The Atheist’s Bible
Diderot and the Éléments de physiologie
Caroline Warman

In offering the first book-length study of the ‘Éléments de physiologie’, Warman raises the stakes high: she wants to show that, far from being a long-unknown draft, it is a powerful philosophical work whose hidden presence was visible in certain circles from the Revolution on. And it works! Warman’s study is original and stimulating, a historical investigation that is both rigorous and fascinating.

—François Pépin, École normale supérieure, Lyon

This is high-quality intellectual and literary history, the erudition and close argument suffused by a wit and humour Diderot himself would surely have appreciated.

—Michael Moriarty, University of Cambridge

In ‘The Atheist’s Bible’, Caroline Warman applies deft, tenacious and often wittily textual detective work to the case, as she explores the shadowy passage and influence of Diderot’s materialist writings in manuscript samizdat-like form from the Revolutionary era through to the Restoration.

—Colin Jones, Queen Mary University of London

‘Love is harder to explain than hunger, for a piece of fruit does not feel the desire to be eaten’: Denis Diderot’s Éléments de physiologie presents a world in flux, turning on the relationship between man, matter and mind. In this late work, Diderot delves playfully into the relationship between bodily sensation, emotion and perception, and asks his readers what it means to be human in the absence of a soul.

The Atheist’s Bible challenges prevailing scholarly views on Diderot’s Éléments, asserting its contemporary philosophical importance and prompting its readers to inspect more closely this little-known and little-studied work. This book is accompanied by a digital edition of Jacques-André Naigeon’s Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de Denis Diderot (1823), a work which, Warman argues, represents the first publication of Diderot’s Éléments, long before its official publication date of 1875.

The Atheist’s Bible constitutes a major contribution to the field of Diderot studies, and is of further interest to scholars and students of materialist natural philosophy in the Age of Enlightenment and beyond.
L’amour est plus difficile à expliquer que la faim: car le fruit n’éprouve pas le désir d’être mangé.¹

Love is harder to explain than hunger, for a piece of fruit does not feel the desire to be eaten.

Love is more difficult to explain than hunger, or so says the eighteenth-century *philosophe* and explainer of difficult things, Denis Diderot. How could we disagree? Hunger is probably a more fundamental physiological need than the complex set of feelings called love. Even if the comparison nudges us to see love in terms of another physiological need, lust and the drive to procreate, we would probably still agree that it is harder to explain than hunger. And that is where we suppose

¹ Throughout this book, I will give page references to the three current critical editions, in order of publication, in part to facilitate ease of reference for readers with access