some of these critics who described this evolution pattern forget to mention in their account that it was precisely materialist authors who led this fight for a public and popular Enlightenment. This was the case not only of Diderot and Helvetius, who they do mention, but before them of La Mettrie, often forgotten by scholars, who first reformulated the dilemma of Fontenelle in new materialist terms.⁷⁴² Furthermore, the simple evolutionary scheme does not take into account that the positions of the philosophers tended to change also because reality was changing: the more the process of secularization advanced (which does not necessarily means atheism), the less the intellectual elite tended to express scorn for the popular classes. But the most important point here is that the struggle within the philosophical field happened between two different lines of reasoning that initially justified philosophical prevention towards the people. On the one hand we find those who opposed the spread of Enlightenment because of social and political motivations, who like Voltaire and Grimm will on the opposite develop their conservative side with the advance of the century.⁷⁴³ From this political

Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes toward the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-century France (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981); and Harry Payne, *The Philosophers and the People* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976).

741 Mortier, *Clartés et Ombres* 85, 94-103.

742 Before arriving at the core of the materialist position on this issue, it is important to mention, with Benitez, that to assume that libertine or “proto-materialist” clandestine philosophy is necessarily secretive and elitist is to simplify the issue. In clandestine books, which aimed at circumventing censorship, we find a variety of positions: from the anti-popular ones to vindications of the need to educate the people. Benitez added in the materialist and libertine productions the search for an accessible language, overcoming the theological and philosophical rhetoric and the “jargon des écoles.” Benitez, “Lumières et élitisme dans les manuscrits clandestins” 200. Amongst the examples of clandestine manuscripts which positively addressed the question of the enlightenment of the people, Benitez mentions the *Mémoires* by the Abbé Meslier and above all the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, a text that asserts that préjugés are the cause of “l’ignorance où tant de peuples sont plongés et dont les vrais sçavants (quelque profond que soit cet abîme) les pourraient retirer.” Benitez, “Lumières et élitisme dans les manuscrits clandestins” 200. In those texts, for Benitez “le peuple n’est plus (...) la racaille dont parlaient les libertins mais un interlocuteur capable d’assimiler la vérité,” even though the critic notes some limits to the disposition of spreading the truth, as it is the case in the *Difficultés sur la religion proposées au père Malebranche*, just to quote one of the popular clandestine texts. Benitez, “Lumières et élitisme dans les manuscrits clandestins” 204.

743 I could not agree more with Mortier when he assesses that “les réserves de Voltaire s’expliqueraient plutôt par des mobiles économiques et sociaux, eux-mêmes issue de sa réflexion historique et de sa position politique conservatrice et modérée.” Mortier, *Clartés et Ombres* 73-74. As “Voltaire estime qu’il faut répandre les ‘lumières’ par étapes et par paliers, en tenant compte du milieu d’instruction et du milieu social.” Mortier, *Clartés et Ombres* Mortier 74. Even though Voltaire is not a Machiavelist, in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* he asserted “la populace n’est pas faite pour penser” (article Blé), or he affirmed confidentially to D’Alembert “on n’a jamais prétendu éclairer les cordonnier et les servantes” (Lettre du 2 septembre 1768). Regarding the strategy to follow for Enlightenment, “Voltaire est persuadé que le mieux est l’ennemi du bien et que le pire service qu’on puisse rendre aux ‘lumières’ est de les répandre inconsidérément dans un public inégalement préparé et dont les couches les plus basses leur sont imperméables, du

stance they wanted to concentrate the Enlightenment more than expand it, basing their arguments on people's intellectual capacity and "backwardness". On the other side we find those whose skepticism originated, as was the case for Fontenelle and Bayle, from a more general anthropological pessimism, a belief with clear religious (and not social roots), but who are still committed to the social project of Enlightenment as a universal one, at least in principle. With the advancement of secularization and philosophical critique, that conception of human nature will be questioned precisely by materialist philosophers (La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and d'Holbach), who will become the most vocal defenders of public education and the education of the people in the second half of the 18th century.

Materialists shared the apology for many forms of public education, which was most visible in Diderot's commitment to the risky publication project of the *Encyclopédie* but also his device in a *Plan pour l'éducation de la Russie*, Helvétius's insistence on the need to develop a public plan of education in France since his *De l'Esprit*, a view which he reiterated in his posthumous *De l'Homme*, and of course D'Holbach's pamphlets of divulgation (*Le Bons Sens*, *Le Christianisme Dévoilé*). La Mettrie's particular stance on education was a singular one within the materialist constellation. Even though he did not publicly advocate, like Helvetius and Diderot did, for a public education system, he insisted on the importance of education for the development of intellectual capacities, but more importantly, he offered a slightly different view on the matter, concentrating more on the quality rather than the quantitative aspects of education, as he interrogated its role in achieving human happiness, and not just of learning for the sake of it.

A Materialist Theory of Education: Overcoming the Antinomy of Elitism and Formal Egalitarianism

“Ne craignons donc pas que l'esprit du peuple se moule jamais sur celui des philosophes trop au dessus de sa portée. Il en est comme de ces Instruments à sons graves et bas, qui ne peuvent monter aux tons aigus et perçants de plusieurs autres, ou comme d'une Basse Taille qui ne peut s'élever aux sons ravissants de la Haute-Contre. (...) Ce sont deux Physionomies qui ne se ressembleront jamais, deux instruments dont l'un est tourné cizelé travaillé; l'autre brut et tel qu'il est sorti des mains de la nature. Enfin le pli est fait; il restera; il n'est pas plus aisé à un de s'élever, qu'à l'autre de descendre.”⁷⁴⁴

When reading these kinds of statements, a question imposes itself: was for La Mettrie philosophy simply *unpopular* because of its social circumstances or is it fundamentally *anti-popular*? Stepping aside for a moment from the question of philosophy as mediation and as the call for interpretation, some of these “materialistic”

moins dans l'immédiat. Mieux vaut doser ses efforts, éclairer par réfraction, diffuser par vagues successives.” as he wrote to Damilaville on April 13th 1766: “Il est bien certain que les pèlerinages, les prétendus miracles, les cérémonies superstitieuses, ne feront jamais un honnête homme; l'exemple seul en fait, et c'est la seule manière d'instruire l'ignorance des villageois. Ce sont donc les principaux citoyens qu'il faut d'abord éclairer... il faut que la lumière descende par degrés. Celle du bas peuple sera toujours fort confuse; ceux qui sont occupés à gagner leur vie ne peuvent l'être d'éclairer leur esprit: il leur suffit de l'exemple de leurs supérieurs.” (77:403) Mortier, *Clartés et Ombres* 76 .

744 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 23.

statements seem to contain a deeper assumption on the intellectual capacity of the people to think and participate in the Enlightenment. And it is right to wonder if La Mettrie could also be an early modern participant of the kind of arrogant elitism and contempt of the people by philosophers Ranciere warned us about?⁷⁴⁵

One reading of La Mettrie's materialism has interpreted these passages as the affirmation of an open elitism based on a natural intellectual inequality between the people and the learned elite, a sort of early modern version of biological eugenics.⁷⁴⁶ I argue that this is superficial reading of La Mettrie or that, at least, this is not the only interpretation that can be made of his reasoning. At no moment has La Mettrie ever argued that there is a difference or inequality of substance" between human souls, nor amongst the *physiological* organization of bodies. The way La Mettrie reconciled the existence of a variety of intelligences and degrees of intellectual capacity with his commitment to provide a physical and scientific account of the mind was to establish a difference between physiology and physiognomy. The latter was a materialist reinterpretation of a Renaissance category,

In 16th-century Renaissance cosmology, the science of physiognomy (next to the ones of metoposcopy and chiromancy) was based on a conception of natural signs as *signatures*, which relied upon the notion of harmony and correspondence between the natural and the celestial world, and where, as Percival noted, "as man was seen as a microcosm of the universe, so the face and hand was a microcosm of the human body."⁷⁴⁷ In such a context the sign functioned in a metonymic way, as a *signature*, expressing and containing the whole complexity of the being. Physiognomy was therefore part of a Renaissance *episteme* based on a system of resemblances that, as Foucault explained, established an analogy or correspondence between the psychic interiority and the physical appearance.⁷⁴⁸

One would think that the reference to physiognomy in the 18th century was at odds with the scientific revolution and the experimental science that inspired materialist philosophers, as it appeared to belong to the previous Aristotelian paradigm, that of substantial and formal causes and hidden potentialities. The notion of physiognomy stood out, as Porter pointed out, as primitive or pre-modern element in the midst of "'paradigm shift' in science from a qualitative to a mathematized and probabilistic approach to nature" and "Foucault's argument about an epistemic shift from a grid of

745 See Jacques Rancière, "Le mensonge de Platon," *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* (Paris : A. Fayard, 1983) 17-85.

746 See Ann Thomson "La Mettrie ou la machine infernale", *Corpus* 5-6 (1987): 15-26; Aury and Wolfe "Sommes-nous héritiers des Lumières matérialistes?"; Vartanian, *Science and Humanism in the French Enlightenment* 67- 70 and Michael Winston, *From Perfectibility to Perversion: meliots in Eighteenth Century France* (New York: P. Lang 2005) 20-37. Vartanian argued that the "man-machine theory (...) brings confirmation to the natural inequality not only between men and animals, but, whether we like it or not, between the human species itself"); his theory "points at the existence of a "psychophysical elite" of intelligence, virtue and talent over and above, or rather outside, the social one based on birth, privilege, and wealth- indeed an authentic aristocracy (...) whose title is founded on performance." Vartanian, *Science and Humanism in the French Enlightenment* 67, 68; and Winston makes a similar argument in his first chapter where he compares La Mettrie and Helvétius. Michael Winston, *From Perfectibility to Perversion* 20-37.

747 Melissa Percival, *The Appearance of Character: Physiognomy and Facial Expression in Eighteenth-century France* (Leeds: W.S. Maney for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 1999) 15.

748 Michel Foucault, "Les signatures," *Les Mots et les choses*, 40-45.

correspondences to a theory of representation.”⁷⁴⁹ Indeed Descartes eliminated any possibility for a physiognomy by reducing the only valid discourse on matter to the science physics, but let us also remind ourselves that never conceived matter as animated or inhabited by a soul that could shape it, but as inert extension.

Why did La Mettrie (inspired by Francis Bacon’s and his contemporary Bougeant’s *Lettres philosophiques sur les physionomies*, 1748) refer to physiognomy?⁷⁵⁰ His approximation to the notion occurred medical context and practice, as we know La Mettrie was first trained as a physician. It was understood as a science of reading external signs of the body; a science not opposed but rather complementary to anatomy. The physician aimed at healing the living, to produce an effect so it could not wait for the totality of the medical science and research to be achieved first. Medicine as a practice, and contrary to the anatomist, had to accept a degree of contingency. Anatomy as a science of dissecting and studying cadaver operated with different constraints. The physician practice thus contained a degree of uncertainty, as it was dealing with living matter and partial knowledge, it needed thus to develop a sort of science of reading the body, of interpreting its external changes and symptoms, at the risk, of course, of making mistakes: that was the medical use of physiognomy. It belonged to the study of a form of *medical semiotics*, to the level of *interpretation* and not that of *determination*, what today would be called symptomatology, allowing to formulate a working hypothesis, a provisional explanation and not a definitive diagnostic.

By analogy, La Mettrie suggested the possibility to think in the intellectual world of a physiognomy of the human mind, which was in fact the recognition of the social and material diversity of the public or addressee of philosophy. By establishing the existence of different intellectual physiognomies, La Mettrie simply acknowledging a sociological fact, that all mind/body arrangements were not shaped, trained, accustomed to receive or engage with philosophy and reflective thought in the same ways, from which he concluded that there could be no universal formula for philosophical delivery or enlightenment. By asserting this La Mettrie was not establishing the existence essential or innate intellectual differences, but that those differences existed because of the diversity of education and experiences and that there were not purely interiorized, but were somehow apparent and readable “from the outside”. La Mettrie’s materialist physiognomy was not delineating something very different from what Bourdieu centuries later called *habitus*: “la croyance pratique n’est pas un “état d’âme” ou, moins encore, une sorte d’adhésion décisive à un corps de dogmes et de doctrines instituées, “les croyances”, mais si l’on permet l’expression, un état de corps,” where the body functions “comme un pense-bête, comme un automate “qui entraîne l’esprit sans qu’il y pense” en même temps que comme un dépôt où sont conservés les valeurs les plus précieuses.”⁷⁵¹ Vartanian was wrong to affirm that La Mettrie considered the intellectual differences to be natural or innate just because he sought to perceive their material dimension and that cognitive and intellectual capacities do not exist in the abstract but are embodied and

749 Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul: Physiognomy in European Culture 1470-1780* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005) 32.

750 Percival, *The Appearance of Character* 14-20.

751 Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980) 115. See Bourdieu, “La croyance et le corps,” *Le Sens pratique* 111-135.

shaped by sensitive and material experience. What La Mettrie was proposing to the Enlightenment philosopher was to undertake a sort of sociology of minds in order to differentiate its audience, as the assumption of a standard intellectual physiognomy would mean in practical terms to exclude the largest portion of philosophy's potential audience.

La Mettrie thus demarcated his views on education from the Cartesian dualist model and abstract egalitarianism, which was later mobilized to establish the Republican model of public education and the ideology of meritocracy. His emphasis was on the side of developing a theory of reception of philosophy together with a theory of education. If the communication of ideas was to be more complicated than the Cartesian metaphor of sealing stamps on fresh and soft wax, as the mind's wax often came already hardened, previously sealed and shaped, the emphasis of philosophy had to be on how reconnect one's mind with a natural sentiment or expression, to bring back our organism to its "ton naturel":

“Si je ne me lasse point de revenir à l'éducation, c'est qu'elle seule peut nous donner des sentiments contraires à ceux que nous aurions eus sans elle. Tel est l'effet de la modification ou du changement qu'elle procure à notre instinct ou à notre façon de sentir. L'Âme instruite ne veut, ne suit, ne fait plus ce qu'elle faisait auparavant, lorsqu'elle n'étoit guidée que par l'instinct. Eclairée par mille sensations nouvelles, elle trouve mauvais ce qu'elle trouvait bon; elle loue en autrui, ce qu'elle y blâmait. Vraies girouettes, nous tournons donc sans cesse comme au vent de l'éducation; et nous retournons ensuite à notre premier point, quand nos organes, remis à leur ton naturel, nous rappellent à eux et nous font suivre leurs dispositions primitives. Alors les anciennes déterminations renaissent; celles que l'art avait produites s'effacent: enfin on n'est pas même le maître de profiter de la meilleure éducation, autant qu'on le voudroit pour le bien de la société. On dégénère malgré soi.”⁷⁵²

For La Mettrie the most important moment of education and which should become a matter of public debate and concern was that of early childhood. It was the moment where most of the harm could be done, as it was possible to leave a trace which would be difficult to erase in the future. No trace was indelible, for if human minds was thought as a material sedimentations of imprints, it was a living one, organized by a living force or conatus, so every trace might potentially be retraced:

“Je n'ai ni craintes, ni espérances. Nulle empreinte de ma première éducation: cette foule de préjugés, sucés pour ainsi dire, avec le lait, a heureusement disparu de bonne heure à la divine clarté de la Philosophie. Cette Substance molle et tendre, sur laquelle le cachet de l'erreur s'était si bien imprimé, rase aujourd'hui, n'a conservé aucuns vestiges, ni de mes Collèges, ni de mes Pédans. J'ai eu le courage d'oublier ce que j'avais eu la faiblesse d'apprendre; tout est rayé, (quel bonheur!) tout est effacé, tout est extirpé jusqu'à la racine: et c'est le grand ouvrage de la réflexion et de la Philosophie; elles seules pouvaient arracher l'ivraie, et semer le bon grain

752 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 163.

dans les sillons que la mauvaise herbe occupait.”⁷⁵³

Education shapes our physiognomy in an almost physical way, imprinting a second nature (giving a physiognomy to our natural physiology), but this was not an irreversible transformation, precisely because it only altered the physiognomy, not the physiology, which remained an active force. We see with this conceptual couple (physiology/physiognomy) a reworking of the Spinozist one of *nature naturante* and *nature naturée*. Nature was seen as a living force which could always restore its path and heal what society has deformed, limited and repress for decades or even centuries of mis-education, be it desire or reflective capacities. If the role of medicine was the restoration of health by appealing to natural and material means, philosophy would attempt to accomplish an analogous function but by resorting to artificial ones: fiction, discourse, theater etc.

The first re-education needed, in order of priority to achieve happiness, was to combat and eliminate the habitus of remorse inculcated in our bodies by religious education:

“Le remord n’est donc qu’une fâcheuse réminiscence, qu’une ancienne habitude de sentir, qui reprend le dessus. C’est si l’on veut une trace qui se renouvelle et par conséquent un vieux préjugé, que la volupté & les passions n’endorment point si bien, qu’il ne se réveille presque toujours tôt ou tard. L’homme porte ainsi en soi même le plus grand de ses ennemis. Il le suit partout. (...) Heureusement ce cruel ennemi n’est pas toujours vainqueur. Toute autre habitude, ou plus longue, ou plus forte, doit le vaincre nécessairement. Le sentier le mieux frayé s’efface, comme on ferme un chemin, ou comble un précipice. Autre éducation, autre cours des Esprits, autres traces dominantes autres, sentiments enfin qui ne peuvent pénétrer notre Ame, sans s’élever sur les débris des premiers qu’un nouveau Mécanisme abolit.”⁷⁵⁴

Ideally, philosophy should become, by its regular practice, a new habitude, as a second but conscious mechanism, which attempted to erase the harmful seals that have been imprinted in the people’s organisms or human machines. Yet because the means of philosophy were so tenuous, the transformation had to go beyond education, and we find again, but as a negative image, the project of a “peuple philosophique” outlined by Dumarsais: “Je comprends qu’on prend de la façon de penser, de parler, de gesticuler, de ceux avec qui l’on vit; mais cela se fait peu à peu, par imitation machinale.... On y est préparé par degrés, et de plus fortes habitudes urmontent enfin les plus faibles.”⁷⁵⁵ Maybe then a common education was not enough, maybe from this perspective a true universal and popular Enlightenment would also entail the transformation of the ways of living, in order to establish between the philosopher and the people a shared space and everyday life.

A conservative reading of La Mettrie would conclude that such an ambitious endeavor was not worth trying. Even the idea of educating the people would be too

753 La Mettrie, *Système d’Épicure* 375.

754 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 150-151.

755 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 24.

difficult and expensive, given that all of these obstacles seemed almost impossible to overcome. The reading I am proposing considers that it was by confronting the real difficulties of the establishment of a public education system, and by the conception of the kind of education that would be truly emancipatory, which takes the human machines as they are, embodied and accustomed (instead of presupposing they are free of form and content), that La Mettrie proposes a new way for a materialist Enlightenment, a proposal which posed in concrete terms the conditions of its universal ambitions, and which highly influenced Helvetius and Diderot to the point that it became a trademark of materialism.

La Mettrie's educational philosophy was opposed to a conception of education founded on the assertion of a formal equality of the souls, but not because he was opposed to the fiction of equality, but this particular fiction proved to be ultimately harmful. The disembodied and abstract form of Cartesian equality was an unproductive fiction, the product of a philosophical mystification, which would not lead mankind to happiness. First because it was, from a natural point of view, a purely formal equality that would eventually become an obstacle to education if everybody was presupposed to relate equally to knowledge, and secondly because it put at the center of education the transmission of a knowledge or truth for its own sake, and not the realization of human happiness, nor it contemplated the diversity of paths and educations that could lead to it.

The universality of the Enlightenment, for the materialists, was not oriented by the goal of ensuring a universal instruction and acquisition of philosophy, but a universal access to happiness. Education and the knowledge of science and philosophy were only socially necessary if they helped to achieve this ultimate goal. La Mettrie would have opposed thus the establishment of a compulsory and uniform education system like the one established in the French Third Republic, which by definition would become an obstacle to the development of some (most) of the people. As he reminded in the *Homme-machine*:

“Nous n'avons pas originairement été faits pour être Savans; c'est peut-être par une espèce d'abus de nos facultés organiques, que nous le sommes devenus; et cela à la charge de l'Etat, qui nourrit une multitude de Fainéans, que la vanité a décorés du nom de Philosophes. La Nature nous a tous créés uniquement pour être heureux; oui tous, depuis le ver qui rampe, jusqu'à l'Aigle qui se perd dans la Nuë.”⁷⁵⁶

Philosophy Beyond (In) Communication

La Mettrie's position in the Enlightenment was a difficult one: while, like many of his fellow philosophical *compagnons d'armes*, he was convinced that philosophical discourse was on principle universal and emancipatory, it was clear to him that this was just an hypothetical or potential universality, because in reality, philosophy could only address a small minority that could read and had the disposition to be sensitive to it. This contradiction I just exposed again does not weaken the social mission of philosophy or its commitment to truth and emancipation, or its universal scope. It only forced the philosopher to rethink his or her strategy and take often an indirect path to Enlightenment.

756 La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* 52.

We find in La Mettrie a first social strategy of Enlightenment which consists in enlightening, or rather re-enlightening those who claim to already be, that is to say those reading and participating in the public sphere, which in the 18th century was expanding rapidly but still remained distant from the popular sectors. This strategy, which appears as “elitist”, or relying on the role of an Enlightened elite is clear beginning in the *Homme-machine*: “Il ne suffit pas à un Sage d’étudier la Nature et la Vérité; il doit oser la dire en faveur du petit nombre de ceux qui veulent et peuvent penser; car pour les autres, qui sont volontairement Esclaves des Prejugés, il ne leur est plus possible d’atteindre la Vérité, qu’aux Grenouilles de voler.”⁷⁵⁷ The first half of the Enlightenment program has to do with the philosopher’s necessary commitment to the publicity of truth and Enlightenment. This is an aspect upon which I already commented, that a private enlightenment was of no use, that it was a sabotage to the true existential mission of philosophy and that the Enlightenment movement had to be a transitive one—an address to the widest public available: “être philosophe c’est enseigner le matérialisme” ou “oser la dire en faveur du petit nombre”, embracing a kind of philosophical proselytism. And in this sense the philosopher should seek to occupy all the social spaces where this enlightenment is possible: *cafés*, *salons*, the press, theater, scientific and art criticism journals, the expanded book market as a whole—and the question emerged whether or not the Academy and the royal court could or should be such a space. Philosophy must be this movement to created an ever-increasing enlightened and enlightening public: “Nous ne briguons point ici le suffrage du vulgaire. Qui dresse dans son coeur des Autels à la superstition, est né pour adorer les Idoles, et non pour sentir la Vertu.”⁷⁵⁸ And he restated the same position in the *Discours Préliminaire*: “Ce n’est qu’aux Esprits déjà éclairés, que la philosophique peut se communiquer.”⁷⁵⁹

The other half of the program, however, was more problematic, as La Mettrie asserts that for those who are “volontairement esclaves des préjugés” philosophical communication seems a dead end, and one cannot but perceive there La Mettrie’s pessimism. His materialist Enlightenment had nothing of the celebrated metaphor of natural sunlight; the vision of was immediate and universal “enlightenment”. For La Mettrie the power or light of philosophy was more of that of the *flambeau* or the *torche*. This pessimism was rooted on the relative powerlessness of philosophy when compared with its rival social discourses: religion and politics. For philosophy could not produce its desired effect like political or religious discourse did, that is to say by the simple communication or contagion of its ideas. Philosophy lacked both the *affective* appeal and efficacy of religion and morals and the *coercive* force of law and political mandates. In both cases (religion and politics) the efficacy of discourse lay elsewhere, outside of words and arguments. Philosophy was only able to rely on the force of its own words and rhetorical strategies of communication and persuasion. It was thus for La Mettrie, constantly threatened by a fate of inefficacy and almost impotence: “Quant à la communication, ou si l’on veut, à la contagion que l’on craint, je ne la crois pas

757 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 63.

758 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 98.

759 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 24.

possible.”⁷⁶⁰

What had to be accepted from the start was the relative powerlessness of this discourse because there was, in real failure of communication or reception. Indeed, the people was not ready to understand and believe what philosophers say because of the social and ideological distance between both of them:

“Les matérialistes ont beau prouver que l'homme n'est qu'une machine, le peuple n'y croira jamais rien. Le même Instinct qui le retient à la vie, lui donne assez de vanité pour croire son Ame immortelle, et il est trop fol et trop ignorant pour jamais dédaigner cette vanité là.”⁷⁶¹

“Le peuple ne vit point avec les Philosophes, il ne lit point de Livres philosophiques. Si par hazard il en tombe un entre les mains, ou il n'y comprend rien, ou s'il y conçoit quelque chose, il n'en croit pas un mot.”⁷⁶²

Two divergent interpretations have been made of these types of statements. The first one is that for La Mettrie philosophy was if not anti-popular, at least a-popular, that is to say incompatible with the people, and thus La Mettrie was, despite of all of his claims, an elitist. A second position has consisted of reading in those claims as an apology for the non-dangerosity and political innocence of philosophy in order to escape censorship.⁷⁶³ Without excluding the pertinence of this second reading, I would like to propose a third one which tackles more directly the problem posed by La Mettrie's text as I think such statements on the incompatibility of the people with philosophy mean more than a simple manoeuvre or declaration of a state of things. La Mettrie's point went beyond the sociological self-awareness of the reception of his philosophy; it formulated a contradiction or a paradox: that Enlightenment philosophy was to accept being universal in its goal, the emancipation and happiness of all, while not being universally addressed. The people were to be the beneficiary but not the direct addressee of philosophical discourse, which did not negate Marx's slogan that the emancipation of humanity would not be the task of humanity itself. It just specified that universal emancipation and happy the establishment of the conditions of happiness does not mean a universal philosophical Enlightenment for all, or at least not immediately. This acknowledgment of the indirect ways philosophy spreads and transforms, can be read today as an early-modern prefiguration of what 20th century materialism theorized as the struggle of an organized and conscious vanguard to emancipate the working class, that is to say Leninism; but also of the limited effect of a philosophy which is only formally addressed to all, but does not contemplate the material conditions of its desired universality.

The paradox is that this blatant contradiction between Enlightenment philosophy's goals and its means, even though it had a social and material root and explanation, could not be solved through material means: by expanding education,

760 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 23.

761 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 20.

762 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 24.

763 The declaration of the unpopular nature of philosophy would thus be the grounds of an appeal to public authorities for an increased toleration of philosophy: "Quel mal, je le demande aux plus grands ennemis de la liberté de penser et d'écrire, quel mal y a-t-il d'acquiescer à ce qui paraît vrai, quand on reconnaît avec la même candeur, et qu'on suit avec la même fidélité ce qui paraît sage et utile?" La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 17-18.

material access to books and literacy. At the core of the problem was the fact that Enlightenment philosophy could not be universally communicated because it lacked precisely a universal political subject to address, a universal subject to which philosophy could be potentially communicated. And this was not an accidental matter, or one simply contingent on education. This absence of a universal addressee was seen by La Mettrie as a constitutive feature of philosophy, in the sense that philosophy does not or should not, like religion, presuppose an addressee or a public already made, for it constituted its own through mediations—which for La Mettrie were both sensual and reflective. Philosophy was not a matter of *communication*, which for La Mettrie is the enlightened name for religious contagion, it aspires to activate a different subjectivity through *interpretation*. This is an idea later found in Adorno’s theory of philosophy:

“Direct communicability to everyone is not a criterion of truth. We must resist the all but universal compulsion to confuse the communication of knowledge with knowledge itself, and to rate it higher, if possible—whereas at present each communicative step is falsifying truth and selling it out. Meanwhile, whatever has to do with language suffers of this paradoxicality.”⁷⁶⁴

To summarize, the existing incompatibility of the people and philosophy was then for La Mettrie a twofold problem, or a problem operating at two levels: the first, strictly material one, that has to do with actual existing historical and social circumstances of a restriction bourgeois public sphere and the enlightened elite and a largely uneducated population; the second had to do with the kind of effect philosophy sought to produce which was not the *dressage* or adoration of Idols, but rather permitting the feeling or experience of natural virtue, which is alienated by religion. Philosophy’s inability to communicate anything, to act immediately, without mediations, lacking the efficacy to convince, that is to act in or in the place of our minds, was in fact its strength and singularity.

The materialist philosopher had to develop a strategy for enlightening that would both depart from and address the existing material conditions of communication or reception, and seek to generate a philosophical subjectivity through interpretation. For La Mettrie, the political dimension of philosophy was not defined solely at the point of production of discourse, but mainly at that of reception and interpretation. As Markovits explained “La Mettrie applique le grand principe de la dépendance du discours envers celui qui l’écoute, par opposition à l’ordre logique et didactique de Port-Royal qui met la pensée et la fonction de l’affirmation à la première personne.”⁷⁶⁵ The opening for interpretation began when the text ended, so the only recourse the philosopher had was to propose a particular kind of text, a particular form, that would solicit not a believer, but an interpreter.

5. The Form of Enlightening Philosophy: Machines for Fiction

⁷⁶⁴ Theodor W Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1973. New York: Continuum, 2007) 41.

⁷⁶⁵ Markovits, “La Mettrie, l’anonyme” 97. As Markovits pointed out, La Mettrie “fait la théorie de la différence des positions et de l’inéchangeabilité des discours qui y sont inhérents”. Markovits, “La Mettrie, L’anonyme” 85. People will read and understand differently a discourse in relation to where they are located in society, and discourses change their meaning when read in different contexts.

The Philosophical Book and the Emergence of the Commodity Form

As Ribard pointed out, the development of the book market and the public sphere, besides transforming philosophy's functions and uprooting it from the university and its satellite educational institutions, also presented a new and unforeseen challenge for reception.⁷⁶⁶ The more philosophy began to be printed and to circulate as a commodity in book form, the more it became challenging to distinguish or identify what set apart a philosophical book from the other types. This problem of indifferenciation which emerged in the 16 century, turned more acute in the mid 18th:

"Vers 1750, il est devenu vraiment difficile pour les lecteurs qui ne font pas partie de l'entourage des auteurs ou ne bénéficient pas d'informations particulières de savoir d'emblée si un livre est ou n'est pas de la philosophie. De là, pour les auteurs et leur critiques, la nécessité de prendre position sur ce point avec autant plus d'énergie, et la multiplication des interventions destinées à éclaircir la situation."⁷⁶⁷

In the new book market the specificity of materialist philosophy, and of philosophy alone, found itself contained—or better, trapped—in a commodity form which tended to equalize all written texts despite their intrinsic qualities. I would argue that to some extent La Mettrie and Diderot were among the few philosophers of their time who were aware of this radical transformation of the material existence of philosophy. For La Mettrie the danger of the *indifferenciation* of philosophical discourse from other types of discourses needed to be addressed. This was probably one of the reasons behind the republication of most of his works in 1751 in a compilation titled *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, using for the first time such a qualifier (“philosophique”) to mark his production. In fact the “Discours Preliminaire” wanted to perform a clear dissection of all the existing types of discourses (religion, science, moral, politics etc), to circumscribe the specificity of philosophy and establish the relation it ought to have with each of them.

In this work of discursive differentiation, inspired by the Spinozist insinuation of the need of a “natural history of discourses,” La Mettrie mobilized two criteria of classification: the function of each type discourse in society and the kind of relation it established with the reader. All of the discourses philosophy critiqued or from which it wanted to be held separate shared a common feature: the establishment of a “closed” relationship with its readership, limiting either its scope or participation. While philosophy's work of differentiation from religion is a topic of widely explored and researched, I will focus here on the difference between philosophy and politics, and philosophy and science.⁷⁶⁸

766 "A partir de la fin du XVIe, les livres de philosophie peuvent trouver des imprimeurs et des lecteurs de moins en moins liés aux institutions enseignantes; ils tendent à ressembler de plus en plus aux autres livres." Dinah Ribard, *Raconter, Vivre, Penser: Histoire(s) De Philosophes, 1650-1766*. (Paris: Éd. De L'École Des Hautes Études En Sciences Sociales, 2003) 13.

767 Ribard, *Raconter, Vivre, Penser* 16.

768 Religious discourse was for its community of believers, immediately effective. It seems to have the immediate power of conviction, almost to *act* on people, defining both beliefs and behaviors. Religion is a form of discourse that is already a form of action because it appeals to human passions, to fear and to pride, shaking the promise of

Political Discourse

The separation of the order of reason from the order of material force was a common place for Enlightenment philosophy. On this issue La Mettrie was very close to Montesquieu and Rousseau's fundamental distinction between the realm of force (nature) and the realm of law (civil society). "La Politique" for La Mettrie was the discourse *coming from* political institutions, that is to say from instances of power, and not necessarily the discourse *about* politics. Although political discourse seemed to contain its strength in its words and the force of its reasoning and arguments, its force of compulsion was in fact always hidden in the social material structure from which it emanated. Political discourse was problematic not only because of the particular "politics" it defended, but because it produces a mystification: that the force of its arguments was in its arguments, presenting a false origin of its power (language and reason). This was potential trap for radical philosophy as the logic of political discourse was to pretend the debate was a rational one, and that it could be combated with better arguments. Philosophy, as the enunciation of a natural point of view on discourse, could never have had the same form of material efficacy that political discourse did, nor should it seek to. To those who feared that philosophy "sape l'édifice de la Politique par ses fondements," meaning those who feared (or hoped) that philosophy could be the equivalent of a political action, La Mettrie responded:⁷⁶⁹

"non, la Philosophie ne rompt, ni peut rompre les chaînes de la Société. Le poison est dans les Écrits des Philosophes, comme le Bonheur dans les chansons, ou comme l'Esprit dans les Bergers de Fontenelle. On chante un Bonheur imaginaire; on donne aux Bergers dans une Eglogue un Esprit qu'ils n'ont pas: on suppose dangereux ce qui est bien éloigné de l'être; car la sape dont nous avons parlé, bien différente de celle de nos Tranchées, est idéale, métaphysique, et par conséquent elle ne peut rien détruire, ni renverser, si ce n'est hypothétiquement. Or qu'est-ce que renverser dans une hypothèse les usages introduits et accrédités dans la vie civile? C'est n'y point toucher réellement, et les laisser dans toutes leur vigueur."⁷⁷⁰

immortality together with that of the eternal punishment. Religious discourse is addressed to imagination and passions which it triggers to push us to act. La Mettrie, like most of the Enlightenment philosophers, distinguishes two kinds of knowledge, the one based on imagination and the one based on reason. Because philosophy is addressed at reason, it triggers at best reflection or inquiry, but not immediate action. Philosophy is a mediated discourse which aims to produce a reflective mediation or critical distancing from the world, where religions is immediately, pathos, an affection of the intellect.

To conceive radical philosophy simply as a counter-religion, as aiming to create an equivalent of religion but inverted, with its own community of "believers" would be to fail in the project of human emancipation. This religious conception of philosophy is not only shared by Scholasticism but also by the absolute monarchy and some philosophers. The delivery of philosophical discourse and its functioning cannot be conceived as the one of religion, to expect from philosophy to immediately transform popular beliefs and actions, as a counter-religion, is a dangerous delusion. Materialism is precisely this effort to think the radical difference of philosophical discourse from the other ones.

769 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 14.

770 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 15. La Mettrie returned later in the text the same idea: "mais qu'il ne s'ensuit pas pour cela, que la Philosophie, quoique théoriquement contraire à la Morale et à la Religion, puisse réellement détruire ces liens sages et sacrés." La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 34.

La Mettrie responds that separated these two different orders of discourse, two logics, philosophy and politics, that have little to do one with another: “la Philosophie et la Politique ne se croisent point dans leurs marches, et n’ont en un mot rien à d’essentiel à démêler ensemble,” if philosophy sought a political effect, it must produce it otherwise.⁷⁷¹ Political interpellation,” to use an Althusserian term, created and constrained a *subject*, which was expected to be obedient and submit; in contrast, philosophical interpellation wished to develop an *audience*, i.e. a form of subjectivity that would be able to hear and understand its point of view but would not be forced to adhere to it or act according to it.

Science

Philosophy could not be thought either as functioning like science, that is to say a sort of theory of life, a supreme guide for action or an instruction manual for thinking. La Mettrie equally opposed those who took philosophy too seriously—or seriously in the wrong way, like a infallible theory that produces right actions, and expected act “according” to philosophy, making of the scientific theory of their daily practice. Scientific and philosophical discourse obeyed, according to La Mettrie, to different principles of production and had different social uses, which he explained by recurring to analogies:

“Il n’en est pas des spéculations philosophiques, aux principes reçus dans le monde, et à la croyance nécessaire (je le suppose) à la sûreté du commerce des hommes, comme de la théorie de la Médecine, à la Pratique de cet art. Ici, l’une a une influence si directe et si absolue sur l’autre, que malheur aux malades, dont quelque Chirac a enfilé le mauvais chemin! Là, des méditations philosophiques ... ne peuvent corrompre ou empoisonner la Pratique de la société.”⁷⁷²

Science produced the theory of its own practice, a theory that was universal and applicable to many cases and situations regardless of the person. But philosophy was not intended to be a theory that should lead to any political or ethical practice. It was not the theory or universal truth of a human or social science, like medical theory is applied in the practice of medicine, but a purely reflective or speculative mediation, an invitation. Here the medical analogy did not work. As a speculation, philosophy offered a different point of view, a critical and hypothetical one, regardless of any artificial intentions, or intentions for action. It formulated a perspective regardless of its consequences: “Mon but est de raisonner, et d’aller aux causes, en faisant abstraction des conséquences, qui cependant n’en seront ni plus fâcheuses, ni plus difficiles à réprimer.”⁷⁷³ Unlike morals or religion, politics and science, philosophy presented an *abstract* point of view on reality:

"Le Philosophe a pour objet ce qui lui paraît vrai, ou faux, abstraction faite de toutes conséquences; le Législateur, peu inquiet de la Vérité, craignant

771 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 34-35.

772 La Mettrie, *Discours préliminaire* 15-16.

773 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 197.

même peut-être (faute de Philosophie, comme on le verra), qu'elle ne transpire, ne s'occupe que du juste et de l'injuste, du Bien et du Mal Moral. D'un côté, tout ce qui paraît être dans la Nature, est appelé vrai; et on donne le nom de faux à tout ce qui n'y est point, à tout ce qui est contredit par l'observation et par l'expérience: de l'autre, tout ce qui favorise la Société, est décoré du nom de juste, d'équitable, etc. tout ce qui blesse ses intérêts, est flétri du nom d'injuste; en un mot, la Morale conduit à l'Équité, à la Justice etc. et la philosophie, tant leurs objets sont divers, à la Vérité"⁷⁷⁴

This is because philosophy aims to be the explicit negation and critique of the already existing social points of view in society (those of morals, religion and political power): a negation that aims at recovering an authentic relationship with nature that has been alienated through these multiple social discourses.⁷⁷⁵

The Metaphor of the Mirror

If there is a philosophical metaphor in La Mettrie's work which is absolute it is that of *philosophy as a mirror*. It was, to borrow Blumenberg's terms, a metaphor that "cannot be dissolved into conceptuality," as it played with the double meaning of reflection. This particular metaphor is, I argue, a materialist one as it both in dialogue and contrast with the hegemonic Enlightenment metaphor of philosophy (or truth) as light.⁷⁷⁶ La Mettrie's metaphore main contribution is that it problematized the idea of a universal, immediate and direct effect of philosophy embedded in the light metaphor. It proposes instead the idea of philosophy as a sort of material *mediation* through representation, as a kind of discourse that does not want to absorb or bewitch the reader, but displace its look away from the text and back to nature.

The metaphor of philosophy as a mirror was first sketched in the preface of the *Ouvrage de Pénélope*, and it was more clearly developed later in the *Discours Préliminaire* where it appeared as way of depicting the form of philosophy as an open-ended dialectical movement: "j'oserais dire que tous les rayons qui partent du sein de la Nature, fortifiés et comme réfléchis par le précieux miroir de la Philosophie, détruisent et mettent en poudre un Dogme qui n'est fondé que sur la prétendue utilité morale dont il peut être."⁷⁷⁷ La Mettrie's mirror is not to be read as the embryo of the later materialist theory of reflection as Lenin and Lukacs presented it, but as an *active* and forceful reflection, producing an effect of its own. Rather than the cast or trace of something else, La Mettrie's materialist view evaluated its density to be that of a tenuous surface of projection and reflection. It was a mirror reflecting nature in order to prompt an active

774 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 13.

775 Spontaneous discourse is longer authentic for La Mettrie, but rather already meditated by society, our second nature, that speaks through us. As a negation of ideology, which is in itself the negation of the original negation society has performed of our body and soul, philosophy is a negation of the negation, without, though, positing any kind of truth as a final affirmation.

776 Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press : Cornell University Library, 2010) 5.

777 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 14.

reflection or reflexivity from the subject. Its *destruction* or negation false representations of nature (the ones that use nature as a pretext for action, or read in it the manifestation of supernatural intentions), was not in order to present a truer image of nature to be imitated and worshiped, but to present a “neutral” place for the beginning of a genuine *reflection*. With the image of the mirror La Mettrie is obviously playing with the double meaning of “réflechir,” its physical or optical and intellectual meaning, without privileging any of those meanings but exploring their productive relationship: as a visual reflection of nature it unveiled the existence of another image of nature beneath that produced in society, but it appealed to the viewer’s reflexivity and imagination to truly it.

The mirror metaphor also helped La Mettrie to present philosophy as a *point fixe* able to reflect any aspect of the natural world, a safe Epicurean harbor for reason in the middle of the ocean, available to pause and engage in reflective thinking, and to began elaborating the necessary negations, mediations and hypothesis to achieve human happiness. The mirror’s fixity in the *Ouvrage de Penelope* is what allows the viewer to see, by contrast, the living and constantly changing natural world, and thus combat its reification. It was ultimately to be a mirror would undo the fiction of the unity of the subject. In La Mettrie’s own life experience, after having spent a fortune and considerable time getting his doctorate in medicine, he described how, when looking himself at the mirror, he could not recognize himself:

“Après avoir été couronné du sale bonnet d’Hippocrate, par les augustes mains de ces dignes enfants, je revins chez moi: là, nonchalamment étendu sur un sofa, pour me reposer de mes fatigues, livré à des réflexions, moitié sérieuses, moitié plaisantes, tantôt j’étais plongé dans un morne silence, et tantôt je ne pouvais m’empêcher de rire seul comme un fou. Je me lève ensuite brusquement, et me promenant à grands pas, jetant par hasard les yeux sur une glace; voilà que j’aperçois une figure de médecin, qui s’était bien diverti dans sa vie, qui avait dépensé peut-être 100 000 livres, *prob pudor!* mais qui ne savait pas quatre mots de médecine: c’était la mienne (ne vous en déplaie, mon fils), avec robe, rabat, bonnet quarré (sic), et tout notre lugubre accoutrement. Je me tenais les côtes à force de rire; je ne revenais point de me voir médecin, médecin, moi!...”⁷⁷⁸

The combination and contrast between the reflection on the mirror of the new image of La Mettrie as doctor (with the “bonnet d’Hippocrate”) and the personal experience or knowledge of the little it took to become one suddenly question the very ontology of the subject: which of the two images was the truest one? As Vartanian analyzed:

"l'expérience du dédoublement devant le miroir, instrument classique de l'objectification du moi, révèle comme infranchissable l'abîme entre la connaissance intime que La Mettrie a de lui-même, et la personne pour qui le prennent les autres. C'est le réflexe du rire qui lui permet de surmonter la prise de conscience d'une situation absurde et angoissante. La Mettrie rit comme un fou devant l'irrationnel de l'existence, qui s'est intuitivement présenté au fond de son désarroi."⁷⁷⁹

778 La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope* 2:121.

779 Aram Vartanian, “Le philosophe selon La Mettrie” *Dix-Huitième Siècle* 1 (1969) 169. The critic further added:

In the *Discours Préliminaire*, the mirror metaphor was to be interpreted as a striving by philosophy for accuracy and for a natural representation of the world, moving away from artificial ones. The philosophical mirror was to be opposed to the seduction produced by *rhetoric*. The latter had been, traditionally, a particular use of discourse that cultivated the relation of immediacy between subject and language, appealing immediately to the senses and imagination and excluding reason and reflection. La Mettrie established a powerful analogy between rhetoric, the logic of passionate immediacy, and the political subjugation of subjects under a tyrannical power, which resorted to appealing to people's passions and blind beliefs in order to ensure its control of them.⁷⁸⁰ Furthermore, rhetoric seduced our imagination by disguising one reality with another:

“La Rhétorique donne-t-elle aux Lois, ou aux Actions les plus injustes, un air d'équité et de Raison, la Philosophie n'est pas la dupe; elle a un point fixe pour juger sainement de ce qui est honnête, déshonnête, équitable ou injuste, vicieux ou vertueux; elle découvre l'erreur et l'injustice des Lois, et met la veuve avec l'orphelin, à l'abri des pièges de cette Sirène, qui prend sans peine, et non sans danger, la Raison à l'appât d'un Discours brillant et fleuri. Souffle pur de la Nature, le poison le mieux apprêté ne peut vous corrompre.”⁷⁸¹

Philosophy operated with the reverse logic of rhetoric, proposing to introduce a reflective mediation between passions, and thus offering this fixed point of view to allow this reflection of nature and discourses, one which ought to be ideally removed from any personal desire or interest and material contingencies, an abstract and *absolute* one. Only such a purified position could be the base for shared universal standpoint available to all the potential readers: “C'est absolument que je parle, et non relativement; distinction solide, et d'un grand sens, quoique Scholastique, et que mes adversaires dissimulent avec leur équité ordinaire: Distinction qui donne deux faces à l'objet, l'une idéale, philosophique, l'autre morale, arbitraire, comme je l'ai tant expliqué.”⁷⁸² La Mettrie was clearly borrowing and elaborating Bayle's methodology of philosophical critique, of distinction between *facts* and *commentaries* on the facts exposed in his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, and ultimately from Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*.⁷⁸³

L'acte philosophique, au sens lamettrien, sera une vision désabusante qui, à partir du sujet face à lui-même, rayonnera au-dehors et s'extériorisera dans le groupe auquel il appartient. Le but en sera, normalement, de nous dévoiler l'ombre et le vide où les autres croient apercevoir, moyennant une illusion collective, quelque chose d'excellent ou de substantiel." Vartanian, "Le philosophe selon La Mettrie" 170.

780 "Cette réflexion n'a point échappé à la prudence des Législateurs éclairés; ils ont trop bien connu les Animaux qu'ils avaient à gouverner. On fait aisément croire aux hommes ce qu'ils désirent; on leur persuade sans peine ce qui flatte leur amour propre; et ils étaient d'autant plus faciles à séduire, que leur supériorité sur les autres Animaux, les avait déjà aidés à se laisser éblouir. Ils ont cru qu'un peu de boue organisée pouvait être immortelle." La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 14.

781 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 37.

782 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 115.

783 See André Tosel, "Spinoza or the Other Critique," *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. Ruth Sonderegger and Karin de Boer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 30-47. The hidden logic of Bayle's experimental philosophical form in his *Dictionnaire*, which La Mettrie wanted to develop, was that the more the texts was objectified and absolute (meaning composed of simple and natural facts), sticking to the mere facts of

It was important that philosophical works, besides critiquing other social discourses acknowledged their own status and nature to prevent an additional mystification of fetishism of the philosophical text. The metaphor of philosophy as a mirror was thus also to warn against any attempt to look in philosophy, in the text, for any kind of truth, as the mirror was the mere vehicle of something else, of a foreign image, an avowed artificial representation. Far from attempting to replace nature, philosophy was just the *indirect* vehicle of enlightenment, its function was to redirect the addressee, reader or spectator, to nature, and foremost to him or herself as a natural being pointing at the true source of meaning and value, which was located outside any discourse.

Finally the mirror metaphor clarified the limits of philosophy's intervention. Like in the process of reflection, it was the viewer who had the last word regarding the interpretation of what was showed to him or her. The mirror was not a judge; it only presented an image. Philosophy was just to present and explain the fact of nature, not to orient or counsel any reading or action.⁷⁸⁴ This definition was very clear in the *Discours sur le bonheur*. Philosophical discourse should be kept to its original principle of explanation, withholding any pulsion towards action coming from the text (towards agreement, obedience or belief) so it could allow an opening on the side of the reader: "Je ne moralise, ni ne prêche, ni ne déclame; j'explique."⁷⁸⁵ It was up to the latter to decide if the explanation, if the natural point of view, was a valid justification for actions or moral rules, and not to the philosopher.

Hypothesis and Fiction

Philosophical discourse seemed to be caught in a tension between abstraction and fiction. On the one hand, it borrowed from science the aspiration to acquire a new kind of contention or self-limitation of its rhetorical powers, and to get closer to reproduce nature's unintentional descriptive "narrative". On the other, it was nurtured by a pulsion towards what I call fiction, in the sense of an appeal to the productive imagination of the reader in order to allow him or her to "speculate" beyond the visible or said. Those two poles were ultimately not so opposed but rather complementary, as the idea of developing a natural point of view, that is representing nature *from* nature's own perspective, without final causes or intentionality (without God and its epistemological corollaries), a nature without destiny, remorse or guilt, was necessarily a fictional one. In fact, nature as a whole could not have a point of view of its own, for it was not a subject or consciousness, but a succession of material events. This was the key difference between the materialist conception of nature and the religious one (that of a nature orchestrated by a God or

nature; the more it created virtually and intellectually room for a subjective interaction and intellectual activity of its readership. Reversely, the more it was the expression of a subjective or particular point of view—propaganda to put it bluntly—the more its readership walked away from the intellectual connection philosophy seeks to establish.

785 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 198. When Descartes transitioned from his scientific account of nature to the formulation of moral rules, La Mettrie resolved "il ne parle pas en Philosophe," as he had overstepped his functions.

785 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 136. "Je sais que Descartes dit que l'immortalité de l'Ame, est une de ces vérités, dont la connaissance est requise, pour faciliter l'usage de la vertu et le chemin du Bonheur; mais alors il ne parle pas en Philosophe: et comme il avoue que le souverain Bien n'est point une matière qu'il aime à traiter, il est facile de voir que la prudence de l'Auteur est proportionnée à la délicatesse du sujet." La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 136.

“Supreme intelligence”). There was not a “natural point of view” hidden to human perception and understanding to look or long for. Adopting a natural perspective would imply first abandoning the very idea of a global and totalizing point of view. Any human natural perspective can only be a situated and “internal” one to nature: “pour moi qui ne suis curieux que de Philosophie, qui ne suis fâché que de ne pouvoir en étendre les bornes, la Nature Active sera toujours mon seul point de vue.”⁷⁸⁶

The move towards abstraction, which was also an anti-rhetorical one, must be compensated by a pull of imagination, as philosophy as a mirror not only negated false representations and avoided the fetishism of discourse, it also formulated an image of its own, which La Mettrie called *hypothesis* or *fiction*: “Je dis donc ce qui me semble, et ne donne qu’une hypothèse philosophique.”⁷⁸⁷ As a hypothesis, materialist philosophy was already an interpretation one with a scientific foundation, based upon facts, and which, like in experimental science, should be further corrected by the reader according to further facts, observations and experiences. In the last instance this hypothesis was a personal or subjective one, the expression of the point of view of nature from a part of nature at a given moment. And yet, in its particular way of being fundamentally hypothetical, materialist philosophical discourse did not lose any of its scientific status, it only renounced to the universalizing and totalizing ambitions of an excessive scientific impulse.

The most well-known example of these productive interpretations or hypotheses, which artfully combined science and fiction, was of course that of the “man as a machine” and its subsequent variations developing both poles of the playful analogy: “l’homme-plante”, “l’homme-plus-que machine”, and “les animaux plus que machine.” In the *Preface* to the *Homme-plante* (1748), La Mettrie qualified his philosophical essay as fiction:

“L’homme est ici métamorphosé en plante, mais ne croyez pas que ce soit une *fiction* dans le gout de celle d’Ovide. La seule analogie du règne végétal et du règne animal m’a fait découvrir dans l’un, les principales parties qui se trouvent dans l’autre. Si mon imagination joue ici quelquefois, c’est, pour ainsi dire, sur la table de la vérité ; mon champ de bataille est celui de la nature, dont il n’a tenu qu’à moi d’être assez peu singulier, pour en dissimuler les variétés.”⁷⁸⁸ [Emphasis added]

This first part of the *Homme-plante* was an imaginary analogy between man and plant by comparing “les parties des Plantes avec celles de l’Homme,” finding in both species “une Racine principale et des Racines Capillaires” and where man was described as a plant “les Poumons sont nos feuilles,” and “si les fleurs ont leurs feuilles, ou Pétales, nous pouvons regarder nos Bras et nos Jambes, comme de pareilles parties.”⁷⁸⁹ The second part was a negation of the analogy and explored “la différence de deux Regnes.”

786 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 300.

787 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 198.

788 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante, Oeuvres philosophiques I*, 183.

789 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 285, 287.

that of plants and animals (in which man is included).⁷⁹⁰ By comparison to plants, animals had movement, so they could be conceptualized as a “*plante mobile*,” if movement were to be the key difference.⁷⁹¹ Yet, contrary to plants, the animal “*sent, il pense, et peut satisfaire cette foule de besoins dont il est assiégé*,” it has therefore an “*instinct*” to fulfill those needs, instinct that in men is called “*âme*.”⁷⁹² The second part of the fiction allowed a progressive differentiation in the realm of nature of plants, animals and men, and the text pointed through analogies the differences between these three realms. Those differences were presented as responding to the increased complexity of their needs as we move from plants to animals and finally humans. To different needs corresponded different conscious faculties in each living entity, the plant being the degree zero of vital needs and consciousness. The third and final chapter of the *Homme-plante* was a meditation on the results of this fictional itinerary which had momentarily allowed the human reader to imagine him or herself as a plant and later a set of animals. By departing from the identity of men with these “*êtres qui ont la même Origine que nous*”; that is to say, by recovering a fictional origin of natural evolution where man could coexist with the plant as co-created, as ontological contemporaries, the materialist fiction was able to recreate relation of charming “*contemplation*” of nature, and not one of identification. Through this contemplative fiction, the text made emerge a more complex and continuous view of nature, and attempt to reconnect the reader with his original natural environment.⁷⁹³

“Rien de plus charmant que cette Contemplation, elle a pour objet cette Échelle si imperceptiblement graduée, qu’on voit la Nature exactement passer par tous ses degrés, sans jamais sauter en quelque sorte un seul Echelon dans toutes ses productions diverses. Quel Tableau nous offre le Spectacle de l’Univers! Tout y est parfaitement assorti, rien n’y tranche; si l’on passe du Blanc au Noir, c’est par une infinité de nuances, ou de degrés, qui rendent ce passage infiniment agréable.”⁷⁹⁴

In this accelerated fictional natural history “*l’Homme et la Plante forment le blanc et le noir.*”⁷⁹⁵ Man was the result of a progressive differentiation of the living matter organized as a plant, and what the fiction allowed to see, and feel, is that material or ontological commonality of man with plants. It proved what today we would call a materialist theory of ecology. As La Mettrie concluded: “*J’ai envisagé l’Ame, comme faisant partie de l’Histoire Naturelle des Corps animés.*”⁷⁹⁶

Fiction was a temporary but necessary recourse, for it was impossible for the

790 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 293.

791 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 293.

792 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 293.

793 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 299.

794 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 299.

795 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 299.

796 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 303.

philosopher to reach such an impassionate outlook on things naturally and permanently, as he was also affected by moral and social passions like those of self-esteem and need of public recognition. He or she had then to adopt a sort of *fictional disposition* in order to envision and imagine a philosophical point of view or hypothesis: “Ecrivez comme si vous étiez seul dans l’Univers ou comme si vous n’aviez rien à craindre de la jalousie & des préjugés des hommes ou vous manquerez le but.”⁷⁹⁷ The kind of fiction philosophy needed on the side of philosophical writing or production was almost opposed to the one it produced by philosophical reading or interpretation: it was the result of a self constraint, a gesture of abstraction and purification from social passions and not an invitation to experience the various possible dimensions of our natural existence.

Imagination, Fiction and Pleasure

The further one progresses chronologically through La Mettrie’s intellectual production, the more the properly intellectual faculties which constitute the “âme raisonnable” as they are outlined in the first work, the *Traité de l’Ame*, (that is reflection, mediation and judgment), are progressively eclipsed by imagination as the key faculty for philosophy, which occupies an increasingly important space in the philosopher’s late production. In the *Traité de l’âme*, imagination, a faculty of the body or of the “âme sensitive” is presented as a double edge sword, it could be an either correct or wrong perception of reality.⁷⁹⁸ But by the time of the publication of the *Homme-Machine*, three years later in 1748, La Mettrie had already changed his mind:

“Je me sers toujours du mot *imaginer*, parce que je crois que toutes les parties de l’âme peuvent être justement réduites à la seule imagination qui les forme toutes; et qu’ ainsi le jugement, le raisonnement, la mémoire ne sont que des parties de l’Ame nullement absolues, mais de véritables modifications de cette toile médullaire, sur laquelle les objets peints dans l’oeil sont renvoyés comme dans une lanterne magique.”⁷⁹⁹

After the *Homme-Machine*, imagination became the key faculty which organized mental operations as a matrix or a “toile medulaire,” being the faculty or activity which mediated the sensual and the conceptual, it is by nature dual and complex. It was the inner “lanterne magique” of the soul. La Mettrie reproached rationalist philosophy for having simplified by force the complicated functioning of the human mind by opposing reason to passion or imagination, by artificially separating faculties which in fact should be thought as a continuum: “Mais si tel est ce merveilleux et incompréhensible résultat de l’Organisation du Cerveau; si tout se conçoit par l’imagination, si tout s’explique par elle; pourquoi diviser le Principe sensitif qui pense dans l’Homme? N’est-ce pas une contradiction manifeste dans les Partisans de la simplicité de l’esprit?”⁸⁰⁰ Here La Mettrie

797 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 47.

798 “L’imagination est vraie ou fausse, faible ou forte. L’imagination vraie représente les objets dans un état naturel, au lieu que dans l’imagination fausse, l’Ame les voit autrement qu’ils ne sont.” La Mettrie, *Traité de l’Ame* 176.

799 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 81.

800 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 81.

was also implicitly critiquing partially his own *Traité de l'Ame*, which even in the form of a history, or progressive differentiation, still divided the soul into a sensitive and an intellectual part. Imagination was the “partie fantastique du cerveau”;; even if it was not very sophisticated and nuanced, it was still the one which has a grip onto sensation, and therefore perception, it was the key to reconnect with nature’s immanent activity:

“l’imagination seule aperçoit (...) c’est elle qui représente tous les objets, avec les mots et les figures qui les caractérisent; et qu’ainsi c’est elle encore une fois qui est l’Ame, puisqu’elle fait tous les rôles. Par elle, par son pinceau flatteur, le froid squelette de la raison prend des chairs vives et vermeilles; par elle, les sciences fleurissent, les arts embellissent, les bois parlent, les échos soupirent, les rochers pleurent, le marbre respire, tout prend vie parmi les corps inanimés. C’est elle donc qui ajoute à la tendresse d’un coeur amoureux le piquant attrait de la volupté. Elle la fait germer dans le cabinet du philosophe et du pédant poudreux; elle forme enfin les savants, comme les orateurs et le poète. (...) Elle raisonne, juge, pénétre, compare, approfondit.”⁸⁰¹

As Vartanian noted, for La Mettrie “thinking is the combinatory manipulation of a stock of such images by means of language. Images registered in the depths of the brain may be brought back to the arena of consciousness by means of their corresponding symbols.”⁸⁰² Imagination allowed the transition or navigation between different layers of consciousness: it was not mere fantasy, or an unreal representation. Fiction thus was not “supplement” to be added to facts, to embellish them like an ornament, but a hint at the other face of reality, a natural one, which could not be directly or accessed consciously. Part of reaching a natural point of view upon nature, was to allow our relation to nature not to be a purely intellectual one, materialist philosophy should equally appeal and invite for a physical and sensuous experience of nature, as La Mettrie did in *De la volupté* (1745) and *L’Art de jouir* (1751), which were the necessary complementary to the more reflective pieces of writing, but which he did not dare to include in his *Oeuvres philosophiques*.

Because of the materialist continuity between sensation and thought, fiction was to be broadened to include dream, hallucination and libidinal speculations. It was seen as a potential bridge to connect the reader with sensuous nature, starting the experience of one’s own bodily sensations. In the *Discours sur le Bonheur*, La Mettrie outlined an interesting parallel between dream and fiction/illusion. The experience of dream could provide a more authentic feeling of pleasure than actual material one, even if the pleasure was not physically real, as it was ultimately a sensation of the soul. During sleep, “l’âme, que rien ne distrait alors, tout livrée au tumulte intérieur des sens, goûte mieux et à plus longs traits des plaisirs qui la pénètrent.”⁸⁰³ The illusionary states provoked by drugs or dream could perfectly be the “vrais Paradis de l’Ame, s’ils étaient permanents,” where our body is “a moitié paralytique” that the soul can achieve pure sensation, and truly

801 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 82.

802 Vartanian, *Science and Humanism in the French Enlightenment* 81.

803 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 129.

experiences pleasure.⁸⁰⁴ Also because it could do so without guilt, remorse or the remaining social connotations that emerged in the conscious state. Nature could better emerge when consciousness was not fully present.

Therefore, true happiness was not just a matter of material or physical satisfaction (food, shelter, health, relief of pain). It had to be supplemented by a true and free enjoyment of pleasure by the soul, and it was only through illusion or fiction that our soul could supersede the moral weight of society that kept us in psychological suffering: “Vous voyez que l’illusion même, produite par des médicaments, ou par des rêves, est la cause réelle de notre Bonheur, ou Malheur machinal.”⁸⁰⁵ An illusion that can only be produced by the adequate stimulation of our imagination: “Saine, ou malade, éveillée, ou endormie, l’imagination peut donc nous rendre content.”⁸⁰⁶

La Mettrie’s Epicurean System: Beyond the Opposition “esprit de système” / “esprit systématique”

The whole reorganization of his works presented by La Mettrie in his final *Oeuvres philosophiques* (1751), was also to be read, as I mentioned earlier, as an exploration of the *form* of exposition philosophy. The order and diversity of philosophical forms in the *Mémoires* is notable: two *discours*, a treatise, an “abrégé” of philosophical systems, another *discours* or essay (*Les Animaux plus que machines*) and, finally, what initially appears to be a philosophical system: *Système d’Epicure* (1750).

Looking then at his final philosophical collection, it is notable that La Mettrie only wrote one classical treatise, following the traditional distribution in chapters and sections, with an initial exposition and a final conclusion. Originally called *Histoire naturelle de l’Ame* (1745) the work was later renamed more properly, according to its form, *Traité de l’Ame* in the *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, precisely to mark the difference of this first form which he later abandoned. Nevertheless La Mettrie did not abandon the treatise to consecrate another particular philosophical form, for example that of the system which was gaining importance in the 18th century. In this section I want to concentrate first on the theorization of the question of philosophical form in La Mettrie starting by an overview the early modern notion of system and La Mettrie’s critique of the “esprit de système” in his *Abrégé des Systèmes* (1746, 1751). I explore later his particular *Système d’Epicure*, which was not systematic at all but rather a collection of meditations and fictions leading to a deconstruction of the system form.

Cassirer, drawing mostly on D’Alembert’s elaboration in the *Discours Préliminaire* to the *Encyclopédie*, synthesized a new “methodological order” that “characterizes all eighteenth century thought”: the emergence of a new “esprit systématique” in opposition to the 17th century “esprit de système”.⁸⁰⁷ While the first

804 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 129.

805 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 130.

806 La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur* 130.

807 Ernest Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1951) 9.

one, the “esprit de système”, was negatively portrayed as deductive and rationalistic, as an exaggerated tendency to build abstract systems which are not based on empirical evidence but a priori principles (the scholastic use syllogism becoming a paradigm of such a deviation); the second one, the “esprit systématique”, was the product of a rational induction based on empirical evidence, the result of the progress of science, a necessary and useful systematization. The “esprit systématique” represented for Cassirer a new kind of logic “that is neither the logic of the scholastic nor that of the purely mathematical concept; it was rather the ‘logic of facts’,” accomplishing a synthesis of the “positive” and the “rational”.⁸⁰⁸ As Le Ru summarized: “L’esprit de méthode est l’esprit juste appelé aussi esprit systématique ou philosophique. Il a pour tâche de réduire en un petit nombre de principes ou de notions générales clairement explicites chaque art ou chaque science dont il se préoccupe.”⁸⁰⁹ Linnée’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) would be the best example of this kind of inductive systematization, as would have been D’Alembert’s desired version of the *Encyclopédie* or was Condorcet’s *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (1795), the *tableau* being one of the finest expressions of this enlightened systematic mind.

It is true that Cassirer’s characterization for an Enlightenment embracing this new impulse for order and systematization fits not only with D’Alembert or Fontenelle’s philosophy, but also with Condillac’s.⁸¹⁰ In his *Traité des Systèmes* (1749), whose subtitles is “où l’on demesles les inconvenients et les avantages,” Condillac started by defining a system as “la disposition des différentes parties d’un art ou d’une science dans un ordre où elles se soutiennent toutes mutuellement et où les dernières s’expliquent par les premières,” that is to say, the organization of the facts of nature with a sort of logical

808 Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* 9. Further in the text Cassirer emphasizes the epistemic change as one of emphasis within that rationalistic postulate: “This difference in mode of thinking [between esprit de système and esprit systématique] does not mean a radical transformation, it amounts merely to a shifting of emphasis. This emphasis is constantly moving from the general to the particular, from principles to phenomena. But the basic assumptions remain. . . , the self-confidence of reason is nowhere shaken. The rationalistic postulate of uniformity dominates the mind of this age.” Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* 22.

809 Véronique Le Ru, *D’Alembert Philosophe* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1994) 176.

810 On D’Alembert’s conception of the system and the “esprit systématique”, see Le Ru, *D’Alembert Philosophe* 173-181. Before D’Alembert, this conception of an inductive system was explored by Fontenelle, in particular in his *Préface sur l’utilité des mathématiques et de la physique et sur les travaux de l’académie française*, where while, agreeing generally with the need for a system for the physical sciences, “il faut que la physique systématique attende, à élever des édifices, que la physique expérimentale soit en état de lui fournir les matériaux nécessaires,” assessing that: “jusqu’à présent l’académie des sciences ne prend la nature que par petites parcelles. Nul système général, de peur de tomber dans l’inconvénient des systèmes précipités, dont l’impatience de l’esprit humain ne s’accommode que trop bien, et qui étant une fois établis s’opposent aux vérités qui surviennent.” Fontenelle, *Oeuvres de Fontenelle* (Bastien) 6:74, 75. Regarding the form of the system applied to philosophy more particularly, Fontenelle had, as always, a “balanced” view on the issue, mentioning both the positive and negative aspects of such a form of exposing philosophy. This is very clear in his *Eloge de Regis*, where, when mentioning his *Système de philosophie, contenant la logique, la métaphysique, la physique et la morale* (1690), Fontenelle affirms that “l’avantage d’un système général est qu’il donne un spectacle plus pompeux à l’esprit, qui aime toujours à voir d’un lieu plus élevé et à découvrir une plus grande étendue. Mais d’un autre côté, c’est un mal sans remède, que les objets vus de plus loin et en plus grand nombre, le sont aussi plus confusément. Différentes parties sont liées pour la composition d’un tout, et fortifiées mutuellement par cette union; mais chacune en particulier est traitée avec moins de soin, et souffre de ce qu’elle est partie d’un système général.” Fontenelle, *Oeuvres de Fontenelle* (Bastien) 6:178-179. On Linnée’s conception of the system and Buffon’s critique of it see Julie Candler Hayes, *Reading the French Enlightenment: System and Subversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 29-39.

order, preferably that of nature itself.⁸¹¹ Condillac distinguished three kinds of systems, those based on “abstract notions”, those based on “hypotheses” made by human organization, and those based on facts and experiences. If the work concentrated its arguments against the two first kinds, it nonetheless argued for the need to establish the “right” kind of systems for physics, politics, and arts. The new “esprit systématique” was indeed a critique of the deductive system-form, but did not question the idea that philosophy should strive to discover and then expose the order of nature in rational and logical terms, it just presented a new method to do so, the analytical one. Unfortunately this effort to conceptualize and rescue the system from an empiricist perspective did not quite reflect the position of the two greatest exponents of materialism and also key participants of the Enlightenment: Diderot and La Mettrie.

The notion of system itself is quite recent in the history of philosophy, far from being the “natural” form of thinking of a philosophy in its wholeness, or present since Greek antiquity. As Hayes points out, the word “système” in French was first used in a non-technical way(s) in Cureau de la Chambre’s *Le Système de l’âme* in 1664, which elaborated and justified the use of such a word by analogy of the astronomers who “construct the System of the world.”⁸¹² The term “système” penetrated everyday language in the 16th century first as an astronomical concept and by the end of the 17th century many dictionaries recognized already a figurative use of it, making it applicable to a variety of matters and situations (“système de tragédie”, “système de la cour”, “système des affaires”, but also the “système” of an author, to mean his or her doctrine.)

In “System, Space, And Intellect in Renaissance Symbolism” Ong showed that it was only with the Copernican Revolution in the 16th century that the notion of system emerged.⁸¹³ Hayes, quoting Ong, summarized this change in the following way: “the concept of the astronomical ‘system’ is concomitant with the acceptance of the purely geometrical Copernican universe ‘in which no direction was more favored than any other’, unlike older Aristotelian and Ptolemaic cosmologies, which favored an up-and-down orientation and whose conceptual ‘wholeness’ was so absolute that the notion of divisible, analyzable in parts was inconceivable.”⁸¹⁴ If in the 18th century philosophers freely talked about the Epicurean or the Aristotelian system it was because the Copernican Revolution and the geometrical conception of nature broke the paradigm of cosmos as an absolute totality, that is to say that of a “unique system without even an imaginable competitor.”⁸¹⁵ In return, this epistemic revolution allowed the possibility of retrospectively “thinking of the Aristotelian system as a system or organized whole and proposing another system to supplant it”, establishing a new vision of the cosmos as “a

811 Etienne Bonnot Condillac, *Traité des Systèmes* (La Haye: Neaulme, 1749) 1.

812 Hayes, *Reading the French Enlightenment* 23. Its earlier rare uses had to do with particular musical concept.

813 Walter J Ong, “System, Space, And Intellect in Renaissance Symbolism” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 18.2 (1956) 234.

814 Hayes, *Reading the French Enlightenment* 23. For a short exploration of the notion of system see Hayes “‘Système’- origins and itineraries,” *Reading the French Enlightenment* 22-56.

815 Ong, “System, Space, And Intellect in Renaissance Symbolism” 234.

system involving an incalculable number of minor systems”.⁸¹⁶ This scientific shift certainly inspired new conceptions of philosophy all over Europe, and beginning in the 17th century philosophers began to conceive or design philosophical “systems” of their own.

This is why it would be wrong to affirm, as Cassan does, that although there was with the French Enlightenment a transition from the “esprit de système” to the “esprit systématique”, a radical break with classical metaphysics and the *more geometrico* paradigm, this was not also a rupture with the notion of system itself, which was indeed rescued and readapted.⁸¹⁷ Cassan posed as a given an ahistorical and logical “‘envie de système’ de la raison connaissante,” presented as a need of reason itself, which was for her “loin d’être un caprice, relève d’une nécessité d’ordre logique et épistémologique.”⁸¹⁸ The system form should be rather considered, in my view, as a philosophical and political choice (i.e. the idea that philosophy should be a system and be oriented towards a pulsion of rational order) which was a 17th-century invention not an essential feature of philosophy. I argue that authors like La Mettrie, who were identified as materialists explored and deconstructed the system form by questioning not only the simple “esprit de système”, but the very idea that philosophy was about establishing any sort of rational *order*, or proposing such a thing as a key or a code to the secrets of nature. Even the most inductive and empirically based of the systems, the mere sketch of a systematization became a problem for materialist philosophers, for besides being a method of *analysis*, the system was also a method of *exposition* of philosophical ideas and a *form*—a form which proved to be an obstacle for philosophical enlightenment, for the emergence of a critical interpretation of the text and nature.

As Charrak carefully explained, the feature of empiricism, the epistemology characterizing the majority of the early Enlightenment inspired by experimental science (that of Bacon, Locke, Voltaire, Hume, Condillac, before Kantism of course), was to propose a new method for philosophy: analysis as both a method of reflection or critique and exposition. The analytical method consisted thus, as Charrak pointed out “à conformer l’ordre d’exposition à l’ordre d’invention” and was first proposed by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) but theorized by Leibniz’s refutation in his *Nouveaux Essais* (1704, 1765); and later developed, amongst others, by Condillac or Hume.⁸¹⁹

The analytical method, which led to the development of a rational psychology, was foremost a technique of analysis or decomposition of complex things into simple ones—that is to say into original ones—and this process of decomposition or analysis was the preliminary stage for classification and organization of knowledge, that is to say its systematization. The “esprit systématique” of empiricist philosophy affirmed that since all the concepts are invented, as ideas are not innate or pre-given, but created by

816 Ong, “System, Space, And Intellect in Renaissance Symbolism” 235.

817 Elodie Cassan, “Esprit systématique et esprit de système” *Labyrinthe* 34 (2010).

818 Cassan, “Esprit systématique et esprit de système” par. 7.

819 André Charrak, *Empirisme et théorie de la connaissance réflexion et fondement des sciences au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2009) 11.

human mind, philosophy should have the task of explaining their emergence and development by recreating them in the way they were elaborated in the first place:

“Ce souci d’exposer les sciences selon l’ordre naturel d’enchaînement des propositions et non selon l’ordre factuel de leur découverte, répond à l’exigence qui caractérise tous les penseurs du système à l’âge classique: mettre en place les conditions de l’invention. Comprendre l’ordre naturel de l’invention en deçà de l’ordre factuel dans lequel elle nous est livrée ou, pire encore, de l’ordre synthétique dans lequel les auteurs l’ont défigurée, c’est aussi bien comprendre les moyens de continuer d’inventer.”⁸²⁰

The empiricist analytical method, which usually adopted the genetical approach, like it was the case in Condillac’s *Origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) and later his *Traité des sensations* (1754), was not in contradiction with the idea of a form of systematisation of human knowledge. Of course, it did not promote the form of the logical system, but it allowed or even encouraged that of the *tableau*, the *traité*, or even a new more systemic form of natural history, as was the case with Bacon and Hume. Against the deductive order and its particular system, empiricists proposed an inductive one, which was always in the process of the making and in regular reconfiguration and updating, but was still an order.

If La Mettrie cannot be considered simply a “radical empiricist”, it was because even though he shared with the Baconian and Lockean empiricism school a critique of the “esprit de système” and abstract systems, his critique went to the root of the problem: the supposed need or benefit for philosophy to produce of systematization of nature, to rebuild a well-ordered interpretation of nature’s events. This evolution of La Mettrie’s philosophical position is visible in the transition operated between his *Traité de l’ame* and his *Système d’Epicure*, in particular in the question of form, as both works could not be more distinct, or even antithetical, from this formal perspective. However it was as early as the *Abrégé des Systèmes*, conceived to be a supplement to the *Traité de l’Ame*, that La Mettrie began to reflect on the question philosophical *form* as a concern of philosophy not easily separable from its content, that is to say considering form itself as a philosophical production and not solely satisfying as literary or scientific requirements of style and clarity.

Let’s start by commenting again the meaning of the epigraphy taken from the Ecclesiastic: “mundum tradidit disputationibus eorum,” which means “to leave our world wholly for them to argue about,” and which indicated an initial distance from all the systems which are to be exposed. Secondly, it is important to note that La Mettrie was not trying to expose all of the philosophical systems for their own sake, or just to explain their logic, but that he was taking a particular, perhaps arbitrary angle, on them: their particular position on the substantiality of the soul, that is to say on a particular thesis.

La Mettrie began his *Abrégé des Systèmes* by celebrating Descartes’s criticism of the “expressions ontologiques”, those usually at the base of the scholastic deductive systems. Descartes was the first one to formulate the need to decompose abstract and complex ideas into tangible ones, going back to their origin of production, and contrary to Leibniz and Wolff, in his *Méditations Métaphysiques*, he attempted to give a recountable

820 André Charrak, “Les systèmes du savoir au XVIIIe siècle, une analyse de la raison connaissante” *Labyrinthe* 34 (2010) 9.

and explainable meaning to all the philosophical concepts he used, even though, La Mettrie noted “il n’(a) point suivi lui-même sa propre méthode” until the end and in some particular issues.⁸²¹

La Mettrie’s critique of Leibniz was sketched an idea he fully concluded with Wolff’s (a follower of Leibniz) which was that the pulsion towards order was the origin of the methodological problem: “par quelles voies les plus grands génies ont été conduits dans un Labyrinthe d’erreurs, dont ils ont en vain cherché l’issue,” as these “beaux génies se sont laissés aveugler par l’esprit de Système, l’ecueil des plus grands hommes”.⁸²² It was the “esprit de système” which is initially targeted here, and to which Locke would definitely bring to blows. As La Mettrie asserted in his critique of Wolff, in order to combat the “esprit de système”, “le premier antidote, est la connaissance du poison” and the greatness of Locke for La Mettrie was indeed to have proven “l’inutilité des Syllogismes, et de ce qu’on appelle Analyses parfaites, par lesquelles on a la puerilité de vouloir prouver les axiomes les plus évidents, minuties qui ne se trouvent ni dans Euclide, ni dans Clairaut ... mais qui abondent en Scholies dans Wolf,” as the syllogism is the prototype of the deductive philosophical system or by excellence.⁸²³ As La Mettrie explains, with Locke all the “principes généraux” and “le grand étalage, cette multitude confuse d’axiomes, de propositions générales systématiquement arrangées” produced by any philosophical system only produce “cette méthode synthétique ... est la plus mauvaise qu’il y ait pour instruire.”⁸²⁴

For La Mettrie natural philosophy’s trap was not located in any particular ontological and abstract expressions, nor in belief of innate ideas or the “jargon inintelligible des écoles,” as these were mere symptoms of the fatal illness. The most insidious threat for the possibility of a radical and natural philosophy had to do with *form* in an Adornian sense. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno pointed out that philosophy’s form of expression has a philosophical meaning of its own, and contributes to shape the concept itself: “the presentation of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea. Its integral, nonconceptually mimetic moment of expression is objectified only by presentation in language.”⁸²⁵ The presentational dimension of philosophy, while being “nonconceptual” is still an inmanent part of the idea.

La Mettrie reading Locke’s radical critique of metaphysical philosophical reasoning, made him realize that any effort to produce “perfect” analysis of nature, exposed through the “synthetic method” was doomed to fail because human knowledge would never constitute a totality; on the contrary, its natural form was to be constantly questioned by experience.⁸²⁶ The key problem of experimental philosophy became one of

821 “Descartes a purgé la Philosophie de toutes ces expressions Ontologiques, par lesquelles on s’imagine pouvoir rendre intelligibles les idées abstraites de l’Etre. Il a dissipé ce chaos, et a donné le modèle de l’art de raisonner avec plus de justesse, de clarté, et de méthode.” La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 249.

822 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 262, 263.

823 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 264.

824 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 264.

825 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2007) 18.

826 La Mettrie, *Abrégé des systèmes* 262.

form, and not anymore one of content. La Mettrie's break with the systematic formal exposition of philosophy as it was embraced by other Enlightenment philosophers (including radical empiricists like Hume or Condillac) became a trademark of materialist philosophy, as Diderot also embraced it. This rupture, however only became explicit with the *Système d'Epicure* wherein La Mettrie consciously resisted any form of synthetic or systematic exposition of philosophy.

The empiricist and rationalist currents of the Enlightenment "esprit systématique" moved by the inductive drive towards synthesis, even though critical of the "esprit de système", repeated the same mistake. It presented a necessarily incomplete account of human natural experience as a whole and complete one, and further it gave the illusion that nature had a systematical or logical order of its own, whose mechanisms or original causes could and should be known. Therefore it was not enough to proclaim that such a synthesis was arbitrary or temporary, another form needed to be found for philosophy so it could truly enlighten and not further mystify its readership.

The system form relies on the assumption that the all the parts fit together and explain the whole, that nature is inherently rational, and therefore that the philosophical system form can function autonomously in a double isolation and separation, from nature (or reality) and from the reader. Instead of enabling a connection of the reader with the natural point of view, it secludes him or her from it.

In the *Discours Préliminaire*, La Mettrie presented this problem more clearly: that the elimination of classic metaphysics from philosophy was not only an epistemological operation of developing a new method, but also questioned the way ideas are materially arranged or presented in a text: "Comment est-on parvenu à donner un air de Doctrine, et comme une espèce de corps solide, au Squelette de la Métaphysique? En cultivan la Philosophie, dont l'art magique pouvait seul changer un vuide Toricellien, pour ainsi m'exprimer, en un plein apparent, et faire croire immortel ce souffle fugitif, cet air de la vie, si facile à pomer de la Machine pneumatique du Thorax."⁸²⁷ How could radical philosophy stand taking "un air de doctrine"? And how then such a thing could be avoided? The solution was not obvious. If La Mettrie agreed with the principle of the analytical method, that the order of exposition must follow that of invention, that abstractions should be eliminated and that all knowledge derived from sensation, he was not satisfied with the two new forms of exposition of 18th century experimental or natural philosophy devised: the systematic one presented the ideas of an implicit natural order, of an organized totality with an inner logic; and the *histoire naturelle*, like any history, presupposed a hidden subject or intention organizing the narration. None of them fit with what the human experience of nature that could restore happiness.

The *Système d'Epicure* was more an attempt to address rather than to resolve this problem. First of all because it is clearly the composition of an unsystematic "system" of 94 sections or better fragments, with no explicit order of exposition, no rational correlation between them, and no unity of the subject if not for the reference to Epicurus, who rarely appeared in the text. Only after careful re-reading of the *Système* was a sort of dual thematic structure insinuated: from fragments I to IV, La Mettrie comments on the impossibility of accessing the knowledge of the causes, of the principles organizing

827 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 35.

nature, and therefore the necessity of fiction to address what could have been the origin of life and what will become of us after death; then comes a first thematic bloc (V-LX) which retraces in a series of scientific fictional glimpses what could have been the origin of life, and from animal life the origin of men and its proper nature; juxtaposed with this first set of concerns we find a series of philosophical reflections on death and the elaboration of a materialist ethic (XLI-XCI), and finally we have a sort of conclusion (XCII-XCIV) which ends with the evocation of an utopian future where “tout homme qui vit comme les autres, peut penser autrement que les autres,” where persecution to philosopher will end.⁸²⁸

The *Système* started by reaffirming that nature itself is not organized, even if we tend to think so, and to this purpose La Mettrie installed the metaphor of nature as the theater of the world: “Nous voions tous les objets, tout ce qui se passe dans l’Univers, comme une belle Décoration d’Opéra, dont nous n’apercevons ni les cordes, ni les contrepoids. Dans tous les Corps, comme dans le notre, les premiers ressorts nous sont cachés, et le seront vraisemblablement toujours.”⁸²⁹

Even if La Mettrie borrowed the metaphor directly from Fontenelle, contrary to this philosopher's desire in the *Discours sur la pluralité des mondes* of developing a philosophy that will be able to “unveil” the hidden mechanism of nature, a philosophy that will think of itself as emancipatory precisely because it is discovering and publicizing this kind of knowledge.⁸³⁰ La Mettrie thought philosophy must abandon impossible fantasies which could only be reverted against its liberatory purposes and instead reproduce the original impression nature produces on us, the one erased by legal, moral, religious and sometimes even philosophical education: that of the “étonnement” and “merveillement” in front of nature, as we find in the “merveilles de tous les règnes” of nature “toutes ces choses que nous admirons, qui nous étonnent si fort.”⁸³¹ How could philosophy bring the reader back to the beginning of knowledge, to the original curious and sensitive attitude towards nature? Indeed, the spectacle of nature itself is rather difficult to transmit: “Quelle Vie fugitive! Les formes des corps brillent, comme les Vaudevilles se chantent. L’Homme et la Rose paraissent le matin, et ne sont plus le soir. Tout se succède, tout disparaît, et rien ne périt.”⁸³² This is why, to some extent, any

828 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 386.

829 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 353.

830 As the narrator embodying the figure of the philosopher explained at the beginning of the *Entretiens* “je me figure toujours que la nature est un grand spectacle qui ressemble à celui de l’opéra”, and while affirming of his interlocutor, who is to be initiated to the secrets of philosophy, her limited knowledge on reality (“du lieu où vous êtes à l’opéra, vous ne voyez pas le théâtre tout à fait comme il est; on a disposé les décorations et les machines pour faire de loin un esset agréable, et on cache à votre vue ces roues et ces contrepoids qui font tous les mouvemens”), he also has the confidence that the creator of the world followed a rational pattern, that “ce machiniste là est assez fait comme les philosophes”, and that even though “à l’égard des philosophes augmente la difficulté”, it is in the scientific study of nature itself that philosophy will unveil its principles of motion: “c’est que dans les machines que la nature présente à nos yeux les cordes font parfaitement bien cachées et elles le font si bien qu’on a été long tems à deviner ce qui causoit les mouvemens de l’univers.” Fontenelle, *Oeuvres* (Bastien) 2:17.

831 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 354.

832 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 371.

attempt to capture it in words and sentences would already be an attempt to give it a rational and logical form, that is to make a sort of “system” of that which is constantly changing.

La Mettrie was fully conscious of this contradiction, already exposed by Epicurus, and to which Lucretius found poetry as the only possible philosophical form to give an account of nature; this is why he asserted that:

“Tant de Philosophes ont soutenu l’opinion d’Epicure, que j’ai osé mêler ma faible voix à la leur; comme eux au reste, je n’ai fait d’un Système. Ce qui nous montre dans quel abyme on s’engage, quand voulant percer la nuit des temps, on veut porter de présomptueux regards sur ce qui ne leur offre aucune prise; car admettez la création, ou la rejetez, c’est partout le même mystère, par tout la même incompréhensibilité.”⁸³³

The *Système d’Epicure* was thus a paradoxical system: a montage of fragments which had no logical connections but conserved an autonomy of their own, whose simple numerical succession could only transmit to the reader the sensation of a pure arbitrary arrangement. Yet behind this real disconnection, a plurality of patterns or connections, suggesting possible cross-references, emerged. I read the text as suggesting mainly two parallel threads, and thus as a further La Mettrie’s exploration of analogy and dual structures at all levels of philosophy, two sorts of patterns that seem to complement and contradict each other, and which do not overlap the two thematic blocks outlined previously: first through the succession of fragments La Mettrie sustained two kinds of philosophies, in particular regarding the issue of death, the Epicurean and the Stoic one (and this is a change from his *Discours sur le Bonheur*). As he himself unveiled at the end of the *Système*: “tels sont mes Projets de vie et de mort; dans le cours de l’une et jusqu’au dernier soupir, Epicurien voluptueux; Stoïcien ferme, aux approches de l’autre.”⁸³⁴ However he also, personally, confessed not to be a skeptic (or relativist), but to be always more moved by the Epicurean attitude towards life and death:

“Voilà deux sortes de réflexions bien différentes les unes des autres, que j’ai voulu faire entrer dans ce Système Epicurien. Voulez-vous savoir ce que je pense moi-même? Les secondes m’ont laissé dans l’âme un sentiment de Volupté, qui ne m’empêche pas de rire de spremières (...) Et qu’on est dupe, de perdre en de vaine recherches, un tems, hélas! si court, et bien mieux employé à jouir, qu’à connaître!”⁸³⁵

Yet, if there was in La Mettrie’s *Système* what seemed to be an hesitation of conflict of philosophical positions, this play with the reader needs to be understood within his strategy of touching, more than convincing, a universal public. All means were welcome for the sake of philosophy’s therapeutic end: “il est assez indifférent par quel aiguillon on excite les hommes à la vertu.”⁸³⁶ If Stoicism could, in some occasions, also produce happiness and fraternal behavior towards humanity, who cared it such a result

833 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 386.

834 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 385.

835 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 385-86.

836 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 379.

was derived from an “incorrect” doctrine?

And if the first crossed underground pattern in the *Système* is that there is sometimes a play between the Epicurean and Stoic positions, the second and more important one is that there are two different kinds of appeals to the audience, because the readership is presupposed to be plural: generally “je tâcherais au contraire d’émousser la pointe des épines de la vie, si je n’en puis diminuer le nombre, afin d’augmenter le plaisir de cueillir les Roses,” that is, will fight remorse and guilt that comes from pleasure, and for to those who do not seek pleasure and happiness, “ceux qui par un malheur d’organisation déplorable, s’ennuyèrent au beau spectacle de l’univers, je les y prierai d’y rester; par Religion, s’ils n’ont pas d’Humanité; ou, ce qui est plus grand, par humanité, s’ils n’ont pas de religion” and finally for the enlightened few:⁸³⁷

“les autres, ceux pour qui la Religion n’est que ce qu’elle est, une fable; ne pouvant les retenir par des liens rompus, je tâcherai de les séduire par des sentiments généreux; de leur inspirer cette grandeur d’Ame, à qui tout cède; enfin faisant valoir les droits de l’Humanité, qui vont devant tout, je montrerai ces relations chères et sacrées, plus pathétiques que les plus éloquents Discours: je ferai paraître une Epouse, une Maitresse en pleurs; des enfants désolés, que la mort d’un père va laisser sans education sur la face de la terre.”⁸³⁸

Of course, this did not mean that the *Système* managed alone to accomplish its goal. As a unsystematic “system” or constellation the philosophical text imagined itself as kaleidoscope appealing to a variety of audiences. More than a system what La Mettrie tried to produce is a sort of machine for pleasure and remembrance, a literary piece embodied in the metaphor of the flower:

“Regrets raisonnables, je vous adoucrai encore, en jettant des fleurs sur mes derniers pas, et presque sur mon tombeau! Ces fleurs seront la gaité, le souvenir de mes plaisirs, ceux des jeunes gens qui me rappelleront les miens, la conversation des personnes aimables, la vue de jolies femmes, dont je veux mourir entouré, pour sortir de ce monde, comme d’un spectacle enchanteur; enfin cette douce amitié, qui ne fait pas tout à fait oublier le tendre amour. Délicieuse réminiscence. Lectures agréables, Vers charmans, Philosophes, Gout des Arts, aimables Amis, vous qui faites parler à la Raison même le langage des Graces, ne me quittez pas.”⁸³⁹

The Machine as an Enlightening Artifact

As I pointed out, the metaphor of man as a machine has been often read in a literal or determinate way: man as a machine, was a provocative statement made in response to Descartes who was the first to compare animals to machines, but also to differentiate men from machines precisely because of the existence of a soul. And this was certainly one of the intended readings of the mechanical metaphor: “Le corps humain est une Machine qui

837 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 378.

838 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 378-79.

839 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 381.

monte elle même ses ressorts; vivante image du mouvement perpetual,” or “nous pensons, et même nous ne sommes honnêtes Gens, que comme nous sommes gais, ou braves; tout dépend de la manière dont notre Machine est montée.”⁸⁴⁰

As I have pointed out, the use of the machine metaphor is also an epistemological challenge or critique of it as Descartes was the one to use it on the first place. In the *Discours de la Méthode* Descartes reduced animals to their bodies, which he proposed to consider “comme une machine qui ayant été faite des mains de Dieu est incomparablement mieux ordonnée et a en soi des mouvements plus admirables qu aucune de celles qui peuvent être inventées par des homes”, concluding that “seulement que les bêtes ont moins de raison que les hommes mais qu’elles n’en ont point du tout”.⁸⁴¹ Animals were comparable to an “horloge qui n’est composée que de roues et de ressorts peut compter les heures et mesurer le temps plus justement que nous.”⁸⁴² According to Pepin then, “l’homme-machine de La Mettrie ne propose pas une extension à l’homme, donc à la pensée, du concept cartésien de l’animal-machine”.⁸⁴³ Indeed, the critic added that “il s’agit ...en jouant avec l’idée de machine, de rompre avec la logique théologique et judiciaire de l’imputation à un auteur de thèses consciemment produites et assumées. L’enjeu est de voir dans l’oeuvre cartésienne par analogie avec une mécanique immanente dont les effets ne sont pas forcément intentionnels et prévisibles, par contraste avec le versant finaliste de la machine fabriquée selon un plan.”⁸⁴⁴

Yet Pepin rightly asked “pourquoi avoir privilégié le registre mécanique?”⁸⁴⁵ If La Mettrie was not interested in the theorization of mechanical laws, nor in a deeper exploration of the potential of mechanistic physics, I argue he had an interest in the metaphor of the machine, in exploring its possibilities, for man was not simply a machine, not even a difficult one to figure out (“l’homme est une machine si composée, qu’il est impossible de s’en faire d’abord une idée claire, et conséquemment de la définir”)⁸⁴⁶, but in fact a machine of machines: “La Nature a fait dans la machine de l’Homme, une autre machine qui s’est trouvée propre à retenir des idées et à en faire des nouvelles, comme dans la femme, cette matrice, qui d’une goutte de liqueur fait un enfant. Ayant fait, sans voir, des yeux qui voient, elle a fait sans penser, une machine qui pense.”⁸⁴⁷ If not only each organ but even human mind could also be conceived as a machine, human beings are thus an infinite proliferations of machines, like two facing

840 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 69, 70-71. “Entrons dans quelque détail de ces ressorts de la Machine humaine. Tous les mouvements vitaux, animaux, naturels, et automatiques se font par leur action. N’est-ce pas machinalement que le corps se retire, frappé de terreur à l’aspect d’un précipice inattendu?” La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 69.

841 René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode. Les passions de l’âme. Lettres* (Paris: Editions du monde moderne, 1930) 65-66, 67.

842 Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* 68.

843 Pepin, “Lectures de la machine cartésienne” 264.

844 Pepin, “Lectures de la machine cartésienne” 264.

845 Pepin, “Lectures de la machine cartésienne” 267.

846 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-machine* 66.

847 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 361.

mirrors. Yet the fact while searching for the inventor of the human machine, for its principle of organization (God, the Soul), we can only be referred to another machine endlessly, poses a challenge to the anxious reader, who finds himself like a child confronted for the first time with a mechanical artifact:

“Au reste il faut pardonner aux Anciens leurs Ames Générales et Particulières; ils n’étaient point versés dans la Structure et l’Organisation des Corps, faute de Physique Expérimentale et d’Anatomie. Tout devait être aussi incompréhensible pour eux, que pour ces Enfants, ou ces Sauvages, qui voyant pour la première fois une montre, dont ils ne connaissent pas les ressorts, la croyent animée, ou douée d’une Ame comme eux, tandis qu’il suffit de jeter les yeux sur l’Artifice de cette Machine, Artifice simple, et qui suppose véritablement, non une Ame qui lui appartienne en propre, mais celle d’un Ouvrier Intelligent, sans lequel le Hazard n’eût jamais marqué les Heures et le Cours du Soleil.”⁸⁴⁸

Thus, what the machine metaphors revealed was not something about nature but about his or her interpreter, which was most often the human reflex to look, in the face of a working and living thing, for an “ouvrier intelligent”, as the idea that intelligence appeared in nature “sans penser” seemed strange and almost impossible to conceive. The materialist metaphor of the machine, which reduced everything to resorts and mechanisms and negated any internal or external separate principle of determination, was a concrete thinking artifact which pointed at the origin of any metaphysical principle in nature: human invention. By contrast to the known human-made artifact, La Mettrie’s metaphor tries to present an analogous natural machine, with no subject or intentions but still animated. The goal of both the *Homme-machine* and the *Homme-plante*, two of the little fictions La Mettrie proposed to us, was to allow the reader to imagine that almost unconceivable thing, a soulless living machine, as the philosopher later revealed in the *Système d’Epicure*:

“Celui qui a regardé l’Homme, comme une Plante, et n’en a guères essentiellement fait plus d’estime, que d’un chou, n’a pas plus fait de tort à cette belle espèce, que celui qui en a fait une pure Machine. L’Homme croît dans la matrice par vegetation, et son corps se derange et se rétablit, comme une montre, soit par ses propres ressorts, dont le jeu est souvent heureux; soit par l’art de ceux qui les connaissent, non en Horlogers, (les Anatomistes,) mais en Physiciens Chimistes.”⁸⁴⁹

La Mettrie’s subversive use of the Cartesian machine metaphor consisted of exploring the possibilities of the automated machine, but he did so by developing the fictional productivity of the system of analogies between different machines (animal as a machine, man as a machine, man as a plant, animals more than machine etc.) and implicitly making of Descartes, in spite of himself, a hidden materialist.⁸⁵⁰ But because the machine metaphor could only work through and by a particular textual arrangement, I propose to read the machine comparison not only as a metaphor for La Mettrie’s

848 La Mettrie, *L’Homme-plante* 295-296.

849 La Mettrie, *Système d’Epicure* 366-367.

850 Pepin, “Lectures de la machine cartésienne” 280-84.

materialism but as a rhetorical device to think of the consequences of the functioning of the philosophical form itself as a machine, and of the textual artifact as an enlightenment machine.

This metaphor of the text as a machine was present in his *Discours Préliminaire*, where La Mettrie compares discourses to machines, denouncing the “Machine théologique” as almost a *machine à penser*, that is a machine that thinks without the subject, or even worse a machine that think in the place of the subject.⁸⁵¹ When Markovits proposed “ne pas faire fonctionner l’automate comme un sujet mais comme un savoir” the critic was already pointing at this analogy of discourses as machines.⁸⁵² This “mechanical” form of the philosophical exposition was precisely the one that should be avoided—and this is what philosophy should avoid, transforming the text into an automated tool that could signify without an active addressee.

The theological declination of the text as a machine, the system or treatise, was not to be as a form for philosophy, but it allowed a reflection on the form of philosophy itself as an impersonal discourse, problematizing both the place of the author and the reader in the philosophical text. The *Ouvrage de Pénélope* could be regarded, as a contrived and conflicted machine, which worked for and against itself, and thus could not “work” as a machine. The *système*’s way of undoing the machine was more a kind of decomposition, where once it seemed that the machine had started working, it suddenly changed gears or stopped: another broken machine. Yet in both cases the text functioned as an enlightening artifact behind which La Mettrie attempts to hide and heal.

851 La Mettrie, *Discours Préliminaire* 10.

852 Markovits, *Décalogue sceptique* 195.

Chapter 5: Diderot: From Public Critique to a Materialist Expression

In this chapter I propose to look at Diderot's materialism as a proposal for new kind of experimental philosophy, analogous but not identical to La Mettrie's, which aimed to at produce a social and political enlightenment through philosophical writing and reading and not as merely a philosophy of matter. Even if Diderot's philosophy has been considered as less controversial and more "acceptable" than La Mettrie's, the materialist status of his thinking has been at the center of critical debates. In the first section of my chapter I review and discuss both the early and difficult reception of Diderot's philosophy in France, and the scholarship around his materialism. The different interpretations of Diderot's work range from variations of different philosophies of matters derived from a diversity of epistemologies, to the affirmation of his philosophy as skepticism, a pre-Kantian form of criticism or eclecticism, where his materialist character is rather diluted. In response to those readings I argue that it was Diderot's vision of a social Enlightenment, his new relationship with science, manual work and the publicity of knowledge—topics which I explore mainly in their manifestations in the *Encyclopédie*, the *Promenade Sceptique* and the *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*—were the main reason for his classification as a "materialist". I turn then to examine the particular materialist aesthetics or forms of expression Diderot identified as the most conducive to the creation of Enlightenment by examining some of the propositions in the *Rêve de d'Alembert* and the *Salons*. However, because my approach is interested in the ways Diderot's philosophy attempted an effective "materialist intervention" in the field of philosophy, I do not, unfortunately, work in detail on two of his major and most posthumously published interesting works: the *Rêve de D'Alembert* and the *Neveu de Rameau*.

1. Diderot and Materialism

The Reception of Diderot's Philosophy

It is today a commonplace to affirm that Diderot began to sustain materialist and atheist positions between 1749 and 1753, and to read the *Lettre sur les Aveugles* (1749) or the *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* (1753) as the moment of a "materialist conversion", which he would and even radicalize in some articles of the *Encyclopédie* and the *Rêve de D'Alembert* (the three dialogues which he wrote around 1769 but he never dared to publish). His philosophical evolution in the conceptualization of matter parallels his progressive acquaintance with sciences but also with different trades and manual work— an evolution Ibrahim has brilliantly summarized by retracing the metaphorical expressions of matter in his texts.⁸⁵³ Diderot's critical scholarship is mostly

853 "Le trajet philosophique de Diderot, adossé d'une part à la tradition lucrétienne, empiriste, médicale, d'autre part à la filiation newtonienne, chimique et biologique, enfin au Tout spinoziste et à la machine naturelle leibnizienne, est en effet marqué par l'exigence de penser la matière à différents niveaux: dans les années 1750 et jusqu'aux deux *Lettres*,

unified today around the idea that his materialism was “of a different kind” from La Mettrie and Helvetius's, as towards the end of his life he sought to distinguish himself publicly from the two other known materialist figures explicitly distancing himself from La Mettrie in his *Essais sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* (1778), where he defended the figure of Seneca against Epicurus amongst others, and publishing a refutation of Helvétius work, the *Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage de Helvetius intitulé de l'Homme* 1773-1774. Diderot's polemics with his two contemporaries were more a complication of the public figure and mission of the philosopher than a plain rejection of their Epicurean, Spinozist or Lockean heritage and re-elaborations, from which he borrowed tremendously. What Diderot abhorred above all was the “esprit de secte,” and, as Spallanzani argued, he tried to show the “complexité inépuisable d'un personnage, le philosophe: complexité constitutive de sa nature, complexité historique des figures des différents philosophes, complexité sociologique, encore, d'un rôle, complexité idéologique, finalement, d'un Diderot philosophe lui-même,” a complexity that derived from the new public status of philosophical discourse and the new form of production and circulation of philosophical texts.⁸⁵⁴ Facing the same social transformation and sharing the same interrogations of La Mettrie, he thought it was useful not to hesitate but to complicate the simplified narratives of philosophical Enlightenment and *partis pris*.

The general consensus of the scholarly critique is that against a “mechanistic materialism”, Diderot supported a “vitalist” one, and that instead of borrowing the paradigm of physical science, he became more interested in biology and chemistry as an epistemological model for his materialism. In fact it is rather impressive that a philosophy managed to produce such a prolific and diverse series of critical characterizations. Just to mention a sample of the critique that highlighted the singularity of Diderot's materialism, we can think of Belaval who referred to a “chimio-vitalisme”, while Versini talked of a “matérialisme biologique”.⁸⁵⁵ Vernière, who argued that his materialism was mainly

dans le cadre d'une philosophie de la Nature, la matière n'est pas nommé; elle est l'état ou la substance qui donne à percevoir des corps matériels, des matières, des choses individuelles. Le champ métaphorique qui prend alors en charge ce moment est celui des métaphores convenues de la Nature. ... Deuxième moment: le souci de nourrir la recherche philosophique par référence aux lois physiques accompli dans les sept conjectures de *L'Interprétation* de la nature la définition de la matière comme système de particules en mouvement, soutenue par la métaphore du choc. Dans les autres articles du même ouvrage et dans la trilogie du *Rêve*, la faillite du mécanisme engendre, comme on sait, l'idée de la matière comme action des molécules sensibles hétérogènes; les métaphores de cette dynamique inquiète se multiplient autour de la plus riche, celle du jeu de dés. La métaphore ici n'est pas simple forme, mais sens. La tension entre dénotation et connotation qui fait sa double structure a quelque chance de nous conduire à l'agitation intestinale des molécules qui permet déjà au philosophe « d'assurer des mondes ce qu'il assure des animaux '...'Troisième moment: Le scandale des aveugles et des monstres, la fréquentation de Maupertuis, des chimistes et des médecins conduisent Diderot à un geste de rupture qui met en évidence les limites de son monisme matérialiste: l'ordre des relations des êtres matériels, de leur production et de leurs mouvements n'épuise pas le principe de la matière désormais posée comme énergie vivante dans le cadre d'un mutabilisme aléatoire. Telle était bien d'ailleurs l'intuition initiale de Diderot qui, dès l'article ANIMAL de *l'Encyclopédie* en 1751 avait posé la conjecture d'un passage par degrés de la matière inerte à la matière vivante. Les métaphores alors convoquées, de la trilogie du *Rêve* aux *Éléments de Physiologie*, au-delà de la forme et du sens ont un pouvoir de création; elles sont la force productive de l'idée même.” Ibrahim, “Métaphores de la matière” 126-127.

854 Mariafranca Spallanzani, “Figures de philosophes dans l'oeuvre de Diderot.” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 26 (1999) 50.

855 As Belaval affirmed, “s'il fallait caractériser [le matérialisme] en tenant en compte de l'ambiguïté des textes, nous verrions volontiers en lui un vitalo-chimisme ou un chimio-vitalisme.” Yvon Belaval, “Sur le matérialisme de Diderot,” *Études sur Diderot* (PUF: Paris, 2003) 367). Versini, in his introduction to the volume of Diderot's philosophical preferred to talk about a biological materialism. Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres /I. Philosophie*, ed. Laurent Versini (Paris:

inspired by Spinoza and solidified later, around 1767 as a “matérialisme expérimental,” defined the latter by three theses: the “sensibilité universelle”, the idea of biological epigenesis, and the affirmation that “l’unité organique de l’être vivant n’est pas distincte de ce que nous appelons ‘âme’ ou ‘conscience.’”⁸⁵⁶ Suratteau-Iberraken argued that Diderot’s refutation of dualism led him to a “matérialisme vitaliste”, and thus, without acknowledging it, brought Diderot’s medical and vital materialism closer to La Mettrie’s.⁸⁵⁷ Finally, Vartanian, who was the only critic to openly compare Diderot’s and La Mettrie’s materialism and seriously consider their textual philosophical relationship, brought the two materialisms together against the dominant trend to oppose them, by showing that both contributed to the emergence of a new kind of materialism “which would not rest upon the thread bare ‘atoms and Chance’ hypothesis of Democritus, Lucretius, and their modern successors,” an “evolutionary materialism” inspired by Needham experiences on the polyp and living matter.⁸⁵⁸ In his view, after 1745, Diderot and La Mettrie developed thus a “materialist-transformist current” which managed to accomplish “the effective fusing together of the ‘chain of being’ with a new vitalistic conception of matter.”⁸⁵⁹ Vartanian even argued that this became a key dividing line within the Enlightenment epistemological debates:

"From La Mettrie to Diderot, the continuity of this particular body of thought is attested by a few facts. La Mettrie, Buffon, Diderot, all three appealed in turn to the polyp’s nature in order to explain the origin of living things. On the other hand, and this too points to the vital role of the polyp, adversaries of evolutionary materialism, such as Bonnet and Voltaire, attempted to delimit the implications of the polyp.”⁸⁶⁰

Laffont, 1994) 7. He explained further “voilà fondé le matérialisme biologique: l’exercice de l’esprit aboutit au même résultat et procède des mêmes lois que l’exercice des sens, nos connaissances dépendent de notre organisation.” Diderot, *Oeuvres /I. Philosophie*, 137.

856 Paul Vernière, Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Philosophiques* 249-250.

857 She argued that Diderot’s materialism was grounded in a concept of life “t dirigé contre les entreprises de réduction des organisations à l’état de leurs composants. La caractérisation de la réfutation du dualisme s’obtient de manière subtile, sans matérialiser purement et simplement tous les phénomènes vitaux, à la manière de La Mettrie ou d’Hévétius, sans spiritualiser la matière en suivant le modèle de Maupertuis.” Aurélie Suratteau-Iberraken, “Diderot et la médecine, un matérialisme vitaliste ?” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 26 (1999). 178-179. She further argued: “Être matérialiste et vitaliste, c’est pour Diderot ne pas confondre la vie comme condition de l’existence et la matière comme structure de la vie. C’est pourquoi dire que la probité consiste à reconnaître que chacun doit disposer de son corps pour exister ne revient pas seulement à réclamer un droit de conservation. La médecine et la philosophie doivent se concerter pour disposer chacun à tenir une place critique dans la communauté et une puissance d’action. Il s’agit de donner un sens fort à un pouvoir affirmatif des corps.” Suratteau-Iberraken, “Diderot et la médecine, un matérialisme vitaliste ?” 195.

858 Aram Vartanian, “Trembley’s Polyp, La Mettrie, and Eighteenth-Century French Materialism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 11.3 (1950) 269, 286. On the parallel between La Mettrie and Diderot, see also Aram Vartanian, “Diderot and La Mettrie Revisited: An Intertextual Encounter” *Diderot Studies* 21 (1983): 155-197. On the concept of spontaneous generation, see Pascal Charbonnat, “La naissance du concept de génération spontanée,” *Les Lumières et l’idée de nature*, ed. Gérard Chazal (Dijon : Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2011) 31-50.

859 Vartanian, “Trembley’s Polyp” 274.

860 Vartanian, “Trembley’s Polyp” 286.

However, all of these critical approaches equated “materialism” with a “philosophy of matter.” Although it is true that of the French Enlightenment philosophers, and even more of those branded as materialists, Diderot was the one who paid closest attention to all of the scientific debates and experiments regarding matter, as his interests ranged from physics to physiology, and included biology, chemistry and the beginnings of electricity; I have attempted to show in my dissertation that the category of “materialism” was inherently polemical, as it was forged by the theologians and the enemies of a certain radical philosophy that they considered politically dangerous, and most of their “materialist targets”, starting by Diderot himself, but also Helvetius refused the legitimacy of such a term and never claimed it. Thus, while many of these scholars have made extremely thoughtful, accurate and interesting elucidations and interpretations of Diderot’s different pieces of philosophy, they share a rather uncritical approach to the category of “materialism” itself, always equating it (explicitly or implicitly) to a philosophy of matter, rooted on epistemologies derived from particular sciences of matter or the living. Through such a lens, materialism seem reduced often as a study *of* nature, which appears at least partially determined by its object of study, which imposes its own method.

In my study of La Mettrie, as I will do in this short journey through Diderot, I want to explore the other, even if not directly opposed, complementary, side of what has been branded materialist philosophy: its critical force of intervention in the public sphere, one which, instead of being used by science, used it in order to project a political and social critique. Because it was the product of a confrontation in the intellectual public sphere, the “materialist” status of Diderot’s philosophy, as well as La Mettrie’s and Helvetius, will always remain problematic. Yet there is a further complication which has been “added” by certain academic scholarship, which I hope can be overcome, as I argue that a set of debates or confusions can be resolved as long as one abandons—or at least makes explicit—any “doctrinal” definition of materialism.

The difficulty of grasping, systematizing or even qualifying Diderot’s unusual intellectual production has been an issue since its initial, tumultuous reception. In the same way Rousseau’s political philosophy was largely ignored until the postwar period in France, Diderot used to be considered throughout the 19th century and early 20th as a strange fiction writer and a rather mediocre philosopher, and was held with a considerable intellectual contempt by the historians of philosophy as a contradictory and inconsistent philosopher and a bad exponent of “materialism”.

The “legend” or “myth” that had been forged about Diderot since the 18th century is that of an overenthusiastic but superficial thinker, Marmontel, for example, affirmed in his *Mémoires*: “il écrivait de verve avant d’avoir rien médité: aussi a-t-il écrit de belles pages comme il disait lui-même, mais il n’a jamais fait un livre.”⁸⁶¹ This image of a daydreaming, distracted, chatty and inventive philosopher, one ultimately not capable of an articulated, sustained and thorough intellectual production was certainly entertained by Diderot himself in some of the *mise en scène* of the philosopher to be found in his works and the polymorphous nature of his production, as he shared with La Mettrie the need to produce literary constructions that would demystify the philosopher

861 Marmontel, *Mémoires* 2:244, Qtd in Georges Daniel, *Le Style de Diderot: légende et structure* (Genève: Droz, 1986) 1.

figure and show its various ethos, tones and positions. Yet the work of representation has been often taken literally, and then seen as butterfly-minded, lacking the necessary rigor and scientific commitment of “true” philosophy by most of its commentators for a long time. We find again in Goethe the idea that Diderot was unable to develop a coherent thinking to write “une oeuvre d’une grande valeur formant un tout;”⁸⁶² Hegel had mocked Diderot’s philosophy as “fantaisiste” and Barbey D’Aurevilly accused him of being a “satyre fumant d’un matérialisme enivré”.⁸⁶³ Yet in the history of philosophy it was, after Hegel, the harsh assessment of Diderot delivered by Lange that really marked his philosophical future:

“On représente, avec une si grande opiniâtreté, Diderot comme le chef et l’organe du matérialisme français, ou comme le philosophe qui a le premier converti le sensualisme de Locke en matérialisme, que nous nous verrons forcé, dans le chapitre suivant, d’en finir avec la manie synthétique de Hegel, qui, par son souverain mépris pour la chronologie, a tout embrouillé et tout confondu, principalement dans la philosophie des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Tenons-nous-en ici à un fait bien simple, c’est qu’avant la publication de l’*Homme-machine*, Diderot était loin d’être matérialiste; son matérialisme se développa par suite de ses relations avec d’Holbach et son entourage; et les écrits d’autres Français, tels que *Maupertuis*, *Robinet*, et probablement même de la *Mettrie*, qu’on dédaignait, eurent sur Diderot une influence plus décisive que lui-même n’en exerça sur n’importe quel représentant notable du matérialisme.”⁸⁶⁴

“Nous rencontrons d’abord Diderot, cet *homme plein d’esprit et de feu*, que l’on nomme si souvent le chef et le général des matérialistes, tandis qu’il eut besoin d’un développement lent et progressif pour arriver à une conception vraiment matérialiste; bien plus, son esprit resta jusqu’au dernier instant dans un état de fermentation, qui ne lui permit ni de compléter ni d’élucider ses idées. Cette noble nature, qui recélait toutes les vertus et tous les défauts de l’*idéaliste*, en premier lieu le zèle pour le bonheur de l’humanité, une amitié dévouée et une foi inébranlable au bien, au beau, au vrai, à la perfectibilité du monde, fut entraînée, comme nous l’avons déjà vu, en quelque sorte contre son gré, par le courant de l’époque vers le matérialisme.”⁸⁶⁵ [Emphasis added]

For Lange Diderot was not really a materialist philosopher, his materialism was rather the result of bad acquaintances, as his ardent and breezy personality did not fit with the systematic and mechanical character of “materialism”. Throughout the 19th century Diderot’s philosophy was perceived, as Quintili pointed out, as inherently contradictory;

862 Qtd in Daniel, *Le Style de Diderot* 2.

863 Barbey D’Aurevilly, *Goethe et Diderot* qtd in Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 28. On Hegel’s evaluation of early-modern French materialist philosophy see Jean-Claude Bourdin, *Hegel Et Les Matérialistes Français Du XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1992).

864 Friedrich-Albert Lange, *Histoire du matérialisme et de son importance à notre époque*, 2 vols. (Paris: Schleicher Frères, 1910-1911) 1:314.

865 Lange, *Histoire du matérialisme* 1:375-376.

his aesthetics and moral stances, often branded idealists, were seen as opposed his scientific ones: “materialiste et vitaliste dans les écrits de la philosophie de la nature, spiritualiste et préromantique dans ses travaux littéraires: suivant cette légende qui a eu libre cours au XIXe siècle, Diderot aurait laissé cohabiter en lui ces deux âmes irréconciliables.”⁸⁶⁶ This was the case for the whole 19th century in France and Germany and the first half of the 19th, until critics like Vernière, Belaval, Proust, or Chouillet rehabilitated his philosophy as coherent.⁸⁶⁷ The paradox is that Diderot was first recovered as a thinker and philosopher by the historians of literature, who approached his philosophy through the relationship of styles and form, and his study and reception in France has been very much polarized by this academic division of labor between scientific disciplines (literature and philosophy) which is generally an obstacle to fully consider Enlightenment intellectual production.

Since Proust’s masterwork on the *Encyclopédie* and Diderot’s materialism, a number of studies and scholars, coming from the field of philosophy have begun to explore, as I have briefly shown, Diderot’s materialism.⁸⁶⁸ The question was not *if* Diderot was a materialist, but rather what *kind* of materialist he was. Since then, critical scholarship has been confronted both with the problem of the category of materialism in early modern France and the richness and complexity of Diderot’s thinking. In this section I certainly do not intend to cover the totality of richness of the debates and site changes that have been articulated around Diderot’s materialism, nor to be exhaustive I can be exhaustive in the particular aspects of his materialism as they have been discussed by the critique. I choose to focus on a couple of debates which help understand how often the questions around Diderot’s materialism are not well posed from the start: the first one has to do with the tension in his work between skeptics and Spinozism in the one hand and materialism, (which in many regards is similar to the one with La Mettrie); the second has to do with the question of the philosophical unity of Diderot’s work, and thus the preference of some scholars to present his philosophy as eclectic, as something provisional, rather than materialist.

Materialism and Skepticism

Bourdin has argued that Diderot’s materialism is to be better understood by first acknowledging the wider goals of his philosophical position, which were ultimately metaphysical, and thus as a means to an end—that of establishing a skeptic position. Diderot was to be seen as a skeptic materialist, or even better as a “un métaphysicien matérialiste sans métaphysique,”⁸⁶⁹ He has most clearly explained his position in *Diderot*,

866 Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 27.

867 Paolo Quintili, *La Pensée critique de Diderot: matérialisme, science et poésie à l’âge de l’Encyclopédie, 1742-1782* (Paris: Champion, 2001) 33-36; Yvon Belaval, *L’Esthétique sans paradoxe de Diderot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950); Jacques Chouillet, *La Formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot, 1745-1763* (Paris: A. Colin, 1973).

868 Jacques Proust, *Diderot et l’Encyclopédie* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1962).

869 Jean-Claude Bourdin, *Diderot, le matérialisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1998) 111. For Bourdin “Diderot est pleinement métaphysicien” in the sense that it wants to establish a supposition on the nature of the world and human knowledge, beyond physical experience and empirical data but a “métaphysicien sans métaphysique, parce que sans principes portant sur l’être ou le sujet connaissant, et profondément sceptique.” Bourdin, *Diderot, le*

le matérialisme (1998):

“La relation du matérialisme et du scepticisme est stratégique puisqu’il [Diderot] s’en sert comme d’une arme contre les dogmes théologiques et les concepts de la métaphysique (la création, l’ordre, la finalité). Toutefois, ce scepticisme ne débouche pas sur un agnosticisme, car il serait inconséquent de ‘dogmatiser’ sur la matière, le mouvement, etc. ...Connaître, en matérialiste, consiste moins à construire un système de la nature ou de l’homme qu’à soumettre les concepts à l’épreuve d’une expérience d’accueil de la réalité dévilée par les sciences.”⁸⁷⁰

Diderot’s materialism thus is to be seen as a “hypothetical” and conjectural one. Bourdin was right to set Diderot’s philosophical production in a context where, “la philosophie se tourne vers les savoirs positifs (physique, chimie, physiologie, médecine), leurs méthodes, leur langage, leurs progrès, leurs difficultés. Il est attendu qu’ils résolvent les questions métaphysiques et lèvent le statut seulement conjectural de certaines thèses avancées par les matérialistes.”⁸⁷¹ In that philosophical situation, Bourdin was also right to argue that “la philosophie n’ayant pas pour Diderot la prétention de concurrencer les savoirs ni de les fonder, elle est à son tour assumée dans son autonomie et sa liberté.”⁸⁷² Yet this does not necessarily mean that philosophy’s surge towards freedom and emancipation must result in the affirmation of skepticism, nor that this impulse needs to be read as a metaphysical one. Rather than a metaphysical skepticism, it would be more appropriate to talk of an “arrière-fond sceptique” as Rioux-Beaulne proposed, one that was shared by “la plupart des philosophes des Lumières et porte principalement sur l’impossibilité, pour l’être humain, d’accéder à un savoir ‘transcendant’.”⁸⁷³

Bourdin grounded his argument in a careful analysis of the *Lettre sur les aveugles* and a faster one of the *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature*, showing that far from being the first affirmation of Diderot’s materialism they are a clear proof of the limit to his commitment to such a philosophy: for in such a text “on se demande comment les affirmations matérialistes ou ayant rapport au matérialisme pourraient échapper au doute,” underlining ultimately the “caractère étrange de ce matérialisme : – il relève à l’évidence de spéculations, énoncées et revendiquées comme telles et non de savoirs positifs, d’expériences, etc., auxquels il ne fait jamais appel.”⁸⁷⁴ Bourdin concluded that:

“Le matérialisme de la *Lettre* a pour objet moins une nouvelle théorie du

matérialisme 112. On this issue see Jean-Claude Bourdin, “Diderot métaphysicien. Le possible, le nécessaire et l’aléatoire,” *Archives de Philosophie* 71.1 (2008): 13-36.

870 Bourdin, *Diderot, le matérialisme* 15-16.

871 Jean-Claude Bourdin, “Matérialisme et scepticisme chez Diderot,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 26 (1999) 88.

872 Bourdin, “Matérialisme et scepticisme chez Diderot” 90.

873 Mitia Rioux-Beaulne, “Mettre en mouvement: conjecturalité et dialogisme chez Diderot.” *Lumen: Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (2004) 284.

874 Jean-Claude Bourdin, “Le matérialisme dans la *Lettre sur les aveugles*” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 28 (2000) 84, 91.

monde (sinon il faudrait avouer qu'elle serai ici bien pauvre) que la reconnaissance (au sens où un explorateur pousse une reconnaissance en pays inconnu) de la possibilité de penser un monde sans sens, sans origine, sans fin. Non pas sans cause, certes, mais sans une raison suffisante qui fournisse à l'entendement une légalité sous laquelle comprendre les phénomènes. Ce qui est ainsi proposé, en somme, c'est d'inscrire toute enquête ultérieure du matérialisme, à propos de la sensibilité, 'qualité générale et essentielle de la matière', sur un plan qui doit engager à penser sans référence à l'idée d'ordre, sans du moins l'absolutiser."⁸⁷⁵

It is true that the *Lettre* was still battling with metaphysical questions. I think Bourdin failed to see the qualitative turn of Diderot's towards a new and Baconian-inspired experimental philosophy in his *Pensées sur l'interprétation*, which has been clearly analyzed and convincingly argued by Pépin. Yet even if the science proposed by Diderot in the *Pensées* was a conjectural, it was nonetheless necessary in order to further scientific research, which was nothing more than a successive of conjectures. As Diderot indicated at the very conclusion of the work: "si les homes étaient sages, il se livreraient enfin à des recherches relatives à leur bien-être, et ne répondraient à mes questions futiles que dans mille ans au plys tôt."⁸⁷⁶

But even if we are to consider Bourdin's arguments regarding the *Lettre*, I believe he departed from some questionable philosophical assumptions. The first one, of course, is that in order to argue that Diderot was not ultimately a "materialist" he had to transform materialism into a positive philosophical doctrine, into a philosophy of matter, and I have shown that materialist was initially a pure negative category both for its detractors but also by its assigned "sponsors," which sought to deploy the negative aspects of philosophy as critique rather than to develop a positive doctrine. Bourdin defined 18th-century French materialism as a confluence of a set of positions or thesis: that "Dieu est inconcevable, inutile et dangereux," the affirmation of the "unité matérielle du monde, ce qu'on appelle le 'monisme matérialiste'" and that "le réel relève de principes de structuration et d'organisation indépendants de la pensée."⁸⁷⁷ To sum up, for

875 Bourdin, "Le matérialisme dans la Lettre sur les aveugles" 96. His argument relies on a careful analysis of Diderot's mode of enunciation: "Si l'on est attentif à son mode d'énonciation, davantage qu'à son contenu qui vient d'être rappelé, on voit apparaître une fonction essentielle, liée à ce que j'ai appelé la dramatisation et la mise en scène de la pensée matérialiste. Il s'agit de montrer que cette représentation de la morphogenèse des vivants et de la cosmogenèse est pensable, qu'elle possible en concepts, parce qu'elle se rapporte à un possible réalisé, dont la preuve nous est donnée par celui qui parle du fond de sa cécité. Cette représentation est opposable avec crédit à la représentation finaliste et déiste qui trouve donc en face d'elle un autre avec lequel elle doit accepter de coexister. Diderot réussit ce tour de force de ne pas dire que les arguments de Holmes sont faux parce que ceux de Saunderson sont vrais, mais que ceux de Holmes n'ont que la valeur d'une supposition, comme ceux de l'aveugle, et qu'on doit assumer cette situation théorique inédite, à savoir la coexistence de la multiplicité des hypothèses opposées." Bourdin, "Le matérialisme dans la Lettre sur les aveugles" 93.

876 Denis Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature, Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Vernière) 244. Tosel's interpretation goes in the same direction as mine: "les conjectures invalident ainsi le scepticisme par leur visé réaliste. Elles sont des noms, des mots, mais des noms réels et réalisateurs de questions nouvelles assurant une nouvelle possibilité d'observation." André Tosel, "Diderot: un matérialisme entre nominalisme et conjecture," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 26 (1999) 6.

877 Bourdin, *Diderot, le matérialisme* 14, 15, 16.

him: “un matérialiste est un philosophe qui essaie de concevoir une matière qui joue le rôle de principe premier rendant compte de l’origine, de la formation et de la conservation des choses, indépendamment de toute finalité ou de toute intelligence transcendante,” and, “le matérialisme des Lumières est essentiellement une spéculation sur la nature de la matière visant à lui reconnaître des propriétés dynamiques ou énergétiques.... Appliqué à l’homme, le matérialisme entraîne le rejet de la sualité des substances, de la spiritualité, et de l’immortalité de l’âme ainsi que la critique du libre arbitre.”⁸⁷⁸ As soon as one abandons this definition of materialism and relativizes the “metaphysical” impulses behind Diderot’s philosophical production, it becomes possible to see what in his work could be perceived and defined as “materialist”, a materialism which had to do with a new social practice and use of knowledge.

Materialism and the Problem of the Unity of Diderot's Work

Belaval was amongst first critics in France to revoke the idea of a “Diderot-girouette” and sought to establish unity in Diderot’s philosophy through his aesthetics.⁸⁷⁹ The more recent field of philosophical studies has approached the same debate from a different angle. After recognizing the diversity and evolution of Diderot’s position on many issues, from epistemology to morals and politics, starting from the evolution of his conception of matter, scholars, short of managing to establish a thematic unity or *fil conducteur*, displaced the question of unity and coherence into the critical relation to knowledge (Skepticism, Kantian criticism or eclecticism). This type of articulations escaped the pitfall of seeing in materialism a doctrine of matter by situating materialism as a form of critical intervention in the public sphere. The alternatives, (if one sets aside the question of Skepticism), where between those who attempted by all means to reconstitute a fundamental unity in Diderot’s critical philosophy using the Kantian model *à rebours* (Quintili, Duflo), and those who read in Diderot’s well-known favorable treatment of eclecticism in the *Encyclopédie* a full endorsement of this position (Ibrahim, Casini).

For the first set of critics, the question of the unity of Diderot’s work was treated as “problem” that Diderot faced and had to surmount: that of the discontinuity of nature and the limits of human science. In *La Pensée critique de Diderot* (2001) Quintili argued for a strong intellectual and philosophical unity throughout Diderot’s work inspired by Rosenkranz’s assessment of the French Enlightenment, which was opposed to Lange’s, which saw in early modern French materialism the formulation of a new kind of systematic critical philosophy before Kant.⁸⁸⁰ Taking Kant’s model of an autonomous reason which can set its own limits (negative work of critique) in order to establish true, scientific knowledge (positive production), materialism—or naturalism—was defined as the critique of the powers of reason in order to establish some fundamental elements, the

878 Bourdin, *Diderot, le matérialisme* 15.

879 Yvon Belaval, *L’Esthétique sans paradoxe de Diderot* (Paris : Gallimard, 1950).

880 Quintili found in Rosenkranz the idea that “Diderot, avant Kant, a été le philosophe qui jette les bases de la perspective systématique du criticism, d’une manière implicite mais déjà mûre,” which allowed the German scholar to develop “la première lecture organique de la pensée de Diderot.” Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 30, 31.

basis of a doctrine or coherent interpretation of the world.⁸⁸¹ The distinctiveness of the critical philosophy developed by Diderot and pre-Kantian materialism was, for Quintili, that of being “encyclopédique, à savoir polycentrique,” one where thought loses any center in any particular scientific practice because it becomes a pure speculative activity, an “enquête de la pensée *sur et dans* la pensée elle-même, où le sujet biologique pensant est impliqué comme l’élément fondateur du processus cognitif”, where the thinking subject “construit le processus d’universalisation de son expérience à travers l’action de son double regard, il cherche ses conditions empiriques d’action, du faire, du savoir, du sentir, sur leur terrain d’unification possible dans l’expérience elle-même.”⁸⁸² It is not difficult to see that Quintili was to a great extent applying to Diderot’s thinking the Kantian conceptual apparatus and vocabulary which was necessarily foreign to the French author: “je définis cette position comme un ‘transcendentalisme biologique’ pour ce qui concerne sa philosophie de la vie, et un ‘pragmatisme transcendantal’ pour sa philosophie morale et politique.”⁸⁸³

For Quintili, there was in Diderot’s philosophy a “noyau systématique unitaire,” “un matérialisme de la morale et de la connaissance qui est le fil conducteur de l’oeuvre entière;” but this was a kind of materialism somehow unrecognizable for the rest of the scholars of materialism as it was founded upon: “le rôle du sujet constructeur dans la connaissance,” “le primat de la ‘vertu’” and the “exercice de la rationalité hors d’un cadre de légitimation métaphysico-ontologique;” that is to say the postulates of Kantian criticism.⁸⁸⁴ The characteristic of materialism in the French Enlightenment was to the particular standpoint which would allow a critique of the powers of knowledge, a true self-reflexivity of reason, “un jugement de jugement, regard second dans le réel,” the elaboration of a self-reflexive critical thought departing from the real itself: a judgement elaborated “sur et dans la complexité ontologique du réel, mettant en cause d’abord elle-même, le premier regard et la raison pour atteindre un regard plus profond.”⁸⁸⁵

Duflo developed an analogous Kantian type of interpretation of Diderot’s philosophy, though he pushed it in a different direction. Diderot was not a Kant *avant l’heure*, but another sort of frustrated metaphysician, one who, like in Bourdin’s view, embraced materialism as the only visible harbor in order to avoid both skepticism and idealism, projecting the negative image of Bourdin’s narrative: he was a materialist in

881 “Au XVIIIe siècle, après la leçon de Locke, les théories des naturalistes (Buffon, La Mettrie) s’acheminent dans cette direction auto-corrective du jugement et représentant un tournant important dans le débat qui marque la première spécificité d’une approche matérialiste du problème de la connaissance.” Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 17.

882 Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 21, 22.

883 Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 23. Other formulations indicate the same tendency: “la philosophie de Diderot se présentera ainsi comme une reconnaissance sur l’acte même du penser *dans* le penser, de l’agir *dans* l’agir, jugement de jugement qui met en cause les facultés naturelles de celui qui fait (et façonne) son expérience finie. Et de “sujet fini” est lui-même façonné par l’opération, l’interprétation de “Dame Nature”. Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 23.

884 Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 24, 27.

885 Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 25. Quintili argued: “le matérialisme fut là, avant tout, son premier ressort en tant qu’essai de construction d’un nouvel art et/ou théorie du jugement de connaissance - un jugement de jugement, regard second dans le réel - aux prises avec la complexité du monde façonné par l’homme dans le moment même où il en fait l’expérience, et qui se fait praxis transformatrice.” Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 24 -25.

order *not* to be a skeptic. Duflo's reading of the *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* is that idea that the discovery of the impossible totalizing science of all natural phenomena should not lead to skepticism, as a "science transitoire de la nature" was possible and necessary.⁸⁸⁶ Duflo argued thus that despite his differences with D'Alembert regarding their vision of nature, they both shared a joint philosophical project which was embodied in the *Encyclopédie*:

"à quelles conditions cette connaissance est-elle possible et que doit-Elle être? Et si une science est possible, même si elle n'est qu'une science transitoire du monde... de quoi sera-t-elle la science? Quels seront ses principes fondamentaux? Ces questions Diderot encyclopédiste ne pouvait pas ne pas se les poser.... En réalité, les encyclopédistes n'ont pas renoncé à la totalité du projet cartésien en abandonnant sa métaphysique. L'idée d'un ordre des raisons parallèle à l'ordre des choses est toujours là, mais, si elle garde une valeur heuristique essentielle, elle est peut-être déjà tout autant une nostalgie d'un idéal."⁸⁸⁷

Duflo affirmed that the whole philosophical inquiry of Diderot is motivated by a "postulat métaphysique de l'unité de la nature," and the purpose of philosophy, and thus the need to resort to materialism is that was the only doctrine or coherent interpretation of nature as a whole.⁸⁸⁸ Diderot's materialism was thus a "methodological one," and in Duflo's account Diderot ended up defending almost the same position than D'Alembert in his *Essais sur les éléments de philosophie* (1759) regarding materialism: "Tous les effets étant observés, il est plus rationnel et plus économique de supposer la seule cause qui permet de les expliquer. L'interprétation de la nature, la physique expérimentale telle qu'elle se dessine pour le dix-huitième siècle dans l'héritage de Newton, ne procède pas autrement."⁸⁸⁹

Diderot's embrace of materialism seemed to have occurred almost by default, because it was the best philosophy available, the most "economical," but it was without any intrinsic conviction, nor did his philosophy represent a genuine contribution to the history of materialism as a subterranean tendency; it is to be explained by a greater need:

886 "Quand l'état actuel sera passé, quand il n'y aura plus la nature, alors il n'y aura plus la science non plus, car elle n'est science que d'un état d'ordre provisoire. Du moins peut-on connaître cet ordre. En quoi il n'y a pas scepticisme au sens que Diderot condamne. La science est possible, même si elle est seulement locale." Colas Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* (Paris : H. Champion, 2003) 166.

887 Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 152.

888 Duflo initiated in this metaphysical postulate which provided the grounds upon which materialism became an acceptable position: "il y a là l'expression d'un postulat métaphysique fort: le tout ne peut jamais être appréhendé dans une sensation, nous n'en faisons jamais l'expérience. Pourtant cet inconnaissable conditionne la possibilité même d'une recherche qui vise à combiner des sensations particulières et éparses. La philosophie doit supposer la continuité de la chaîne des phénomènes, dont nous ne connaissons que des fragments." Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 162. He even argued that this strive for unity was the guiding force of his *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*: "L'unification est la tâche que s'est fixée la physique moderne que Diderot reprend à son compte." Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 163.

889 Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 181. For an explanation of Diderot's methodological materialism see Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 180-187. Duflo's conclusion is that: "il y a bien un monisme de la matière chez Diderot, par quoi il est bien matérialiste, mais, s'il faut ajouter à la liste déjà conséquente qu'on a pu ajouter pour qualifier ce matérialisme, il semble bien que sa spécificité au XVIIIe siècle, est d'être aussi un matérialisme méthodologique." Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 187.

that of resolving a metaphysical problem (“il a besoin d’une solution au risque immatérialiste”) formulated by Berkeley: “Il suffit que l’hypothèse de la matérialité intégrale du réel convienne pour interpréter intégralement l’ensemble des effets qu’on observe dans la nature, pourqu’on soit légitimé à l’adopter. Si le monisme matérialiste explique tout, et mieux que les hypothèses concurrentes, c’est-à-dire à la fois d’une façon plus rationnelle, plus économique et plus complète, alors il est justifié.”⁸⁹⁰ There were thus more philosophical reasons which brought together the two author’s positions than those which would separate them: “[il] partage avec d’Alembert un héritage philosophique commun qui mêle le rationalisme cartésien au sensualisme de Locke,” but differed only on the particular conception of their shared object of study: nature.⁸⁹¹

In fact by superposing the Kantian framework, both Duflo and Quintili ended missing or obscuring the specificity of Diderot’s philosophy and more particularly his “materialism,” that is the particular expression of his social and political critique, which other scholars had perceived in his “aesthetic” or style. It might seem that this superposition, combined by the minimization of his “materialism” was an attempt to recover Diderot’s thought by dissociating his work from a word which still today falls under an institutional stigma.

I too qualify Diderot’s philosophy as one which was essentially critical, which allows one to circumvent the problem of materialism as a monism or a doctrine as posed by Bourdin and other critical approaches concerned with “defining” or giving a stable content to the materialist critical position. Nevertheless I cannot share Duflo’s and Quintili’s views on the impulse or motivation behind it, nor on the result or purpose of such a critique: that of restoring a sort of fundamental “systematic unity” of the world between the different human spheres.⁸⁹² Precisely the impossibility of restituting this human experience as a totality, and the critical acceptance of such a limitation, is the point of departure of a different kind of philosophical enterprise.

The *Lettre sur les aveugles*, subtitled “à l’usage de ceux qui voient”—to those who have sight—Diderot sought to prove that the possession of that sense was not a guarantor of truth, that those who could physically see might be as equally or even more intellectually blind to the real nature of the physical world as those born blind. Thus, in the *Lettre*, it is Saunderson, the blind character who ended up revealing how the human mind really works.⁸⁹³ As Stenger argued, he performs “une véritable Critique de la raison

890 Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 182.

891 Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 182.

892 Quintili asserted: “Par l’unité systématique qui l’anime - unir le sentir, le faire-agir et le savoir, dans une expérience humaine restituée à l’épaisseur immanente de son sens-, Diderot, après l’Encyclopédie, élabore des nouveaux modèles méthodiques de recherche dans les champs des sciences naturelles et des techniques.” Quintili, *La Pensée critique* 35-36. Duflo, since the beginning of his work, affirmed his goal of “montrer l’unité philosophique de cette oeuvre multiple” in particular by showing the relations between his natural and moral philosophy, as well as his esthetics, resorting the Kantian trilogy to structure his work (*le vrai, le beau et le bien*). Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* 7.

893 “On cherche à restituer la vue à des aveugles-nés; mais si l’on y regardait de plus près, on trouverait, je crois, qu’il y a autant à profiter pour la philosophie en questionnant un aveugle de bon sens. On en apprendrait comment les choses se passent en lui; on les comparerait avec la manière dont elles se passent en nous, et l’on tirerait peut-être de cette comparaison la solution des difficultés qui rendent la théorie de la vision et des sens si embarrassée et si incertaine.” Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles, Oeuvres philosophiques* (Vernière) 126.

aveugle: en s'efforçant de comprendre la formation et la nature des idées chez les aveugles, Diderot entreprend en réalité un examen critique de la capacité de connaître de l'esprit humain.⁸⁹⁴ But Saunderson did not reveal a universal or generic human nature, but rather one where each living organism constructed its own representations and ideas from its sensorial experiences, affirming, like Markovits argued, a materialist nominalism.⁸⁹⁵ Saunderson ended up questioning God but also the unity of the world as a coherent set of natural phenomena:

“Qu'est-ce que ce monde, monsieur Holmes? un composé sujet à des révolutions, qui toutes indiquent une tendance continuelle à la destruction ; une succession rapide d'êtres qui s'entre-suivent, se poussent et disparaissent : une symétrie passagère ; un ordre momentané. Je vous reprochais tout à l'heure d'estimer la perfection des choses par votre capacité; et je pourrais vous accuser ici d'en mesurer la durée sur celle de vos jours. Vous jugez de l'existence successive du monde, comme la mouche éphémère de la vôtre. Le monde est éternel pour vous, comme vous êtes éternel pour l'être qui ne vit qu'un instant: encore l'insecte est-il plus raisonnable que vous. Quelle suite prodigieuse de générations d'éphémères atteste votre éternité ? quelle tradition immense ? Cependant nous passerons tous, sans qu'on puisse assigner ni l'étendue réelle que nous occupions, ni le temps précis que nous aurons duré.”⁸⁹⁶

The world does not present anything but a “symétrie passagère”, an “ordre momentané” and this is the best any human science can achieve in the midst of such chaos. For Saunderson, the important lesson to take from this disorder was not to propose to create an order, to restore a holistic interpretation of the world given that “nous passerons tous, sans qu'on puisse assigner ni l'étendue réelle que nous occupions, ni le temps précis que nous aurons duré.” Saunderson did not only affirm a truth regarding the limits of human knowledge; he also made an “existential” suggestion to the philosopher and the scientist: to refrain from developing an *intentional* even if scientific interpretation of nature, one that seeks to restore its coherence:

“Un phénomène est-il, à notre avis, au-dessus de l'homme? nous disons aussitôt : c'est l'ouvrage d'un Dieu ; notre vanité ne se contente pas à moins. Ne pourrions-nous pas mettre dans nos discours un peu moins d'orgueil, et un peu plus de philosophie? Si la nature nous offre un nœud difficile à délier laissons le pour ce qu'il est et n'employons pas à le couper la main d'un être qui devient ensuite pour nous un nouveau nœud plus indissoluble que le premier.”⁸⁹⁷

In fact, any attempt to restore a unity as authentic is a sophism, or worse the

894 Gerhardt Stenger, “La théorie de la connaissance dans la Lettre sur les aveugles,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 26 (1999): 99-100.

895 “Dans la logique de l'aveugle, sa physique est solidaire d'un métaphysique et d'une éthique.” Francine Markovits, “Une figure paradoxale des Lumières: l'aveugle,” *L'Aveugle et le philosophe: Ou Comment la cécité donne à penser*, ed. Marion Chottin (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2009) 45.

896 Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres*, 1:381.

897 Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres*, 1:378.

expression of human pride and the beginning of metaphysics. Humanity is doomed to leave with transitory interpretations, but for Diderot this is not necessarily bad, or at least not the worst. As Diderot affirmed in the *Pensées sur l'interprétation*: “la philosophie expérimentale ne sait n ice qui lui viendra, n ice qui ne lui viendra pas de son travail; mais elle travaille sans relâche.”⁸⁹⁸ Experimental philosophy was then presented as another immanent expression of organic life and the need to interpret the surrounding world.

In her recent book *Diderot: un matérialisme éclectique* (2010) Ibrahim refuted this idea that one could find or even seek in Diderot’s materialism the project of a unitary philosophy. She proposed instead to read his materialism as a singular materialist elaboration of eclectic philosophy, and to dislodge the question of Diderot’s philosophical coherence from the scientific and metaphysical terrain and move it to that of form and expression.⁸⁹⁹ Her reading of Diderot’s article “Eclectique” of the *Encyclopédie* led her to understand Diderot’s philosophy not as a science but as a sort of art: “l’art d’exprimer la nature, sachant qu’elle s’imite elle-même en inventant des formes et qu’elle nous invite à une imitation expressive,” which offered the reader “la liberté de se tourner vers les ‘interprètes’ de la nature.”⁹⁰⁰ By establishing an analogy between the *comédien* and the philosopher—Ibrahim proposed to read the *Encyclopédie* in parallel with the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*: “l’artiste interprète au sens où il exprime, comme par des reflets, mille émotions diverses; le philosophe interprète au sens où il tente de saisir dans la nature un même mécanisme qui s’exprime d’une infinité de manières différentes.”⁹⁰¹ Ibrahim formulated a very stimulating perspective regarding Diderot’s materialism as an original development of eclecticism:

“L’esthétique de Diderot, comme son épistémologie, part du réel, c’est-à-dire de la nature multiforme animée du perpétuel mouvement créateur de variétés nouvelles. Si l’unité de la création artistique et scientifique s’affirmer ainsi comme matérialiste, elle se manifeste aussi comme le fait de la rencontre aléatoire des éléments entre eux, nature et oeuvre d’art, savant et artiste, des mouvements du regard entre le spectateur et l’inventeur. Ce nouveau modèle de la nature, scientifique our artistique fait allégeance à l’éclectisme dès lors qu’il joint nécessité et contingence, c’est-à-dire inaugure une autre pensée de la liberté.”⁹⁰²

Casini interpreted Diderot’s appropriation of eclecticism in a different way, by empathizing the ideal of a modern free-thinker, as of all of the philosophies he reviewed in the *Encyclopédie* articles, the eclectic philosopher one stood out as “un philosophe qui foulant aux pieds le préjugé, la tradition, l’ancienneté, le consentement universel,

898 Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres philosophiques* (Vernière) 193.

899 Ibrahim defines Diderot’s eclecticism as “une pensée et une pratique de l’expression, qui entrecroise ou emboîte trois niveaux: éclectisme de la nature, ... eclectisme de la pensée,... éclectisme d’un style d’écriture.” Annie Ibrahim, *Diderot: un matérialisme éclectique* (Paris: Vrin, 2010) 69.

900 Ibrahim, *Diderot* 97.

901 Ibrahim, *Diderot* 99.

902 Ibrahim, *Diderot* 165.

l'autortié, en un mot tout ce qui subjugué la foule des esprits, ose penser de lui-même.”⁹⁰³ Compared to this claim for freethinking which as already articulated in the *Promenade*, for eclecticism seems for Diderot the place of a new and necessary encounter, and not that of an hesitation or incoherence: one where in a context of early scientific specialization, different scientific epistemologies can come together to interpret nature; one where an “eclectisme experimental” based on observation can entertain a productive dialogue with an “eclectisme systematique”, where we find the collaboration between rationalist and experimental science Diderot outlined in the *Pensées*.⁹⁰⁴

Materialism as Experimental and Conjectural Philosophy

If materialism is not to be thought as a philosophy of matter it does not mean that the particular philosophies of Diderot and La Mettrie were labelled “materialists” by accident. They both affirmed theses that were quite scandalous in their time, like the sensibility of matter, the spontaneous generation of life, and the naturalization of the soul and morals. But this was only “one part” of their philosophy that excluded its more direct political critique. It is the common nature of their philosophical method, their modern version of experimental philosophy called “materialism” that lead them to articulate such radical and scientifically founded ideas, and to project a social and political critique.

Diderot’s experimental philosophy outlined in the *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature* and of the scientific and philosophical articles in the *Encyclopédie* has been clearly outlined by Pépin.⁹⁰⁵ Diderot managed to develop a new version of experimental philosophy, a trend that since Bacon and La Mettrie proposed to reverse the way scholasticism operated and returning of the natural world: “La révolution centrale est l’inversion de l’ordre scolastique entre la logique et la physique, ou entre les mots et les choses.”⁹⁰⁶ In the *Pensées* and the *Encyclopédie* Diderot appropriated and developed Bacon’s heritage to create a “new philosophical culture,” one where “le travail pratique, enraciné dans les opérations des arts, fournit en lui-même la base et le moteur d’une démarche prétendant se substituer à la philosophie rationnelle,” a critical philosophy thus opposed to the one which Kant would later propose.⁹⁰⁷ Diderot’s innovation, when compared to Bacon and La Mettrie, is to have focused on the connections between practical and theoretical knowledge, while at the same time departing from the experience of the former, and to have proposed a philosophy that would realize “le travail de l’abeille,” meaning “revenir des sens à la réflexion et de la réflexion aux sens:

903 Denis Diderot, “Eclectisme”; *Encyclopédie*, ARTFL, University of Chicago. See Paolo Casini, “Diderot et le portrait du philosophe éclectique,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 148-149 (1984): 35-45.

904 Casini, “Diderot et le portrait du philosophe éclectique” 42-44.

905 François Pépin, *La Philosophie expérimentale de Diderot et la chimie: philosophie, sciences et arts* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012).

906 François Pépin, “Diderot: la chimie comme modèle d’une philosophie expérimentale,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 42 (2010) 450.

907 Pépin, “Diderot: la chimie comme modèle” 453-454.

rentrer en soi et en sortir sans cesse.”⁹⁰⁸ In order to develop this kind of philosophy one needs to have a close relationship with what Pépin called, “le plan pratique des faiseurs, le plan empirique du contact avec l’expérience.”⁹⁰⁹ Theory is as an elaboration based upon the analogies or recurrences established in a practice, but there is not one single kind of practice but rather a plurality of them that philosophy can use as a resource or terrain of activity, thus the interests of the chemist as a “manoeuvrier”, as the scientist whose body is in contact with nature, whose intellectual practice cannot be separated, one instant, from a sensuous one.

Pépin showed that more than any other scientific practice it was that of the chemist which out serve as a model for his new philosophy: “Le chimiste est un manouvrier, un travailleur qui emploie son corps et se confronte à la nature en la transformant. Il s’agit en fait du chimiste en tant que manouvrier, c’est-à-dire en tant que travailleur au contact d’opérations, et non d’un savant spécialisé.”⁹¹⁰ Chemistry to Diderot was what medicine was to La Mettrie: it provided to philosophy the paradigm of the science which was closer to an art and showed the contradictions, variations and complexities of nature, constantly challenging any universal model or law:

“La nature n’a-t-elle pas assez de son voile, sans le doubler encore de celui du mystère; n’est-ce pas assez des difficultés de l’art? Ouvrez l’ouvrage de Franklin; feuillotez les livres des chimistes, et vous verrez combien l’art expérimental exige de vues, d’imagination, de sagacité, de ressources: lisez-les attentivement, parce que s’il est possible d’apprendre en combien de manières une expérience se retourne, c’est là que vous l’apprendrez.”⁹¹¹

Further, as Pépin argued, the idea of the philosopher as a chemist or *manoeuvrier* was a challenge to the division of knowledgess but more improtnatly to the social division of labor: “paradigme d’une philosophie expérimentale qui rompt avec les divisions philosophiques classiques (corps et esprit, sens et jugement, imagination et idée), mais aussi avec des divisions sociales (pratiques nobles et basses, libres et serviles, réfléchies et aveugles).”⁹¹² Diderot’s materialism was thus the development of a philosophy of knowledge which would derive from a practical dimension, one which would be indebted to its experimental origin as well as aware of its social status:

“L’originalité de la philosophie expérimentale diderotienne est de proposer une philosophie de la connaissance où les opérations pratiques, l’expérience habituelle (banale et commune mais surtout spéciale et différenciée) et les sens ne sont pas une préparation, un accompagnement ou un outil annexes par rapport à des opérations intellectuelles plus

908 Denis Diderot, *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature, Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Vernière) 185.

909 Pépin, “Diderot: la chimie comme modèle” 454.

910 Pépin, “Diderot: la chimie comme modèle” 454. Pepin argued that Diderot had a particular interest “pour les gestes et concepts chimiques, pour l’effort théorique que les chimistes manifestent en pensant leurs opérations, sans les dériver d’un système extérieur, en un mot, pour la culture que se construisent ces praticiens.” Pépin, “Diderot: la chimie comme modèle” 448.

911 Denis Diderot, *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature, Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Vernière) 217.

912 Pépin, “Diderot: la chimie comme modèle” 446.

centrales, mais constituent une base qui se développe d'elle-même en savoir."⁹¹³

Materialist or experimental philosophy proposed a different kind of Enlightenment, one where reason can derive its own concepts from practice and experience, and where philosophical enlightenment is local, that of a *flambeau* (i.e Bacon and La Mettrie) more than one of a universal light, but also in some way immanent, not imposed from the outside: "loin de chercher à les éclairer par une lumière extérieure, issue d'une philosophie du sujet ou d'une doctrine préalable, Diderot s'intéresse aux voies par lesquelles les opérations s'éclairent elles-mêmes. Tel semble le sens profond du lien entre philosophie et chimie: la constitution d'une pratique philosophique déterminant de nouveaux genres d'intérêts philosophiques."⁹¹⁴

I argue that this relation that Pépín established between philosophy and nature, one which unveils new ways of operations, and provides new problems and interests for philosophy was also for Diderot the model of the *social relationship* to knowledge the philosopher should establish with its public: not only imposing a philosophical interest upon the reader, but soliciting one. "Philosophical interest," and ultimately the meaning of devoting a whole life to philosophy is not to be established a priori, as a given, but it is rather up for redefinition. In La Mettrie's eudaemonism, we see a reappropriation of the Epicurean existential purpose of philosophy, as a therapeutical practice for happiness, but reformulated in a new public sphere, and thus entrusting philosophy with collective and social goals. In Diderot's materialism, the "interest" of philosophy is not pre-set (happiness) but rediscovered in each particular encounter with nature and human experience.

In fact, the adoption of a chemical model for experimental philosophy had another dimension connected to its practical and social dimension: the formulation of what Rioux-Baulne called a "dialogisme radical" as its inherent conjectural status is a constant appeal for verification, an appeal to the other scientists but ultimately, an appeal to the reader: "Tant que les choses ne sont que dans notre entendement, ce sont nos opinions; ce sont des notions, qui peuvent être vraies ou fausses, accordées ou contredites. Elles ne prennent de la consistance qu'en se liant aux êtres extérieurs. Cette liaison se fait ou par une chaîne ininterrompue d'expériences, ou par une chaîne ininterrompue de raisonnements."⁹¹⁵ The conjectural status of philosophy as a whole was thus marked by the need to establish this link to exterior beings, a link to an *experience* in the scientific but also the literary sense: an interpretation by the reader. The recourse to dialogue and dialogical structures in most of Diderot's philosophical production is then a way to address the conjectural status of philosophy:

"Partout où il propose ses propres conjectures, Diderot demande en quelque sorte à son lecteur d'en éprouver la consistance par lui-même. En contrepartie, il s'efforce de faire de même avec les théories d'autrui. En ce sens, la conjecture déploie déjà une conception essentiellement dialogique de la pratique philosophique, instaurant, du même coup, une communauté liant le

913 Pépín, "Diderot: la chimie comme modèle" 461.

914 Pépín, "Diderot: la chimie comme modèle" 447.

915 Denis Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature, Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Vernière) 184.

philosophe et ceux à qui il s'adresse.”⁹¹⁶

2. The *Encyclopédie* or the Vast Publicizing of Enlightenment Philosophy

Publication and Publicity of the Encyclopédie

Diderot's most notable contribution to the publicity of Enlightenment philosophy was the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772), a project he began with D'Alembert but that became soon a risky enterprise for both philosophers and which led to their split. Diderot's leadership in giving a concrete shape to the encyclopedia, assembling teams and distributing tasks, as well as finding subscriptions has been largely commented.⁹¹⁷ The same can be said of his perseverance and defiance of public authorities when D'Alembert abandoned the project around 1757-58, and the *Encyclopédie* was banned for the second time in 1759. Overall Diderot devoted twenty years of his life to this flagship project of the Enlightenment movement, beginning in 1748 when he signed the contract with its publishers (for what at the time was supposed to be only a translation of Chambers *Cyclopaedia*) to the publication, of the 17th volume of the *Encyclopédie* in 1772.

This gigantic project that ended up amounting to 70, 000 articles written by more than 130 collaborators became an important reference work, which competed with both the Académie and the Jesuit's dictionaries. It proved to be also one of the most profitable publishing enterprises of the 18th century.⁹¹⁸ Just to give an example, Darnton's extensive research on the business aspect of the publication showed that “the publishers, André-François Le Breton and his associates, Antoine-Claude Briasson, Michel-Antoine David, and Laurent Durand, had envisaged an edition of 1,625 copies, but the subscriptions poured in so fast that they increased it three times, until it reached 4,255 copies in 1754.”⁹¹⁹ The distribution exceeded the expectations, and so did the profits: “On an initial investment of about 70,000 livres, their profit may have reached as much as 2,500,000 livres. Net income came to approximately 4,000,000 livres and net costs to something in the range of 1,500,000 to 2,200,000 livres, of which about 80,000 went to Diderot.”⁹²⁰

However if the economic motivation was what moved the association of publishers, it was not Diderot nor D'Alembert's main motive for engaging in such an ambitious and difficult project. Theirs was a philosophical and political commitment to produce, from a material and concrete point of view, a particular kind of Enlightenment D'Alembert outlined in the *Discours Préliminaire* (1751, the *Encyclopédie* présentation

916 Rioux-Beaulne, “Mettre en mouvement” 287.

917 See Jacques Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1962) 9 - 43.

918 See Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1979).

919 Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment* 11.

920 Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment* 16.

brochure). For the *Encyclopédie* was not repeatedly banned only because it was secular philosophy, but because, as Israel noted, it also made an apology for a certain kind of social function of philosophy in the public sphere, as it was “a work with two different faces, a surface complexion and a hidden face, an undercurrent of systematic subversion of state and church.”⁹²¹

The *Encyclopédie* was indeed condemned for a first time in February 1752, after the publication of the first two volumes, by direct order of Louis XV. Presumably, this “Arrêt” responded to the pressure of Jesuits and the Bishop of Paris. The former who were in part offended that Diderot refused their collaboration in the project and also felt the *Encyclopédie* was quickly overshadowing their own *Dictionnaire*.⁹²² While the *Encyclopédie* had 4,000 subscriptions, almost matching its print run, by the middle of the Century, for the 1752 edition of the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* around 2,000 copies were printed, which became more and more difficult to sell, with no more than 6000 subscriptions.⁹²³ The mediation of Malherbes, the Directeur des Librairies who was sympathetic to Enlightenment philosophy, was key in producing a sanction that was initially more of a formal warning than a real sanction. The volumes issued were banned in a strong indictment for: “plusieurs maximes tendantes à détruire l'autorité royale, à établir l'esprit d'indépendance et de révolte et, sous des termes obscurs et équivoques, à élever les fondements de l'erreur, de la corruption des mœurs, de l'irreligion et de l'incrédulité.”⁹²⁴ Yet despite this strong condemnation, the editors were not arrested and the King did not revoke the privilege, thus in fact permitting its legal continuation.⁹²⁵

The second condemnation of the *Encyclopédie* in 1759, however, had a completely different character. It happened in the midst of a very heated political and intellectual dispute, which I have described previously as an ideological crisis of the absolutist regime. It was condemned after the banning of Helvétius' *De l'Esprit*, and, as Hobohm noted, it marked a clear shift of public authorities perception of the dangers of a public critical philosophy: “le vrai danger de l'Encyclopédie n'est reconnu qu'au moment où le texte fait irruption dans la réalité, lors de l'attentat de Damiens ou lors de l'affaire du Chevalier de la Barre, quand on accuse un certain esprit encyclopédique d'être la cause de ces faits criminels, c'est-à-dire quand le texte montre son aptitude à sortir de lui-même et à surgir dans la réalité sous forme d'actions.”⁹²⁶

921 Jonathan Israel, “French Royal Censorship and the battle to Suppress the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D'Alembert, 1751-1759,” *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment* 67.

922 The *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* first issued in 1704 saw 8 re-editions (1721, 1732, 1734, 1738-42, 1743, 1752, 1762, 1771). The one issued in 1752, in 7 volumes plus supplements in folio, was to be the most completed one. See Isabelle Turcan, “La série des éditions du Dictionnaire de Trévoux: conquête d'une identité dans l'histoire de la lexicographie française,” *Quand le Dictionnaire de Trévoux rayonne sur l'Europe des Lumières*, ed. Isabelle Leroy-Turcan and Louis André (Paris: Harmattan, 2009) 84-163.

923 Turcan, *Quand le Dictionnaire de Trévoux rayonne sur l'Europe des Lumières* 46.

924 “Arrêt du Conseil of Feb. 7, 1752,” qtd. in John Lough, *The Encyclopédie* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1971) 21.

925 See John Lough, “The Struggle for Publication,” *The Encyclopédie* 17-39.

926 Hans Christoph Hobohm, “Le progrès de l'Encyclopédie. La censure face au discours encyclopédique,” *L'Encyclopédie et Diderot*, ed. E. Mass and P. E. Knabe (Cologne: Verlag, 1985) 87.

The banning of the publication had been previously solicited by the *avocat général* in a speech at the Parliament on January 23 1759, and in March of the same year an “Arrêt du Conseil du Roi” was issued again, denouncing the “abus réitérés” of the authors and their lack of appreciation of the previous indulgence of the Monarch showed towards them 7 years before. This royal decree did revoke the privilege arguing that “l’avantage que l’on peut retirer d’un ouvrage de ce genre pour le progrès des sciences et des arts ne peut jamais balancer le tort irréparable qui en résulte pour les moeurs et la religion.”⁹²⁷ And a second royal mandate also sought to toughen the sanction and eliminate the publication by attempting to bring about the economic ruin of the publishers, trying to, as Lough recounted, fix “at 72 livres the sum to be repaid by the publishers to subscribers as representing the difference between the amount they had paid and the value of the seven volumes actually received.”⁹²⁸ However such a profitable enterprise could not be stopped: it was only interrupted for 8 years (1757- 1765) and in 1765 it began to circulate underground after Diderot managed to negotiate verbal tacit permission to continue with Malesherbes.⁹²⁹

Furthermore, the condemnation by the Royal authority was doubled by the condemnation of the Catholic Church, when the *Encyclopédie* was added to the Index in 1758 and banned by the Saint Office (The Inquisition Tribunal) in 1759.⁹³⁰ The new Roman Pope, Clément XIII himself had to publish a letter on september of 1759 against Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* wherein he forbid: “à tous et chacun des fidèles, à ceux mêmes dont il faudrait faire une mention spéciale ou qui devraient être expressément nommés de le lire, garder ou copier, et cela sous peine d’excommunication majeure pour les séculiers et de suspens a divinis pour les ecclésiastiques, même les réguliers, lesquelles peines seront encourues par le seul fait sans qu’il soit besoin d’autre déclaration.”⁹³¹ As Maire concluded, this was also a turning point in the Church’s relation with Enlightenment philosophy, a “prise de conscience du véritable dessein de l’Encyclopédie par les juges romains,” and moment where “le pape officialisait le tournant zelante; il manifestait que,

927 “Arrêt du Conseil of March. 8, 1759,” qtd. in John Lough, *The Encyclopédie* 26.

928 Lough, *The Encyclopédie* 26.

929 “Discreetly communicating to Malesherbes the offers Frederick the Great and Catharine the Great had both made to host the *Encyclopédie*’s completion in their capitals should all doors remained closed in France, Diderot extracted from the *directeur* of the *Librairie* an unwritten and unannounced ‘tacit’ permission which allowed the editing of the *Encyclopédie* to proceed. Nothing existed on paper. Malesherbes took some personal risk in conceding even this much. Inevitably under the circumstances, there was no commitment that publication in France would ever be allowed. Officially, the whole business lacked legality so that the few remaining accomplices had to trust only in each other’s loyalty and discretion. But the work went on.” Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 85.

930 See Catherine Maire, “L’entrée des ‘Lumières’ à l’Index : le tournant de la double censure de l’Encyclopédie en 1759,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 42 (2007): 108-139.

931 *Damnatio et prohibitio operis in plures tomos distributi cujus est titulus : Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des métiers par une Société de gens de lettres, [...] et publié par M. Diderot,...* – *Condamnation et prohibition d’un Ouvrage...* (Clément XIII, pape, 3 septembre 1759), qtd. in Catherine Maire “L’entrée des ‘Lumières’ à l’Index” par. 65. The previous Pope Benedict XIV “followed a distinctly pro-Enlightenment policy, at least as far as moderate Enlightenment ideas were concerned, the Pope himself having written to Voltaire some years before, in , expressing sympathy for his (at that time) publicly stated Newtonian and Lockean standpoint and aims.” Israel “French Royal Censorship and the battle to Suppress the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D’Alembert, 1751-1759,” *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment* 62.

désormais, il n'y aurait plus aucun compromis possible avec ces 'Lumières' dont le péril venait d'être identifié."⁹³²

Yet the troubles of the *Encyclopédie* cannot be recounted without explaining the quarrel and separation of its two chief editors and close friends and collaborators, Diderot and D'Alembert. It still remains unclear why D'Alembert quit, yet it was not solely or directly connected by the increased political repression against the *Encyclopédie* and materialist philosophy. His correspondence with Voltaire seems to prove he made this decision in 1757, before the second and major blow to the publication. And as Pappas suggested, part of the reason had to do with a political and intellectual differences in their conceptions of what the project ought to be: "Ainsi que le démontre le 'Discours préliminaire', d'Alembert veut imposer sur l'œuvre un ordre cartésien qui procède de raisonnement en et qui fixe le tout dans un moule équilibré raisonnement et harmonieux. Diderot, par contre, avec sa soif baconienne de savoir, ne se soucie pas tellement de la forme mais plutôt de l'accumulation des connaissances."⁹³³

What is certain is that D'Alembert, who developed stronger ties with Voltaire after this episode and focused on his academic career until becoming *secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie Française* in 1772, did not want the *Encyclopédie* to continue if it was to be defeated and he would rather see the project fail than to make compromises.⁹³⁴ He was quite furious when Diderot and the publishers decided to continue the project without him, despite the censorship.⁹³⁵

Materialism As Critical Philosophy

In the article "Encyclopédie" which appeared in the *Encyclopédie's* fifth volume in November 1755, Diderot restated the goal of his particular dictionary. Initially the article does not seem to differ from the outline which was put out 4 years before by D'Alembert in the *Discours Préliminaire*:

"le but d'une Encyclopédie est de rassembler les connoissances éparses sur la surface de la terre; d'en exposer le système général aux hommes avec qui nous vivons, et de le transmettre aux hommes qui viendront après nous; afin que les travaux des siècles passés n'aient pas été des travaux inutiles pour les siècles qui succéderont; que nos neveux, devenant plus instruits, deviennent en même tems plus vertueux et plus heureux, et que nous ne mourions pas sans avoir bien mérité du genre humain."⁹³⁶

Yet this seemingly innocent and naive reformulation of the project covered a

932 Maire, "L'entrée des 'Lumières' à l'Index" par. 65.

933 John N. Pappas, "Diderot, d'Alembert et l'Encyclopédie," *Diderot Studies* 4 (1963) 195-196.

934 Pappas, "Diderot, d'Alembert et l'Encyclopédie" 201-203.

935 "D'Alembert, voyant l'Encyclopédie en train de renaître de ses cendres, et son projet manqué, se montre hors de lui. Voici comment Diderot décrit sa conduite à cette occasion: 'Il partit avec l'impétuosité puérile que vous lui connaissez, traita les libraires comme des valets, la continuation de l'ouvrage comme une folie, et m'adressa chemin faisant des choses fâcheuses à entendre.'" Pappas, "Diderot, d'Alembert et l'Encyclopédie" 202.

936 "Encyclopédie," *Encyclopédie*.

more radical project beyond the ambition of producing a “well-organized” collection of all human knowledge for future generations. Indeed, we know today that the *Encyclopédie*'s “order” was not simply alphabetical, but that work was made of a diversity of points of view, and a strive to undo or subvert the arbitrary order of the alphabet and all its possible corollaries. It was a labyrinthic and polyphonic masterpiece with a subterranean life, a system of hidden tunnels cross-referencing articles, dislocating opinions and points of view through the multiple *renvois*.⁹³⁷ Diderot established and theorized several types and functions for the *renvois*, ranging from simple association to dislocation or montage of meanings and satire.⁹³⁸ Scholars have extensively shown how the *Encyclopédie* worked, its subterranean and implacable methods, and how it became a sort of Trojan horse for materialist philosophy, and ultimately a true “war machine” against the Church and the absolutist regime.⁹³⁹ This was the case not only with the articles which mocked and attacks metaphysics and Catholic faith, or the immaterial nature of the soul, but also with several key articles, mostly written by the materialists themselves, regarding political matters (“Droit Naturel”, “Autorité Politique”, “Citoyen”, “Despotisme”, “Souveraineté”, “Représentant”, “Théocratie”, “Population” etc.), as they targeted both the very alliance of religious and monarchical power that sustained the feudal structure of economic exploitation and domination, and the illegitimate nature of the absolutist government.⁹⁴⁰ This alone was a reason to consider the *Encyclopédie* as an ideological war machine against the political order of the *Ancien Régime*. Diderot was very well aware of the radical nature of his project, as he wrote to Sophie Volland in September 1762: “Cet ouvrage produira sûrement avec le temps une révolution dans les esprits, et j’espère que les tyrans, les oppresseurs, les fanatiques et les intolérants n’y gagneront pas. Nous aurons servi l’humanité; mais il y aura longtemps que nous serons réduits dans une poussière froide et insensible, lorsqu’on nous en saura quelque gré.”⁹⁴¹

There is another aspect defining Diderot’s materialist project throughout the *Encyclopédie*, maybe less studied, which has to do with the vindication of a public

937 See Francine Markovits, Florent Guénard and Mariafranca Spallanzani, eds., *L'ordre des renvois dans l'Encyclopédie*, Spec. issue of *Corpus* 51 (2006): 1-391.

938 “ils [les renvois] opposeront les notions; ils feront contraster les principes; ils attaqueront ébranleront, renverseront secrètement quelques opinions ridicules qu'on n'oserait insulter ouvertement. Si l'auteur est impartial, ils auront toujours la double fonction de confirmer et de réfuter de troubler et de concilier” Diderot, “Encyclopédie”, *Encyclopédie*. “Diderot distingue quatre types de renvois, ou plutôt assigne quatre fonctions aux renvois. Les renvois de choses indiquent les liens entre un objet traité dans un article et d'autres objets. Ils ont deux effets : renforcer le propos ou au contraire le contredire, si besoin est. Les renvois de mots ont pour fonction d'expliquer un terme ; ils permettent, en renvoyant à un autre article, de faire l'économie d'une définition. Il est en outre un troisième type de renvois : ceux qui, en rapprochant certaines vérités, en font naître d'autres. Enfin, les renvois épigrammatiques permettent d'alerter le lecteur sur certains articles, qui doivent être lus « avec précaution »7. Les renvois sont ainsi de quatre sortes : gnoséologiques et critiques, sémantiques, heuristiques, satiriques.” Florent Guénard, “La vertu du savant: le système des renvois dans l'article Encyclopédie de l'Encyclopédie,” *Corpus. L'ordre des renvois* 2-3.

939 See John Lough, “Reference work of ‘Machine de guerre’,” *The Encyclopédie* 61-97.

940 For a selection and commentary of the most political articles of the *Encyclopédie*, see Albert Soboul, *Textes choisis de l'Encyclopedie, Ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1962) and Véronique Le Ru, *Lumières Subversives: l'Encyclopédie comme machine de guerre* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2007).

941 Denis Diderot, “Lettre du 26 septembre 1762,” *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Garnier, 1875) 19: 140.

critical philosophy, one independent from the State and the Church and at least virtually, addressed and engaging all of the citizens. It was a materialist conception of philosophy, which departed and developed some of the aspects we saw in Dumarsais's *Le Philosophe*, but more importantly, a conception Diderot began to test in reality and to put in practice for 20 years.

In this regard, the article "Encyclopédie" began to demarcate a clear alternative from D'Alembert's initial formulation in 1751. There, Diderot outlined several aspects of his program for philosophy were outlined: the commitment to the publicity of knowledge, against the cult of secrecy and monopolies of "savoirs-faire" by the corporations; the idea of a "social utility of philosophy", delineating a philosophy that should serve "le genre humain"; the rather new idea that philosophy ought to be not an isolated and individual practice but a social and collective intellectual activity, based upon collaboration and drawing from different sciences arts and manual practices; finally, the need to find a method of exposition that would be both pedagogical (allowing any reader to become a potential philosopher, to follow the rational steps of those who are addressing him or her) and critical (to find in the form a place for critique, for subversion that would escape censorship).

In fact Diderot wanted to outline a different philosophical ethos and position, taking equal distance from the model of the *Académicien*—who he abhorred— from the book-writer ambitioning to make a name and a style of his own, and from the aristocratic micro-world of the *salons* and "enlightened sociabilities"—the *honnête-homme* type. In his proposal for the encyclopedic team, Diderot wanted to emphasize the last aspects of the *Encyclopédie*'s long official title: *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres*. Of course such a totalizing work could never be achieved by one man alone but rather "par une société de gens de lettres et d'artistes, épars, occupés chacun de sa partie, et liés seulement par l'intérêt général du genre humain, et par un sentiment de bienveillance réciproque."⁹⁴² What kind of "société de gens de lettres" was behind the *Encyclopédie*? I argue that for Diderot, such a vindication of a collective and collaborative subject had a particular meaning. While our authors might have had in mind the independent and free spirited association of the 17th-century English academies movement when he was thinking of this new kind of "société de gens de lettres," his appeal for a collective society of collaborators was not for him an utilitarian one, nor the embodiment of the traditional secluded aristocratic circle of sociability or *côterie*. Of course, no single man (or woman) can "connoître tout ce qui peut être connu; de faire usage de tout ce qui est; de voir tout ce qui peut être vû; de comprendre tout ce qui est intelligible" in order to realize the encyclopedic project alone,⁹⁴³ yet I argue that Diderot's motivation was to concretize a philosophical and political ideal, the expression of a desire, in many ways utopian, to contribute to create a new kind of society where its participants are "liés par l'intérêt général du genre humain et par un sentiment de bienveillance réciproque." The society behind the *Encyclopédie* ought to be a concrete realization of DuMarsais's call for a "people philosophique," a modern political society inspired by the ancient philosophical

942 "Encyclopédie," *Encyclopédie*.

943 "Encyclopédie," *Encyclopédie*.

sects, where the intellectual relationships were not those of rivalry, competition and pettiness, but rather constituted an atmosphere where: “on s'applaudit intérieurement de ce que l'on fait; on s'échauffe; on entreprend pour son collègue et pour son ami, ce qu'on ne tenteroit par aucune autre considération; et j'ose assurer, d'après l'expérience, que le succès des tentatives en est plus certain.”⁹⁴⁴

Diderot wanted to break with—or better, transcend—the still-dominant archetype of the gentleman-philosopher which gave birth the Enlightenment, that of the “têtes étroites, des âmes mal nées, indifférentes sur le sort du genre humain, et tellement concentrées dans leur petite société, qu'elles ne voyent rien au - delà de son intérêt”.⁹⁴⁵ So in order to ensure a new social function of philosophy, philosophers ought to develop, in practice, a new form of sociability, or better, of society. And the *Encyclopédie* was a first, experiment in that direction, despite its limitations and contradictions.

The first challenge or trait of this new philosophical people, was to undertake a renegotiation between intellectual and manual labor. Diderot did not belong to any privileged order, his father was a cutler, and though he participated in aristocratic forms of sociability, he sought to involve a wide range of social sectors in the production of the *Encyclopédie*, in particular artisans or those who were relegated into the stigmatized category of mechanical arts. It is well known that in the *Encyclopédie* Diderot attempted to rehabilitate manual labor, and in particular the work and knowledge of artisans, questioning the medieval opposition between liberal and mechanical arts. In the article “métier” Diderot criticized the unjustified contempt society had for artisans, because they use their hands and reproduce mechanical operations, and he exposed their key position in the social division of labor:

“Je ne sais pourquoi on a attaché une idée vile à ce mot ; c'est des *metiers* que nous tenons toutes les choses nécessaires à la vie. Celui qui se donnera la peine de parcourir les ateliers, y verra partout l'utilité jointe aux plus grandes preuves de la sagacité. L'antiquité fit des dieux de ceux qui inventerent des *metiers* ; les siècles suivants ont jetté dans la fange ceux qui les ont perfectionnés. Je laisse à ceux qui ont quelque principe d'équité, à juger si c'est raison ou préjugé qui nous fait regarder d'un œil si dédaigneux des hommes si essentiels. Le poëte, le philosophe, l'orateur, le ministre, le guerrier, le héros, seroient tout nus, et manqueroient de pain sans cet artisan l'objet de son mépris cruel.”⁹⁴⁶

As Sewell pointed out, “Diderot’s concern with the mechanical arts was partly utilitarian,” in that artisan’s work was genuinely useful for society, but in his mind, if mechanical arts should be consider equal to liberal ones, it was “not only because they are useful but because they were equally subtle and complex productions of the human mind.”⁹⁴⁷ Yet beyond combating an unfounded prejudice against artisans, Diderot

944 “Encyclopédie,” *Encyclopédie*.

945 “Encyclopédie,” *Encyclopédie*.

946 “Metier,” *Encyclopédie*.

947 William H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) 65.

outlines a materialist conception of intelligence or rationality, as for him the artisan's trade or practice signals a sort of rationality, although it may be hidden.⁹⁴⁸ For him the word “mechanique” is not to be read as the absence of consciousness or attention from the worker, in the sense that the worker would be an automaton, but the exercise of a different form of rationality, a practical one where the hand possesses a knowledge of which the mind is not yet aware and where practice precedes conceptualization and systematization. The purpose of the *Encyclopédie* was then to establish the dialogue between the hand and the brain, proposing a new kind of exchange between the artisan and the philosopher, for their reciprocal advantage:

“Les Artisans se sont crus méprisables, parce qu'on les a méprisés; apprenons - leur à mieux penser d'eux - mêmes: c'est le seul moyen d'en obtenir des productions plus parfaites. Qu'il sorte du sein des Académies quelqu'Homme qui descende dans les ateliers, qui y recueille les phénomènes des *Arts*, et qui nous les expose dans un ouvrage qui détermine les Artistes à lire, les Philosophes à penser utilement, et les Grands à faire enfin un usage utile de leur autorité et de leurs récompenses.”⁹⁴⁹

The philosopher then needed a constant dialogue with artisans in order to make his or her thought useful for society; and the artisan in return, needed the philosopher not to think per se, or to learn science, but to be able to “raise the mechanical arts to a higher perfection by spelling out the truths implicit in [their] practice”, in the sense of objectifying his practical knowledge.⁹⁵⁰

The second aspect of Diderot's call for a social philosophy has to do with the necessary commitment for the publicity of knowledge, for all particular knowledges to be socialized (more than democratized) in the public sphere, that is to say exposed and revealed to the public so they can be freely discussed, criticized, appropriated and used. And this is where maybe a conflict with the corporations arose, as Diderot's *Encyclopédie* wanted to break the monopoly of knowledge and *savoir-faire*, and any kind of ownership of ideas. In the article “Encyclopédie” he opposed any intellectual attempt to put a personal or corporatist interest before the interest of humanity:

“Ces hommes veulent qu'on les appelle bons citoyens; et j'y consens, pourvu qu'ils me permettent de les appeler méchants hommes. On diroit, à les entendre, qu'une Encyclopédie bien faite, qu'une histoire générale des Arts ne devrait être qu'un grand manuscrit soigneusement renfermé dans la bibliothèque du monarque, et inaccessible à d'autres yeux que les siens; un

948 “Dans quel système de Physique ou de Métaphysique remarque-t-on plus d'intelligence, de sagacité, de conséquence, que dans les machines à filer l'or, faire des bas, et dans les métiers de Passementiers, de Gaziers, de Drapiers ou d'ouvriers en soie? Quelle démonstration de Mathématique est plus compliquée que le mécanisme de certaines horloges, ou que les différentes opérations par lesquelles on fait passer ou l'écorce du chanvre, ou la coque du ver, avant que d'en obtenir un fil qu'on puisse employer à l'ouvrage? Quelle projection plus belle, plus délicate & plus singulière que celle d'un dessein sur les cordes d'un sample, & des cordes du sample sur les fils d'une chaîne? qu'a-t-on imaginé en quelque genre que ce soit, qui montre plus de subtilité que le chiner des velours? Je n'aurois jamais fait si je m'imposois la tâche de parcourir toutes les merveilles qui frapperont dans les manufactures ceux qui n'y porteront pas des yeux prevenus, ou des yeux stupides.” “Art,” *Encyclopédie*.

949 “Art,” *Encyclopédie*.

950 Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France* 69.

livre de l'Etat, et non du peuple. A quoi bon divulguer les connoissances de la nation, ses transactions secretes, ses inventions, son industrie, ses ressources, ses mysteres, sa lumiere, ses arts et toute sa sagesse! ne sont - ce pas là les choses auxquelles elle doit une partie de sa supériorité sur les nations rivales et circonvoisines? Voilà ce qu'ils disent; et voici ce qu'ils pourroient encore ajoûter. Ne seroit - il pas à souhaiter qu'au lieu d'éclairer l'étranger, nous pussions répandre sur lui des ténèbres, et plonger dans la barbarie le reste de la terre, afin de le dominer plus sûrement?"⁹⁵¹

This conception of the philosopher's commitment to public utility, to serve humanity, was sustained by Diderot until the very end of his life, as he spoke in the defense of the Abbé de Prades, the Abbé Galiani and the Abbé de Raynal. In his *Lettre Apologétique de l'Abbé Raynal à Monsieur Grimm* (1781): "le peuple dit : 'Vivre d'abord, ensuite philosopher.' Mais celui qui a pris le manteau de Socrate, et qui aime la vérité et la vertu plus que la vie, dira, lui : 'Philosopher d'abord, et vivre ensuite.' Si l'on peut..."⁹⁵² Diderot's philosophical ideal that was embodied at the beginning of his life in Socrates, a figure that in his old age he associated more to Seneca. Yet in the middle of his career and through the collaboration with the encyclopedic team and later with D'Holbach and Naigeon, he sought more to create philosophical societies. What he took from the Socratic figure was his position in the public sphere: "Socrate ne se croyoit point sur la terre pour lui seul et pour les siens; il vouloit être utile à tous, s'il le pouvoit, mais surtout aux jeunes gens, en qui il espéroit trouver moins d'obstacles au bien. Il leur ôtoit leurs préjugés. Il leur faisait aimer la vérité. Il leur inspiroit le goût de la vertu."⁹⁵³ The philosopher was then to be a philosopher before a citizen, in an inclusive sense, as experimental materialist philosophy offered the grounds for a wider scope of political critique and practice than the citizen status, which was conditioned by the particular laws and moral values of a society in a given time. The philosopher's sense of utility as a commitment to humanity was thus to exceed and have a prevalence over both personal desires and interests, over the existing social institutions.

3. The Red Lines of the Bourgeois Public Sphere: Politics and Religion

The very life of Diderot is a proof that such a commitment to embodying a modern Socrates and to form a radical *société philosophique* was doomed to remain an ideal, for it was a project which proved to be rather difficult to realize in 18th-century France. It was more of a mandate than an actually existing possibility. An overview of Diderot's philosophical beginnings shows that our author knew these limits from practice, as he was imprisoned for three months in Vincennes in 1749 because of his first publications (the *Pensées Philosophiques*, the *Lettres sur les Aveugles* and the novel *Les Bijoux indiscrets*). Since 1746, Diderot's reaction to repression was not to revolt directly against the rules nor to abandon his ideals, but rather to develop strategies to unveil the true workings of the field to his readers by showing the mechanics of power, and the

951 "Encyclopédie," *Encyclopédie*.

952 Diderot, *Oeuvres Philosophiques* 629.

953 "Philosophie Socratique," *Encyclopédie*.

audacities and compromises hidden behind philosophical texts. He usually did so by producing a text that would allow the reader to actively read, socially and politically speaking, the dynamics of philosophy's publication and communication, and to map the different and contending options for philosophy: Scholasticism, Radical Enlightenment, Moderate Enlightenment, Libertinism, etc.

The *Pensées Philosophiques* were issued anonymously in 1746 under a fake publisher name ("La Haye, Aux Dépends de la Compagnie"), but we know they were actually sent to print clandestinely (with no *privilège* nor tacit authorisation) to Charles-Jean-Baptiste Delepine by Diderot's publisher Laurent Durand in Paris.⁹⁵⁴ The *Pensées* were quickly censored and condemned to be burned by the *Parlement de Paris*, together with La Mettrie's *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* on July 7th 1746. Both texts were presented as "écrits dont une impression clandestine inonde depuis quelque temps le public."⁹⁵⁵ Yet the motives justifying their condemnation were separate. La Mettrie's work was accused in an expedite way of "anéantir [l'esprit], en le reduisant à la matière," and judged dangerous because it undermined "les fondements de toute Religion et de toute Vertu".⁹⁵⁶ But the indictment against Diderot's book exhibited a different set of arguments. And even though the thesis defended there were less "radical" than La Mettrie, (Diderot was "simply" a Deist), his work was judged equally dangerous. Diderot was very influenced by Shaftesbury's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue* (1699), which he was translating when he wrote the *Pensées Philosophiques*. Scholars agree that in this first text Diderot put forward theist or deist positions, close to the Newtonian type of theism defended years earlier by Voltaire. He was just claiming the rights of reason to examine moral and theological issues and opposing fanaticism, but nothing more.⁹⁵⁷ But the most subversive aspect in his book was the way the philosopher presented his position, his attitude towards metaphysical debates more than his particular position on that matter, as he seemed to be merely contemplating the disputes between atheists, deists, skeptics and even Christian apologists with a certain distance, from an impassionate rational standpoint, and even with some cynicism. Diderot's tone allowed the reader to disengage from all these positions and consider them from a different standpoint, sometimes a merely instrumental one. Diderot through his theatrical *mise en scène* and the formal organization of his ideas in isolated sections or *pensées*, arranged with no particular order, composed a text with no logical progression, no internal rationality. There was nothing compelling in the arguments, all the reasons to believe or now, came from

954 Frank A. Kafker, and Jeff Loveland, "Diderot et Laurent Durand, son éditeur principal," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 39 (2005), par. 5. Durant published several translations by Diderot between 1745 and 1749, and he was also the publisher of the *Bijoux Indiscrets* and the *Lettre sur les Aveugles*, and became with Le Breton, Briasson and David an associate publisher of the *Encyclopédie*. As Kafker and Loveland argued "Quoique peu connu, Laurent Durand fut l'un des libraires français les plus importants du dix-huitième siècle. Seul ou en collaboration, il publia des centaines d'ouvrages au long de sa carrière, y compris des classiques des Lumières tels que l'*Encyclopédie*, l'*Histoire naturelle* et *De l'esprit*. En outre, il fut l'éditeur principal de Diderot." "Diderot et Laurent Durand, son éditeur principal" par.1.

955 *Arrêt de la cour du parlement, qui condamne deux livres*, 1746 2.

956 *Arrêt de la cour du parlement, qui condamne deux livres*, 1746 2.

957 See Aram Vartanian, "From Deist to Atheist: Diderot's Philosophical Orientation 1746-1749." *Diderot Studies* 1 (1949): 46-63.

outside the text. The *Pensées*'s reader was not put in front of a passionate debate that could be resolved by the force each side's compelling arguments, but rather by applying criteria of social utility, an external form of rationality. The Parliament's indictment of the *Pensées Philosophiques* claimed therefore that the text should be banned because it presented "aux esprits inquiets et téméraires les venin des opinions les plus criminelles et les plus absurdes dont la dépravation de la raison humaine soit capable; et par une incertitude affectées, place toutes les Religions presque au même rang, pour finir par n'en reconnaître aucune."⁹⁵⁸

However Diderot began probably to be closely watched by the authorities when he published also anonymously and clandestinely his *Bijoux Indiscrets* (dec. 1747- Jan. 1748) for his file from the Paris Police dates from January 1st 1748.⁹⁵⁹ His began, like all the police files did, by clarifying his social status and was followed by a brief characterization of his activity: "il est fils d'un coutelier de Langres. C'est un garçon plein d'esprit mais extrêmement dangereux. Il a fait *Les Pensées philosophiques*, *Les Bijoux* et d'autres livres de ce genre."⁹⁶⁰ Of the twenty-two *encyclopédistes* Darnton researched, only two were defined as "dangerous" by the police: Diderot and Langlet.⁹⁶¹ Such a reputation became for sure well established when a year later, in June 1749, our philosopher issued anonymously, and with the fake indication of London as the place of publication, the *Lettre sur les aveugles* which has been signaled as the public embrace of materialist thesis. And indeed just a month later, on July 24th, a "Lettre de cachet" was issued for his arrest signed by the King. According to Wilson, two police officers woke him up that morning and arrested him, taking him to Vincennes where he stayed from that day to November 3rd.⁹⁶² They were looking for the original manuscripts five works he published anonymously (*Lettres Philosophiques*, *Bijoux Indiscrets*, *Lettre sur les Aveugles*, *L'allée des idées* and *Oiseau blanc, conte bleu*) and searched his apartment for any writings "contrary to Religion, the State, or morals".⁹⁶³ At that time Voltaire intervened, making use of his important relationships to shorten Diderot's prison stay and to make it more "livable". But if he was released from prison it is because he had previously signed with Le Breton in 1748 the contract to work for the important

958 *Arrest de la cour du parlement, qui condamne deux livres*, 1746 2.

959 Regarding the publication of the *Bijoux Indiscrets*, Kafker and Loveland stated that: "Le roman licencieux Les Bijoux indiscrets fut publié à Paris par Durand en décembre 1747 ou en janvier 1748, Pierre-Guillaume Simon s'étant chargé de l'impression. La page de titre, sans date, n'identifie ni l'auteur ni l'éditeur mais signale Monomotapa comme lieu de publication – pointe d'esprit, car cette ville d'Afrique, figurait dans la géographie fantaisiste du récit. Le libraire Boni évalua le gain de Diderot à 1 200 livres." "Diderot et Laurent Durand, son éditeur principal" par.1.

960 Robert Darnton, "Les encyclopédistes et la police," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 1 (1986) 103.

961 The "dangerosity" of Diderot was repeated twice in the brief police note: "C'est un jeune homme qui fait le bel esprit et se fait trophée d'impiété, très dangereux. Parlant des saints mystères avec mépris, il disait que lorsqu'il viendrait au dernier moment de sa vie, il se confesserait comme les autres et qu'il recevrait et [= ce ?] que l'on appelle Dieu, qu'il ne le fera point par devoir, mais par rapport à sa famille de crainte qu'on ne leur reproche qu'il est mort sans religion." Darnton "Les encyclopédistes et la police" 103.

962 Arthur McCandless Wilson, *Diderot: The Testing Years, 1713-1759* (New York: Oxford UP, 1957) 103.

963 Wilson, *Diderot* 103.

translation and edition of Chamber's *Cyclopaedia* (which would eventually become a work of its own, the *Encyclopédie*). It was then Le Breton and the other publishers who spent time and money to free him. In their written appeal to the police demanding Diderot's liberation they argued that:

“c'est un homme de lettres d'un mérite et d'une probité reconnus; nous l'avons chargé depuis près de cinq ans de l'édition d'un *Dictionnaire universel des sciences, arts et métiers*. Cet ouvrage, qui nous coûtera au moins deux-cent cinquante mille livres et pour lequel nous avons déjà avancé près de quatre-vingt mille livres, était sur le point d'être annoncé au public. La détention de M. Diderot, le seul homme de lettres que nous connaissions capable d'une vaste entreprise et qui possède seul la clef de toute cette opération, peut entraîner notre ruine.”⁹⁶⁴

This short excursus through Diderot's agitated philosophical beginnings shows that the philosopher's dilemmas regarding publication and publicity began well before the *Encyclopédie*. The initial dialogue between Cléobule and Ariste, two fictitious philosophical characters opening the *Promenade du Sceptique* contained a first reflection upon the red lines structuring the new public sphere. The *Promenade* was a work Diderot wrote probably in 1747, just after the *Pensées* but it remained unpublished during the author's life, as it was only made available to the public in 1830.⁹⁶⁵ We do not if the police forced Diderot not to publish the manuscript or if it was confiscated by the latter around 1750, but it seems that “presumably Diderot hoped to publish *La Promenade du Sceptique* ... but the police, on way or another, prevented it.”⁹⁶⁶

The *Promenade* contained already one of Diderot's major philosophical preoccupations (the relation and changes of philosophy with the new public sphere) and also one of its preferred formal features: theatricality. As Rioux-Beaulne noted, the work proceeded to a “véritable mise en scène de la philosophie dans les années 1740 et de son rapport à deux autres formes de vie: la religion et la vie mondaine.”⁹⁶⁷ The text opened up with a dialogue between Ariste and Cleobule's, conversation regarding the risks of publications and the social goals of the philosophers. Following this preliminary dialogue, the text itself presented a description and narration of the three different *allées* or paths for philosophy, three social allegories of separate but juxtaposed philosophical spaces: the “allée des épines” (Scholastic philosophy), the “allée des marronniers” (the social enlightener) and the “allées des fleurs” (libertinism). This philosophical fiction aimed at presenting to the reader three accounts, and also critiques, of the different ways a philosopher could occupy the social scene and practice philosophy.

Scholars have read Ariste and Cléobule's initial dialogue of the *Promenade* as a representation of two distinct social figures of the philosophes at the core of the

964 “Archives de la bastille 11671, f. 8” Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal qtd in Lough, *L'Encyclopédie* 18.

965 See Assézat “Notice Préliminaire,” Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes* 1: 173-175, Franco Venturi, *Jeunesse De Diderot: (1713-1753)* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1967) 108-119.

966 Wilson, *Diderot* 63-64.

967 Mitia Rioux-Beaulne, “Diderot face à la clandestinité: le cas de la *Promenade du sceptique*,” *La Lettre clandestine* 19 (2011): 98-99.

Enlightenment: Cléobule, the aristocrat or *libertin* retired in the countryside, in his philosophical garden and Ariste, the “militaire philosophe”. As Brewer showed, these two figures expressed in fact two different ways of relating to the public sphere: Cléobule, closer to the aristocratic 17th-century tradition, constructed a symbolic space for philosophy outside of the social world, that of the garden far from urban centers, one “in which philosophy can situate itself in relation to what is figured as outside it,” one where philosophy wants to entertain, at least ideally, a relation of exteriority to institutions and established powers; whereas Ariste, who was clearly a virtual spokesman for Diderot, was marked by social circulation and displacement, “moves between two spaces, which explains why the distinction between private and public is both more difficult for him to maintain and less desirable than for Cleobule.”⁹⁶⁸ We find in Diderot’s *Promenade* a representation of the ongoing tension or alternatives between the libertine and the social enlightener studied by Gumbrecht. Yet the dialogue between our two characters was not there just to thematize a social opposition or rather an evolution of philosophy, as the future of such a practice is clearly represented in Ariste.⁹⁶⁹ What was at stake, also, was the social nature of philosophical discourse itself: for Cléobule and libertinism in general there was, as Brewer noted, a “refusal to confront the possibility that [philosophy’s] exteriority is a fabrication, a paradoxical *hors-texte* that the text of philosophy itself invents, thereby reaffirming the disruptive power of all that it would retreat from,” as indeed Cléobule comes from “clio-bulla” “a sealed history or story that cannot or should not be told”.⁹⁷⁰ Ariste, on the opposite, defended a philosophy that would fully embrace and penetrate the public sphere, to become a rational point of reference from within and not from without. Aristo’s self-reflexive philosophical model sought to invent “a way of presenting knowledge that is better able to resist, counter, and situate other claims of knowledge, made in his own texts and his readers.”⁹⁷¹ The question posed, by Diderot’s lucid reflection, was that of the social status of the philosophical persona and his or her discourse in early modern France, of managing to situate socially each philosophical voice as the expression to a particular ethos or social intervention, and ultimately to create a philosophy which will fully embrace, not negate, its new form of public circulation and production, its enlarged dialogue with readers, its battlings with the rules and traps of the book’s political economy. As Rioux-Beaulne noted, Diderot developed a properly materialist requirement for philosophical writing: “il faut qu’un teste témoigne de ses conditions de production.”⁹⁷²

This attempt to contextualize knowledge and discourses was to be a trait of materialist philosophy shared by DuMarsais, La Mettrie, Diderot, and, later, Helvétius and D’Holbach. However if materialist philosophers shared this commitment for a public

968 Daniel Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-century France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 80.

969 Brewer sees in this dialogue the “thematic oppositions (age/ youth, private/public, wisdom/impetuosity, meditation/ activity, speech/writing, country/town, and knowledge/error).” Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment* 79.

970 Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment* 80, 81.

971 Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment* 83.

972 Rioux-Beaulne, “Diderot face à la clandestinité” 113.

and critical enlightenment and a refusal to subordinate their philosophical commitment to a mundane life, they developed different strategies for publication and circulation. La Mettrie and DuMarsais were closer to the libertine clandestine heritage, and even though they broke with the traditions of private circulation of manuscripts, their texts still contained the double doctrine or double enunciation proper to clandestine philosophy, one that required a careful decoding both of the message and the real position of the author from the reader. Everything was said in an indirect mode.⁹⁷³ Helvetius and D'Holbach, on the other hand, strived for the utmost clarity and transparency of their ideas, attempting to be conscious of where speaking from and were trying to achieve. They also produced less playful and less demanding texts for the reader. Diderot could be situated as an articulation between both models of enunciation. The *Encyclopédie*, for example, was on the one hand, one of the bold attempts to place philosophy in the midst of the urban public sphere, to socially and materially ground philosophy in the really existing debates of the bourgeois public sphere, those of art, science, political economy, trades, legislation, quarrels of corporations etc. as well as the theological and theoretical discussions. Philosophy was to emerge in the midst of that polyphony as a critical, reflective and self-reflective voice in that diverse constantly changing space. Yet at the same time, Diderot's *Encyclopédie* was also the place of a blurring of meanings and positions through the system of *renvois*, the occultation of critiques in seemingly banal articles, and the ironic tone in many orthodox claims. The work was also the inheritor of Bayle and Spinoza's philosophical critique.

Yet Diderot's dialogue presented a third feature, and that was its ability to turn the simple enunciation of a rule, here the rule of the order of discourse as Foucault put it, into a potential subversive act, a hidden provocation. Of the three exclusions structuring social discourse, Foucault started with the obvious one, the prohibition (*l'interdit*), which despite being the most obvious one, was also the most efficient:

“On sait bien qu'on n'a pas le droit de tout dire, qu'on ne peut pas parler de tout dans n'importe quelle circonstance, que n'importe qui, enfin, ne peut pas parler de n'importe quoi. Tabou de l'objet, rituel de la circonstance, droit privilégié ou exclusif du sujet qui parle: on a là le jeu de trois types d'interdits qui se croisent, se renforcent ou se compensent, formant une grille complexe qui ne cesse de se modifier.”⁹⁷⁴

What was forbidden in the 18th-century intellectual field was precisely a public debate about religion and politics. These two subjects were indeed the monopoly of the Church and the persona of the King; they belonged to those privileged political subjects and could not be appropriated by the *Tiers-Etat*. Politics and religion were not up for discussion. They resorted rather to the public practices of representation and ritual: that is to say the performance of a content with had no context, which always appeared as the unique manifestation of something transcendent, that language could not really grasp but just reproduce. Each society relegated to the level of the “interdit” the necessary symbolic constructions that could not stand the proof of public examination. In 18th-century France, to clearly state, as Diderot did, that there was a forbidden object of debate, was to

⁹⁷³ See Olivier Bloch, “Matérialisme et clandestinité: tradition, écriture, lecture,” *Matière à histoires* 273-286.

⁹⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) 11.

make visible what the public sphere wanted to hide. When Cléobule warned Ariste “la religion et le gouvernement sont des sujets sacrés auxquels il n’est pas permis de toucher... le plus sûr est d’obéir et de se taire, à moins qu’on n’ait trouvé dans les airs quelque point fixe hors la portée de leur traits, d’où l’on puisse leur annoncer la vérité,” Diderot was simply pointing out the existence of a taboo for public debate, which of course once named was able to be transgressed.⁹⁷⁵ By exhorting the philosophers to play by the rules, Cléobule voiced the ideals of a moderate Enlightenment, that of Voltaire, D’Alembert or Grimm, who believed that “il y a des préjugés dans lesquels il est important d’entretenir le peuple,” that is to say who secretly and knowingly were ready to enforce the existing “order of discourse” set by the political power to maintain its rule.⁹⁷⁶

Ariste responded to Cléobule, and it is Diderot speaking here, by making an apology for what Foucault called *parrhesia*: “si la vérité et la justice ne peuvent que gagner à mon examen, il est ridicule de me défendre d’examiner, ” “imposez-moi silence sur la religion et le gouvernement, et je n’aurai plus rien à dire.”⁹⁷⁷ The philosopher’s commitment to free speech could not be partial or regionalized, nor could it bear any kind of restriction or prohibition. It was there to subvert the order of discourse when necessary, to exhibit its hidden mechanisms. Foucault explained that the ancient notion of *parrhesia* or freedom of speech in the public sphere, which reemerged in the 18th century, was not a sort of freedom given to the orator, but one claimed and taken by him, against the rules and expectations, as an act of defiance and affirmation: “Someone is said to use parrhesia and merits consideration as a parrhesiastes only if there is a risk or danger for him or her in telling the truth.”⁹⁷⁸ I argue this form of public frankness, or *parrhesia*, incarnated a fundamental trait of materialist philosophy in early modern France, as the commitment to truth was linked to a social and moral obligation. In response to Cléobule’s tips on how a philosopher could make a name and reputation for himself or herself without taking any risk, targeting his publications to the right public and adapted to the political rules, privileging the manuscript over the printed books, and to his warnings for self preservation, Ariste responded: “je tâcherai (...) de faire un bon livre, et d’éviter la persécution.”⁹⁷⁹

975 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 181.

976 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 182. A similar attitude of verbalizing the rules structuring the economy of books was deployed by Diderot in his *Lettre sur le commerce de la librairie* (1763). See Colas Duflo, “Diderot and the Publicizing of Censorship,” *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment* ed. Laerke Mogens (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009) 121-135.

977 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 181, 184.

978 *Parrhesia* did not consist in sharing everything one thought, but that of telling the truth, speaking from an intimate conviction, even or particularly when it entails risks: “the fact that a speaker says something dangerous — different from what the majority believes— is a strong indication that he is a parrhesiastes.” It also referred to “a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says. For in parrhesia, the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion.” Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhēsia* (ed. Joseph Pearson. N.p.: n.p., 1985. Web 1 August 2014).

979 Diderot, *Promenade du sceptique*, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 185. Cléobule advised Ariste not to publish audacious manuscripts: “Ariste, si vous m’en croyez, vous préviendrez cet éclat, vous renfermerez votre manuscrit, et ne le communiquerez qu’à nos amis. Si vous êtes fâché du mérite de savoir écrire et penser, c’est un éloge qu’ils seront forcés de vous accorder. Mais si, un jaloux d’une réputation plus étendue, l’estime et la louange d’une petite société de philosophes ne vous suffisent pas, donnez un ouvrage que vous puissiez avouer. Occupez-vous d’un autre sujet, vous en trouverez mille pour un qui prêteront, et même davantage, à la légèreté de votre plume.” Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat)

This fictional discussion between Ariste and Cléobule was in fact the script for a real exchange in the years to come between Diderot and his fellow philosophers regarding the necessity to defend and protect the right of free speech. It first happened first in 1753 when he wrote the *Apologie de l'abbé de Prades* against the Jesuits and the proponents of a theological Enlightenment who were harassing Prades because of the relative audacity of his dissertation, and later in 1781, but this time against Grimm and the moderate Enlightenment who were ready to slander Raynal.⁹⁸⁰ The controversy began when Grimm and his friends attacked Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (1780) in his *Correspondance littéraire* in 1781, accusing Raynal of either being a coward for not signing his polemical work or of being crazy for publishing a work criticizing the monarchy, as this behavior seemed irrational and to compromise his happiness, peacefulness and security in his old age. Grimm's public reaction angered Diderot, who wrote his *Lettre Apologétique de l'Abbé Raynal à Monsieur Grimm* (1781) wherein he refuted that a philosopher who challenges power by speaking on political matters should be called crazy: "Comment sommes-nous sortis de la barbarie ? C'est qu'heureusement il s'est trouvé des hommes qui ont plus aimé la vérité qu'ils n'ont redouté la persécution. Certes ces hommes-là n'étaient pas des lâches. Les appellerons-nous des fous?"⁹⁸¹ In his apology for Raynal, Diderot again resorted to the references to Hellenistic philosophy:

"C'est ainsi qu'ont pensé les philosophes des écoles les plus opposées sous Tibère, sous Caligula, sous Néron; et ces philosophes-là n'étaient pas des fous... Ils ne coururent point après la louange; ils ne redoutèrent point la persécution; ils voulaient être utiles; ils voulaient dire la vérité; ils voulaient la dire fortement. Ils s'adressaient aux scélérats couronnés qui faisaient gémir tant d'innocents, aux imposteurs sacrés qui faisaient éclore tant d'imbéciles ou de furieux; et le bonheur ou le malheur qu'ils pouvaient attirer sur eux, la gloire ou le blâme qui pouvaient leur en revenir, étaient des choses qui, dans le moment du moins, ne les touchaient nullement et qui ne les auraient pas touchés davantage dans le moment de l'orage, s'ils avaient réuni le courage de l'âme à la force de l'esprit."⁹⁸²

Beyond defending Raynal, Diderot further criticized his colleagues who, like Grimm, behaved like servile philosophers, and degraded the figure of the public intellectual:

"Depuis que l'homme que la nature avait destiné à se distinguer dans la carrière des lettres, s'est réduit à la triste condition de serviteur des grands, son goût s'est perdu; il n'a plus que le petit esprit, que l'âme étroite et rampante de son nouvel état, et il donne le nom de déclamateur aux

1: 183. And he continues: "n'écrivez jamais s'il faut que vous vous perdiez par un écrit... il vaut mieux être mauvais auteur en repos, que bon auteur persécuté. Un livre qui dort, disait sensément un auteur d'ailleurs assez extravagant, ne fait mal à personne." Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 184-5.

980 On the Abbé de Prades *affaire* and Diderot's intervention, see Simone Goyard-Fabre, "Diderot et l'affaire de l'abbé de Prades," *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger* 174.3 (1984): 287:309.

981 Denis Diderot, *Lettre Apologétique de l'Abbé Raynal à Monsieur Grimm*, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1961) 628.

982 Diderot, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, 628-629.

hommes éloquents et hardis qui parlent avec quelque fierté à ses protecteurs.”⁹⁸³

4. Local Philosophy and Eclecticism

If we turn now to the *Promenade* itself, and to the mapping of the field with three different paths, Diderot contrasts a utopian unity of the *peuple philosophique* with a deepening fragmentation of philosophical practice. As Markovits reminded us, the park where all conversations occurred was a “lieu commun de la littérature clandestine,” and also the “lieu de l’amitié entre les sectes et l’amitié ne repose pas sur le consensus mais sur les différences,” and indeed in Cléobule’s park we find all of the philosophical positions: pyrrhonism, atheism, skepticism, spinozism, deism etc.⁹⁸⁴ Such an ideal philosophical society, where all positions enriched each other and the diversity of opinions was encouraged was possible because Cléobule established a certain ethos or philosophical practice:

“il n’a jamais exigé d’aucun qu’il conformât ses sentiments aux siens, et il ne les gêne non plus sur leurs goûts que sur leurs opinions: c’est là que j’ai vu le pyrrhonien embrasser le sceptique, le sceptique se réjouir des succès de l’athée, l’athée ouvrir sa bourse au déiste, le déiste faire des offres de service au spinosiste; en un mot toutes les sectes de philosophes rapprochées et unies par les liens de l’amitié. C’est là que résident la concorde, l’amour de la vérité, la vérité, la franchise et la paix; et c’est là que jamais ni scrupuleux, ni superstitieux, ni dévot, ni docteur, ni prêtre, ni moine n’a mis le pied.”⁹⁸⁵

The utopian philosophical garden of libertine philosophy is presented as one where the philosophical exchange does not need to achieve a communion of feelings, passions or tastes. It relies upon a disembodied intellectual relation, one where reason abstracts itself from its material, and social and emotional grounds. Yet this ideal garden is not presented by Diderot as a possible model, but rather as a lost paradise which is no longer possible to engage in the existing context of philosophy, as philosophical practice seemed inescapably tied to the debates and contradictions inhabiting the bourgeois urban sphere. This is why the *promenade* represents a diversity of philosophical positions, organized into three paths representing conflicting visions of the social function of the philosopher. The *allée des épines* is that occupied and led by the blind soldiers of God, the scholastic clerics of la Sorbonne who wear a blindfold and a white tunique representing the purity of their virtue and desire. This space or position associates the

983 Diderot, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, 631. Diderot praised not only Socrates and Aristotle, but also Montesquieu and Voltaire “et tant d’autres, parmi les anciens et les modernes, qui, plus jaloux de servir le monde, ou leur patrie, que de passer des jours tranquilles et obscurs dans leurs foyers, négligèrent leur fortune, leur vie, leur liberté, et même leur honneur, à votre avis ont été des sots, s’ils ont méconnu le péril auquel ils s’exposaient, des lâches, s’ils ont cru n’en courir aucun, ou des fous lorsqu’ils ont intrépidement attendu leur glorieuse et fatale destinée !” Diderot, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, 632-633.

984 Francine Markovits, “La Promenade su sceptique ou comment surprendre ses pensées,” *Le Décalogue sceptique: l’universel en question au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Hermann, 2011) 93.

985 Diderot, *Promenade du sceptique*, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 179.

practice of philosophy with pain and submission for it is one where philosophers subordinate their intellectual practice to a metaphysical and political authority, to suppress their desire in the name of a moral ideal. Above all, the *épines* clerics despised Enlightenment philosophers and were tasked with combating their ideas and chasing them out of the park. The *allée des fleurs*, which represents aristocratic sociability, the salons and the gentleman-philosopher, is presented as a more free and emancipated space for an independent philosophy, it is where the most extreme or radical positions are to be found, like atheism. But this space is also one marked by superficiality and frivolity: “on rit, on pleure dans le suns; on chante, on danse dans les autres; ailleurs l’on critique, l’on dispute, l’on crie, et la plupart du temps sans savoir pourquoi.”⁹⁸⁶ It is not a space dominated by a genuine philosophical desire, a true commitment to *parrhesia*, to truth and social enlightenment but a place where “la galanterie a fixé son empire.”⁹⁸⁷ The different philosophical positions, who seem to coexist peacefully, hide a fake harmony as they are able to do so because such positions are not really motivated, as philosophers are not really compelled to sustain, justify, and defend their arguments. As Markovits pointed out, there is there a critique of the aristocratic ethos as it represents a “peuple léger échappé de l’allée des épines, que son bandeau gêne beaucoup et qui se soucie peu de la blancheur de sa robe,” but where “toutes les relations d’amour et d’amitié sont sur le mode de la duplicité, mais sans dramatisation, sans culpabilité et dans une sorte d’amnésie heureuse.”⁹⁸⁸ Finally, the *allée des marronniers*, is that modeled on the old Academy, where philosophers were united by links of friendship and utility, where rational debate predominated, but also a space where no philosophical position emerged as more rational or evident. It was a practice of philosophy regulated or framed, implicitly, by the rule of skepticism. In the *Promenade*, it seems that it was only in such a space or practice that the authentic philosophical *parrhesia* can happen: one where philosophical discourse is not motivated by fear nor by particular interests, where there are no a priori taboos or prohibitions to limit the public use of reason, where no position subjugates another. The paradox then is that one can speak truly, that is to speak a truth, only when Truth is not at stake, when ultimately skepticism is the necessary conclusion of each philosophical confrontation. While these three paths present, each of them a different and competing direction for philosophy, a different meaning of its practice, it is then that there is a possible circulation between them, and to some extent, Diderot outlined an ideal trajectory, that of a philosophical education that starts in the *allée des épines* and ends on the skeptic position, that of the *marronniers*, which is the philosophical ethos to come, the one that can inhabit the new public sphere. We see here a figuration of Diderot’s eclecticism, which he would defend in his article “Eclecticism” for the *Encyclopédie*, and which constituted his particular expression of materialism as a necessarily provisional and contingent philosophy.

In the *Promenade* we do not see Diderot defending any particular position, not even the skeptical one, but rather skepticism as a social ethos, as a condition for public

986 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 236.

987 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 237.

988 Markovits, *Le Décalogue sceptique* 101.

debate. This conception of the public practice of philosophy is expressed throughout Diderot's work in his elaboration of a "local philosophy," that is to say a philosophy that finds its grounds somewhere, a situated discourse, which develops an internal coherence in multiple directions: of course that of form and content, but also that of the subject of enunciation with the object of enunciation, of the theoretical discourse with a consequent practice, and that of a social position and a social project. Yet it is also a local philosophy which refused abstract universal ambitions of a certain Enlightenment, that is to say the pretension of a truth that would be valid anywhere anytime for anyone. A practice which refuses the kind of anonymous and universal truth, that of the tribunal of the "public opinion" so much celebrated by many Enlightenment philosophers and scholars. Diderot borrowed the ideal of a local philosophy from the Hellenistic school, and from the epicurean libertine philosophers expressed in Cléobule: "J'ai compris que Cléobule s'était fait une sorte de philosophie locale; que toute sa campagne était animée et parlante pour lui; que chaque objet fournissait des pensées d'un genre particulier, et que les ouvrages de la nature étaient à ses yeux un livre allégorique où il lisait mille vérités qui échappaient au reste des hommes."⁹⁸⁹ Diderot wanted to recreate this internal cohesion of philosophy but also change its location, from the garden to the city, from the exteriority to society, to change its activity to one which happened *within* the public space and not outside or besides it. Philosophy does not need to find a new terrain for inspiration, a more exotic or surprising one, as the proper philosophical astonishment is to be produced by the radical transformation of the social and economic world. This one of the reasons why Diderot was never really attracted by the travel literature:

"Le sage a-t-il besoin de traverser les mers et de tenir registre des noms barbares et des penchants effrénés des sauvages, pour instruire des peuples policés? tout ce qui nous environne est un sujet d'observation. Les objets qui nous sont le plus familiers, peuvent être pour nous des merveilles; tout dépend du coup d'oeil. S'il est distrait, il nous trompe; s'il est perçant et réfléchi, il nous approche de la vérité."⁹⁹⁰

The project of developing a local philosophy was then, as Markovits noted "l'expression d'un lieu" socially and politically speaking, of what it mean to speak from somewhere, and it became since the *Promenade* a thread throughout Diderot's work.⁹⁹¹ By arguing for a local and not a universal philosophy Diderot did not renounce to anything of the materialist social project of Enlightenment. He just proposed to adjust its form, by privileging the relation of the text with its audience, that is to say the production of a qualitative rather than a quantitative effect. This is why I argue we can find in Diderot

989 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 180.

990 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 190.

991 "Le thème de la philosophie locale est un theme constant chez Diderot, qu'il s'agisse de la régionalisation des lois de la nature dans l'interprétation de la nature, des idiotismes de métier dans *Le neveu de Rameau*, de la géométrie des boutiques dans l'article "Art". Markovits, *Le Décalogue sceptique* 93. The idea of a local philosophy was based upon a particular conception of the world, one established by modern science and affirming a relative homogeneity of matter and well as its internal dynamism: "En physique expérimentale, on apprend à apercevoir les petits phénomènes dans les grands; de même qu'en physique rationnelle, on apprend à connaître les grands corps dans les petits." Diderot, *Essais sur l'interprétation de la nature*, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 189.

a true materialist pedagogy of philosophical writing and reading, as both need to be conceived together as a dual practice.

The Constitution of a Reader Figure

From the *Pensées* (1746) to the *Interprétations de la nature* (1753) and the *Encyclopédie* Diderot successively searched and experimented with the figure of the reader he wanted to produce in his philosophical texts. In the period from 1745-1749, Diderot early philosophical phase was dominated, before his more resolute turn to science, by metaphysical and moral preoccupations: Did God exist? Was virtue ensured by religions? etc.⁹⁹² As critics have noted, this initial period was that of an evolution from a Deist to a more Atheist position; however it was also an important exploratory moment in another equally important aspect: the search for a proper form of addressing the reader, of establishing his or her presence in the philosophical text. Diderot's materialist production was centered on the reader, and not the author; the accurate situation of the text for its reception was more important for him than the intellectual legitimation of the producer by his peers. In this sense Diderot's strange "translation" of Shaftesbury's *Essai sur le mérite et la vertu* (1745) presents interesting features. As Hobson noted "it is difficult to decide even whether it is actually his, for it is close to being a paraphrase of Shaftesbury," which shows that our author was not so concerned about clarifying the voice of the authorship as he was tortured by clarifying the proper address to his readership.⁹⁹³ The text indeed has two separate addresses to the reader written by Diderot, one title "À mon frère" and a second one labeled "Discours Préliminaire". While the first is more of a universal address, the second seems to concern only philosophers or specialists. The dedication "À mon frère" established a double bond with the reader, one of friendship and philosophy, and in both cases is an unidirectional offering to the latter: "Cet ouvrage sera donc, si vous voulez, un antidote destiné à réparer en moi un tempérament affaibli, et à entretenir en vous des forces encore entières. Agréez-le, je vous prie, comme le présent d'un philosophe et le gage d'amitié d'un frère."⁹⁹⁴ However, in the "Discours Préliminaire" Diderot adopted a more demanding, even aggressive tone towards the reader: "quiconque n'a pas la force ou le courage de suivre un raisonnement étendu, peut se dispenser d'en commencer la lecture [de l'ouvrage]; c'est pour d'autres que j'ai travaillé."⁹⁹⁵ The "Discours" did not target a universal public but rather the young fellow who "au sortir de son cours de philosophie, est jeté dans un monde d'athées, de désites, de sociniens, de spinosites et d'autres impies," that is to say, the students who were breaking with scholastic education and entering the intellectual sphere but were suddenly confronted and puzzled by a diversity of positions.⁹⁹⁶ While the first address is

992 See Franco Venturi, *Jeunesse De Diderot: (1713-1753)* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1967).

993 Marian Hobson, "Diderot's Earlier Philosophical Writings," *New Essays on Diderot*, ed. James Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) 32.

994 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1:9.

995 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1:16.

996 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1:12.

presented as a gift, the second one requires a serious commitments from the reader, that of an attentive and prolonged reading.

A similar and even harsher tone can be found in the address of *Pensées philosophiques* and later the *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* (1751).⁹⁹⁷ The *Pensées*, however, present a first reflection on the status of philosophical discourse: “J’écris de Dieu; je compte sur peu de lecteurs, et n’aspire qu’à quelques suffrages. Si ces *Pensées* ne plaisent à personne, elles pourront n’être que mauvaises; mais je les tiens pour détestables, si elles plaisent à tout le monde.”⁹⁹⁸ Brewer read this address to the reader in the *Pensées* as the expression of “paranoid fear of improper reading,” and as constituting “exclusionary gesture” “an ideal reader-philosophe de-legitimizes all other kinds of reading”.⁹⁹⁹ In the end, this first Diderot was, for Brewer, more interested in a “monologue of truth” one “suppressing the dialogical within itself”.¹⁰⁰⁰ While it is easy to read the incipit of the *Pensées* like Brewer did, as a restrictive assertion which excluded any reader that was not yet a philosopher, one can maybe make a double reading of Diderot’s initial sentence “J’écris de Dieu” and therefore of the whole address, for the preposition “de” indicates both the subject and the origin of discourse. If this address is to be read as one coming from God, as a representation of a certain discursive regime of philosophy, that of Scholasticism where reason is founded on a metaphysical authority which can dispense from its audience, then the whole address is rather ironic. Such an authoritarian position, which claims not to need the approval of public opinion but just the understanding of a selected few, the priests and doctors who can interpret the word of God, is to be soon dismantled by the tone and formal composition of the *Pensées* themselves, which can be read then as a way of undoing such a discursive regime. In any case, it is clear that in the *Pensées philosophiques* the reader is presented with a pure performance, and left lost and unable to find a point of reference, to unveil the true intentions of the authors towards him or her as towards religion, which explains the multiple and contradictions interpretations scholars have produced of such a text.

It is clear in that in the 1750s Diderot operated a change and found maybe a first voice, partially inspired by the reception of Locke in France and the development of a rational and sensuous psychology by Condillac in his *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (1746). The address to the reader in the *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature* has a very different tone, as it targets the “jeunes gens qui se disposent à l’étude de la philosophie naturelle”:

“Jeune homme, prends et lis. Si tu peux aller jusqu’à la fin de cet ouvrage,

997 “Il y a, je le répète, des lecteurs dont je ne veux ni ne voudrais jamais; je n’écris que pour ceux avec qui je serais bien aise de m’entretenir. J’adresse mes ouvrages aux philosophes; il n’y a guere d’autres hommes au monde pour moi.” Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1: 414-15. This address can be also read the proposal of a philosophical constitution or an invitation: in the Enlightenment ideal Diderot defended, and by distinction to the scholastic and aristocratic practices of philosophy, one becomes a philosopher by being a reader of philosophy, by establishing with philosophical books and ideas a relationship of reciprocal honesty and exigence.

998 Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1:128.

999 Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment* 75-76.

1000 Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment* 77.

tu ne seras pas incapable d'en entendre un meilleur. Comme je me suis moins proposé de t'insruire que de t'exercer, il m'importe peu que tu adoptes mes idées ou que tu les rejettes, pourvu qu'elles emploient toute ton attention. Un plus habile t'apprendra à connaître les forces de la nature; il me suffira de t'avoir fait essayer les tiennes. Adieu.”¹⁰⁰¹

Diderot here completely changed his tone and goal, abandoning the classic precept of *placere* and *docere*, of exposing the “order of reasons” to the reader, in order to resuscitate, like La Mettrie did, the notion of philosophy as an exercise not only for the writer but first of all for the reader. The text is to function as a non-intentional surface where the reader is to find his or her marks, to try out his or her ideas and hypothesis. By the *Pensées sur l'interprétation* de la nature Diderot had operated a rejection of any authoritative philosophical voice as an insolent one:

“Insolent: qui se croit et ne cache point qu'il se croit plus grand que les autres. Un sauvage ni un philosophe ne sçauroient être *insolens*. Le sauvage ne voit autour de lui que ses égaux. Le philosophe ne sent pas sa supériorité sur les autres, sans les plaindre, et il s'occupe à descendre modestement jusqu'à eux. Quel est donc l'homme *insolent*? c'est celui qui dans la société a des meubles et des équipages, et qui raisonne à peu près ainsi. J'ai cent mille écus de rente; les dix - neuf vingtièmes des hommes n'ont pas mille écus, les autres n'ont rien. Les premiers sont donc à mille degrés au - dessous de moi; le reste en est à une distance infinie. D'après ce calcul il manque d'égards à tout le monde, de peur d'en accorder à quelqu'un...Il y a l'*insolence* de la grandeur; l'*insolence* littéraire. Toutes consistent à exagérer les avantages de son état, et à les faire valoir d'une manière outrageante pour les autres. Un homme supérieur qui illustre son état, ne songe pas à s'en glorifier, c'est la pauvre ressource des subalternes.”¹⁰⁰²

Indeed the article “Insolent” of the *Encyclopédie* Diderot outlined the negative image of the philosopher, one which would be found again in the *Neveu de Rameau*. It is clear that in 1750 Diderot operates a conscious distancing from the preceptorial position for the philosophers towards the reader in the classical philosophical forms of the treatise and order organized expositions, which was also a break with the analytical method of exposition theorized by Descartes and Locke, as they only offered to the reader a signposted itinerary, always under the control of he who “possessed” the knowledge, but nothing of a wandering, a promenade, a park or a labyrinth where the reader could get lost and benefit from such a reading experience.

To this new conception of a philosophical voice that does not want to convince or exposure the proper order of thoughts, Diderot further explored the form of the *pensée*, before turning to the letters and dialogues, that is to say deciding to experiment with more open dialogical textual forms for philosophy. The first *pensée* of the *Interpretation de la nature* read as follows: "C'est de la nature que je vais écrire. Je laisserai les pensées se succéder sous ma plume, dans l'ordre même selon lequel les objets se sont offerts à ma

1001 Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, *Oeuvres philosophiques* 175.

1002 Diderot, “Insolent” *Encyclopédie*.

reflexion; parce qu'elles n'en représenteront que mieux les mouvements et la marche de mon esprit." ¹⁰⁰³ As Brewer noted, Diderot's position is to publicly contest a "transcendental position from which to survey, master, and comprehend nature" both for the writer and the reader. ¹⁰⁰⁴ Nature is a matter of experience: it needs to be apprehended from "within", as does any philosophical text. It is understood not by following orders and indication, but by examining the seemingly disorganized matter and collections of thoughts, requiring an active reader that seeks to make and unmake connections, fill gaps and detect contradictions. Since the *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* Diderot never ceased to appeal to a reader-interpreter he sought to provoke, confuse and question, as it became most famously the case with *Jacques le Fataliste et son maître*. This configuration of a new reader figure occurred simultaneously with a deeper one that Quintili summarized as the transition of a conception of truth as *adequation* to one of truth as a *process*, and the development of a new form of critical philosophy. ¹⁰⁰⁵

Diderot's philosophical address became, nevertheless, inhabited by a two developing dilemma or antinomies he never was able to fully resolve. In fact our author was very well aware of the wide diversity of reading public and levels of instruction, and despite being an adamant defender of a new secular and truly public system of education, he had to operate with the existing social reality of his readership, and not with an ideal one to come. ¹⁰⁰⁶ Diderot expressed in the *Encyclopédie* the need to popularize philosophy by targeting the "middle reader" and emphasized the editorial work he practiced as also a part of the philosophical enterprise, as it had to do with adjusting the text to the audience:

"Un Editeur qui aura de l'expérience, et qui sera maître de lui - même, se placera dans la *classe moyenne des esprits*. Si la nature l'avoit élevé au rang des premiers génies, et qu'il n'en descendit jamais; conversant sans cesse avec les hommes de la plus grande pénétration, il lui arriveroit de considérer les objets d'un point de vue où la *multitude* ne peut atteindre. Trop au - dessus d'elle, l'ouvrage deviendroit obscur pour trop de monde. Mais s'il se trouvoit malheureusement, ou s'il avoit la complaisance de s'abaisser fort au - dessous; les matieres traitées comme pour des imbécilles deviendroient longues et fastidieuses. Il considérera donc le Monde comme son école, et le *Genre humain comme son pupile*; et il dictera des leçons qui ne fassent pas perdre aux bons esprits un tems précieux, et qui ne rebutent point la foule des esprits ordinaires. Il y a deux classes d'hommes, à - peu -

1003 Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, *Oeuvres philosophiques* 177.

1004 Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment* 89.

1005 See Paolo Quintili, "De la vérité comme adaequatio à la vérité comme processus dans la philosophie de Diderot," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 30 (2001): 17-33 and *La Pensée critique de Diderot: Matérialisme, science et poésie à l'âge de l'Encyclopédie, 1742-1782* (Paris: Champion, 2001).

1006 In his *Plan d'une université pour le gouvernement de Russie* (1775), Diderot famously stated: "Qu'est ce qu'une Université? Une université est une école dont la porte est ouverte indistinctement à tous les enfants d'une nation, et où des maîtres stipendiés par l'État les initient à la connaissance élémentaire de toutes les sciences. Je dis indistinctement parce qu'il serait aussi cruel qu'absurde de condamner à l'ignorance les conditions subalternes de la société. Dans toutes il est des connaissances dont on ne saurait être privé sans conséquence." Diderot, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 3: 443. On the debates on public education emerging in the 1760's see Roland Mortier, "The "Philosophes" and Public Education," *Yale French Studies* 40, *Literature and Society: Eighteenth Century* (1968): 62- 76.

près également étroites, qu'il faut également négliger. Ce sont les génies transcendans et les imbécilles, qui n'ont besoin de maîtres ni les uns ni les autres."¹⁰⁰⁷ [emphasis added]

Diderot's philosophical arithmetic of the *Encyclopédie* proposed to target the middle reader so the work would have the widest audience possible. Furthermore, the more difficult and theoretical matters had to be adjusted and rendered attractive: "plus les matieres seront abstraites, plus il faudra s'efforcer de les mettre à la portée de tous les lecteurs."¹⁰⁰⁸ The way the *Encyclopédie* and philosophy in general could accomplish that was by presenting philosophy as a *useful* knowledge, by explaining its social utility: "Il n'y a qu'un seul moyen de rendre la philosophie vraiment recommandable aux yeux du vulgaire: c'est de la lui montrer accompagnée de l'utilité. Le vulgaire demande toujours: à quoi cela sert-il ? et il ne faut jamais se trouver dans le cas de lui répondre: à rien".¹⁰⁰⁹ Yet Diderot immediately added that showing philosophy's "utility" to the people mean adopting a purely practical and instrumental or technical vision of it. It emans to be aware of the conditions of reception of a majority that is not "enlightented" yet, that is, "aveugle".

This reference to "utility" in order to expand the philosophical Enlightenment to a popular public can be better understood by referring back to the dialogue of the philosopher and the blind in the *Lettre sur les aveugles*, where the people would be an analogous figure to the *aveugle*: not as the one who is deprived—or worse, incapable—of knowledge, but the one who has developed an entirely different practical and sensous relation to the world, has derived differently similar ideas from experience and thus has developed a different moral and metaphysical system. In the letter he sent to to Voltaire regarding his concerns about the *Lettre*, Diderot was not looking as much to convince his peer of Saunderson's atheism as to insist on the need to establish a ground of dialogue:

"Le sentiment de Saunderson n'est pas plus mon sentiment que le vôtre; mais ce pourrait bien être parce que je vois. Ces rapports qui nous frappent si vivement n'ont pas le même éclat pour un aveugle: il vit dans une obscurité perpétuelle; et cette obscurité doit ajouter beaucoup de force pour lui à ses raisons métaphysiques. C'est ordinairement pendant la nuit que s'élèvent les vapeurs qui obscurcissent en moi l'existence de Dieu; le lever du soleil les dissipe toujours; mais les ténèbres durent pour un aveugle, et le soleil ne se lève que pour ceux qui voient. Il ne faut pas que vous imaginiez que Saunderson dût apercevoir ce que vous eussiez aperçu à sa place: vous ne pouvez vous substituer à personne sans changer totalement l'état de la question."¹⁰¹⁰

Experimental philosophy was to develop a social utility and a practical dimension of its own, separate from that of trades, arts and sciences, but "[le peuple] ne sait pas que ce qui éclaire le philosophe et ce qui sert au vulgaire sont deux choses fort différentes,

1007 Diderot, "Encyclopédie", *Encyclopédie*.

1008 Diderot, "Encyclopédie", *Encyclopédie*.

1009 Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interpétation de la nature, Oeuvres philosophiques* 191.

1010 Denis Diderot, "Lettre à Voltaire 11 juin 1749," *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 19: 420.

puisque l'entendement du philosophe est souvent éclairé par ce qui nuit, et obscurci par ce qui sert."¹⁰¹¹ Nonetheless, this new social utility of philosophy was of a kind yet to be constituted by the creation of a new kind of philosophical people or "ligue philosophique", through a rearticulation of manual and intellectual labor and a more wide discussion of the place and function of knowledge in the existing social division of labor:

"L'intérêt de la vérité demanderait que ceux qui réfléchissent daignassent enfin s'associer à ceux qui se remuent, afin que le spéculatif fût dispensé de se donner du mouvement; que le manoeuvre eut un but dans ses mouvements infinis qu'il se donne; que tous nos efforts se trouvassent réunis et dirigés en même temps contre la résistance de la nature; et que, dans cette espèce de ligue philosophique, chacun fit le rôle qui lui convient."¹⁰¹²

Diderot's philosophical project considered a new kind of public and time for philosophy, no longer the aristocratic leisure time, but the labor time of the people and Tiers-Etat, and wondered not only how to simply appeal to this new and previously neglected public, but also how to develop with it a new philosophy. However this project was at odds with another of his deep preoccupations: the question of philosophical invention and the *homme de génie*, that is to say, the minority of men who make intellectual history, their singularity and their talent. The question of the genius, of the extraordinary man, who surpassed his contemporaries and the nature of their talent was a problem for materialist philosophers who sought to derive ideas from sensation and at the same time observed a wide diversity of the results of nature in terms of creativity, intelligence and so on and so forth. That was a problem that Diderot first mentioned in the *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* but fully embraced and explored in his never published *Neveu de Rameau*, maybe because he was unwilling to publicize his own doubts and hesitations on this question.¹⁰¹³

5. The Form of Materialist Enlightenment: Metaphors and Skecthes

Diderot's concern for philosophical form has been usually studied as his preference for polyphonic texts and dialogical forms where a particular kind of *maieutique* is enabled, not one following the Platonic model with a teacher and a student, but more often with aporetic dialogues which do not attempt to convince the reader of one side or allow any kind of identification with a superior reason. Although this is a fundamental aspect of Diderot's formal expression, I would like to present and discuss here one which has attracted less attention: the philosophical dimension and powers of

1011 Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interpétation de la nature*, *Oeuvres philosophiques* 191.

1012 Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interpétation de la nature*, *Oeuvres philosophiques* 177-178.

1013 "Comment cet esprit se communique-t-il ? Il faudrait que celui qui en est possédé descendît en lui-même pour reconnaître distinctement ce que c'est, substituer au démon familier des notions intelligibles et claires, et les développer aux autres. S'il trouvait, par exemple, que c'est une facilité de supposer ou d'apercevoir des oppositions ou des analogies, qui a sa source dans une connaissance pratique des qualités physiques des êtres considérés solitairement, ou de leurs effets réciproques, quand on les considère en combinaison, il étendrait cette idée; il l'appuierait d'une infinité de faits qui se présenteraient à sa mémoire; ce serait une histoire fidèle de toutes les extravagances apparentes qui lui ont passe par la tête." Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interpétation de la nature*, *Oeuvres philosophiques* 197.

metaphors, which in the *Lettre sur les aveugles* he labeled as “expression heureuses”:

“Mais qu’entendez-vous par des expressions heureuses? me demanderez-vous peut-être. Je vous répondrai, madame, que ce sont celles qui sont propres à un sens, au toucher, par exemple, et qui sont métaphoriques en même temps à un autre sens, comme aux yeux; d’où il résulte une double lumière pour celui à qui l’on parle, la lumière vraie et directe de l’expression, et la lumière réfléchie de la métaphore.”¹⁰¹⁴

The metaphor was conceptualized as reflected light “lumière réfléchie” and thus a “lumière double” which refers back to La Mettrie view of philosophy as a mirror and in the indirect means of philosophy and the invocation of the powers of imagination and analogy. Diderot borrows La Mettrie’s idea that social enlightenment is not just a question of appealing to the *lumières naturelles* but requires a degree of artificial composition. This aspect of Diderot’s aesthetic philosophy has been recently revalued by Ibrahim who explained that, given the disorder of nature, the metaphor was the only form capable of seizing an image of totality, derived by experience, and to present it as a false representation, as the product of human imagination, allowing a “libre enquête sur l’idée de matière que serait cette ‘sciences des idées’ débarrassée des scories de l’abstraction.”¹⁰¹⁵ Instead of convoquing the first *Critique* to understand Diderot’s critical materialism, as Quintili, Duflo but also to some extent implicitly Bourdin did, Ibrahim appealed to the third, presenting philosophical judgement as closer to the judgement of taste than to that of cognition:

“Au paragraphe 49 de la *Critique de la faculté de juger*, Kant exalte dans la métaphore l’élan pour penser qu’elle donne à l’imagination et le ‘principe vivifiant en l’esprit’ qui ‘place sous un concept une représentation de l’imagination qui appartient à sa présentation, mais qui donne par elle-même bien plus à penser que ce qui peut être compris dans un concept détermine.’ L’audace de Diderot est de produire la version matérialiste de ce programme du jugement réfléchissant.”¹⁰¹⁶

Diderot’s preference for a metaphorical, rather than a conceptual expression, built upon analogies resulting from experience, is not regulated by mimetism, but as Ibrahim argues, by a “connivence” between “l’enchaînement des idées et les chaînons des êtres matériels,” and it is related back to the project of “construire en philosophie une idée métaphorique de la matière.”¹⁰¹⁷ The metaphor allowed constructing instead of a system, “une libre enquête sur l’idée de matière.”¹⁰¹⁸ This is why, in Ibrahim but also in Stenger’s view, Diderot’s metaphors are always fluid or plastic ones, because they want to convey that internal and changing nature of matter and are to be seen opposed to the metaphor of the machine or the clock preferred by LM. Ibrahim interpreted most of Diderot’s

1014 Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles*, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1:371.

1015 Ibrahim, *Diderot* 100.

1016 Annie Ibrahim, “Matière des métaphores, métaphores de la matière.” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 26 (1999) 128.

1017 Ibrahim, “Matière des métaphores” 101, 100.

1018 Ibrahim, *Diderot* 100.

metaphors of nature (the spider web, the beehive or the mussel and in particular the “pépinière” of human polypes in the *Rêve de D’Alembert*) as different aspects or fictional representation of nature’s plasticity as thus as the “exacte antithèse de la métaphore de l’horloge,” as his metaphors presented “la matière est saisie comme une énergie plastique capable de métamorphoses, de reproduction par boutures et greffes spontanées, de retournement et inversions; elle est aussi saisie comme unité problématique.”¹⁰¹⁹ For Stenger too:

“nous sommes à mille lieues de l’univers horloge... l’univers n’est pas une machine, car une machine est finie et douée de stabilité... Une machine, enfin, est solide alors que l’univers selon Diderot est un système fluctuant qui intègre le changement perpétuel... Avec l’atome se construit une mécanique des solides, tandis que la mécanique des fluides est basée sur les molécules vivantes et leurs formes changeantes.”¹⁰²⁰

And while I think both critics are right in seeing the philosophical meaning of those fictions and metaphors, I think it is necessary to specify that, given that materialism is not a philosophy of matter, the choice of metaphors rather than concepts to embody and carry forward materialist philosophy cannot be solely, nor even primarily, explained through adequation between content and form. Metaphors are not only the most accurate way to represent an ever-changing world, or better convey the nature of the world. The emphasis on metaphors and sketches does not have to do with the nature of matter itself, but with the nature of the *forms* of representation, the nature of the thought process itself, which is always already embodied, and can never reach this idealized full abstraction. Rather than seeking to purify language in order to achieve a transparent conceptual clarity, Diderot proposed to surprise our own thought in the very form they appeared, and to reflect upon the nature of the metaphors (in particular the metaphors of nature, but also those of enlightenment or “communication” philosophy displayed). In the *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* (1751) Diderot reminded the reader that language had a sensuous dimension, that “les pensées s’offrant à notre esprit... pour ainsi dire tout habillées,” and thus that what was perceived to be the philosopher’s “instrument” had a life of its own.¹⁰²¹ The *Rêve de D’Alembert* he pushed further the materialist conception of language, and the coextensivity of language and thought, and proposed to thematize what had been already the practice of Diderot’s dialogical *décentrement* of the narrative voice and authorship, qualifying the ideal of a “philosophical subject” which takes nature as its “object”. In the *Rêve*, the philosopher himself is presented as a sensuous instrument and not as a subject:

1019 Ibrahim, “Matière des métaphores” 101.

1020 Gerhardt Stenger, “Matière et vie chez Diderot et Voltaire” 14-15. “Nous sommes à mille lieues de l’univers horloge, où chaque élément reste à sa place et remplit la fonction qui lui a été assignée par le Créateur. L’univers n’est pas une machine, car une machine est finie et douée de stabilité, elle a été créée dans un but précis et s’achemine vers une fin prévisible. Une machine, enfin, est solide alors que l’univers selon Diderot est un système fluctuant qui intègre le changement perpétuel... Ce n’est pas sans raison que Diderot préfère d’ordinaire le terme de molécule à celui d’atome. L’atome, concept physique, est indivisible, donc solide et immuable. La molécule, en revanche, concept chimique, est une entité provisoire, donc sujette à une dissolution et une recombinaison perpétuelles. Avec l’atome se construit une mécanique des solides, tandis que la mécanique des fluides est basée sur les molécules vivantes et leurs formes changeantes.”

1021 Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets*, *Oeuvres* (Assézat) 1:353.

“L’instrument philosophe est sensible; il est en même temps le musicien et l’instrument. Comme sensible, il a la conscience momentanée du son qu’il rend; comme animal, il en a la mémoire. Cette faculté organique, en liant les sons en lui-même, y produit et conserve la mélodie. Supposez au clavecin de la sensibilité et de la mémoire, et dites-moi s’il ne se répétera pas de lui-même les airs que vous aurez exécutés sur ses touches. Nous sommes des instruments doués de sensibilité et de mémoire. Nos sens sont autant de touches qui sont pincées par la nature qui nous environne, et qui se pincent souvent elles-mêmes; et voici, à mon jugement, tout ce qui se passe dans un clavecin organisé comme vous et moi.”¹⁰²²

From this perspective, the recourse to metaphors is to be seen as the preference for an *aesthetic form of expression*, one that would appeal to imagination, sensibility and memory and not just to understanding, in order to move, connect or activate the keys of human mind. A text that would only appeal to understanding and reflection only, would not only face a considerable obstacle for communication, but defeating the purpose of enlightening naturalist philosophy which is to restore the whole experience and capacity of the human mind.

In this sense, it is important to consider that metaphors were not the only form of expression Diderot considered. Particularly in his art criticism in the 1767 *Salon* Diderot reflected on the aesthetic nature of sketches and representations of ruins, interrogating why often a painting or *tableau*, that is a finished representation of nature was less appealing to the human mind than unachieved ones: “L’esquisse ne nous attache peut-être si fort que parce qu’étant indéterminée, elle laisse plus de liberté à notre imagination, qui y voit tout ce qui lui plaît,” and he continued:¹⁰²³

“L’esquisse ne nous attaché peut-être si fort, que parce qu’étant indéterminée, elle laisse plus de liberté à notre imagination, qui y voit tout ce qu’il lui plaît. C’est l’histoire des enfant qui regardent les nuées, et nous le sommes tous plus ou moins. C’est le cas de la musique vocale et de la musique instrumentale. Nous entendons ce que dit celle-là, nous faisons dire à celle-ci ce que nous voulons.”¹⁰²⁴

Diderot really entered into a kind of ecstasy when contemplating Robert’s sketches because of their incompleteness was a direct appeal to imagination: “quatre lignes perpendiculaires, et voilà quatre belles colonnes... les vraies proportions sont

1022 Denis Diderot, *Le Rêve de d’Alembert, Oeuvres* (Assézat), 2:124.

1023 Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1767, Oeuvres* (Assézat) 11:245.

1024 Diderot, *Salon de 1767, Oeuvres* (Assézat) 11:246. We find the same idea in Diderot’s description of Greuze’s sketch “La mère bien-aimée” two years earlier, in the *Salon* of 1765: “Les esquisses ont communément un feu que le tableau n’a pas. C’est le moment de chaleur de l’artiste, la verve pure, sans aucun mélange de l’appât que la réflexion met à tout; c’est l’âme du peintre qui se répand librement sur la toile. La plume du poète, le crayon du dessinateur habile, ont l’air de courir et de se jouer. La pensée rapide caractérise d’un trait. Or plus l’expression des arts est vague, plus l’imagination est à l’aise. Il faut entendre dans la musique vocale ce qu’elle exprime. Je fais dire à une symphonie bien faite, presque ce qui me plaît; et comme je sais mieux que personne la manière de m’affecter, par l’expérience que j’ai de mon propre cœur, il est rare que l’expression que je donne aux sons, analogue à ma situation actuelle, sérieuse, tendre ou gaie, ne me touche plus qu’une autre qui serait à mon choix. Il en est à peu près de même de l’esquisse et du tableau. Je vois dans le tableau une chose prononcée; combien dans l’esquisse y supposé-je de choses qui y sont à peine annoncées!” Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1765, Oeuvres* (Assézat) 351-352

données, l'imagination fait le reste," "le mouvement, l'action, la passion meme sont indiqués par quelques traits caractéristiques; et mon imagination fait le reste, je suis inspiré par le soufflé divin de l'artiste."¹⁰²⁵ For Diderot the sketch was the production of the *homme de génie*, and not of the regular man, such was the ability to perceive and articulate hidden analogies in nature he referred to in the *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*: l'esquisse est l'ouvrage de la chaleur et du génie; et le tableau, l'ouvrage du travail, de la patience, des longues études et d'une expérience consommée de l'art."¹⁰²⁶ This genius or talent is to be understood though, in the sense of a higher sensibility, of a capacity to let oneself go to passion, experience, desire, something close to La Mettrie's *volupté*, and still keep a high degree of lucidity.¹⁰²⁷

The problem of philosophical Enlightenment, from a materialist perspective, was then the text's ability to move, to convince the reader or spectator, which cannot be accomplished simply by a well-developed argument. The clarity of rational critique and the establishment of analogies and logical arguments was not enough, and towards the end of his life, in particular after 1765, Diderot seems to be more convinced that the form of materialist critique was equally important or even more than the content of the arguments themselves. When philosophy was presented to the reader in the form of a tableau or a system, that is to say, by analogy, as an "experience consommée" of thought, it lost its efficacy as it could not touch or move its audience. In this sense, we find in Diderot's esthetics also a conscious doubt of the metaphor as an expression form, because it can easily be reified, or become a "style figure" which loses its inner life: "Aussitôt qu'on s'est accommodé d'un certain style figuré, d'une certaine langue qu'on appelle poétique; aussitôt qu'on a fait parler des hommes en vers, et en vers-très-harmonieux; aussitôt qu'on s'est écarté de la vérité, qui sait où on s'arrêtera? Le grand homme n'est pas celui qui fait vrai, c'est celui qui sait le mieux concilier le mensonge avec la vérité."¹⁰²⁸

1025 Diderot, *Salon de 1767, Oeuvres* (Assézat) 11:254.

1026 Diderot, *Salon de 1767, Oeuvres* (Assézat) 11:245.

1027 "Dans les transports violents de la passion, l'homme supprime les liaisons, commence une phrase sans la finir, laisse échapper un mot, pousse un cri, et se tait. La passion ne fait que des esquisses." *Salon de 1767, Oeuvres* (Assézat) 11:254

1028 Diderot, *Salon de 1767, Oeuvres* (Assézat) 11:254.

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Compared distribution of the occurrence of words « matérialiste », « matérialisme », « idéaliste », « idéalisme » in the *Journal des Savants*.

18 th Century											
	1700-09	1710-19	1720-29	1730-39	1740-49	1750-59	1760-69	1770-70	1780-89	1790-99	% Total
Matérialiste	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Matérialisme	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	2
Idéaliste	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Idéalisme	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0

19 th Century											
	1800-09	1810-19	1820-29	1830-39	1840-49	1850-59	1860-69	1870-70	1880-89	1890-99	% Total
Matérialiste	-	-	-	-	-	2	3	2	4	4	15
Matérialisme	-	1	3	-	3	4	6	5	6	4	32
Idéaliste	-	-	-	-	1	-	3	3	5	6	18
Idéalisme	-	2	-	-	3	-	6	6	7	5	29

Compared distribution of the occurrence of words « matérialiste », « matérialisme », « idéaliste », « idéalisme » in the FRANTEXT database.

18 th Century											
	1700-09	1710-19	1720-29	1730-39	1740-49	1750-59	1760-69	1770-70	1780-89	1790-99	% Total
Matérialiste	-	-	-	1	-	-	2	9	12	2	26/481
Matérialisme	-	-	-	2	2	12	12	10	2	5	45/738
Idéaliste	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0/536
Idéalisme	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	2/912

19 th Century											
	1800-09	1810-19	1820-29	1830-39	1840-49	1850-59	1860-69	1870-70	1880-89	1890-99	% Total
Matérialiste	5	13	5	14	33	17	28	7	12	16	150/481
Matérialisme	4	15	26	27	57	13	40	16	14	5	228/738
Idéaliste	1	19	19	1	9	4	22	8	22	23	128/536
Idéalisme	1	17	32	33	22	7	17	5	21	25	184/912

20 th Century												
	1900-09	1910-19	1920-29	1930-39	1940-49	1950-59	1960-69	1970-70	1980-89	1990-99	2000-10	% Total
Matérialiste	8	10	42	85	45	34	30	15	21	10	6	306/481
Matérialisme	7	15	53	115	99	53	47	27	26	9	14	475/738
Idéaliste	27	21	75	85	60	55	19	16	20	18	13	408/536
Idéalisme	65	64	123	169	146	49	55	16	11	20	4	726/912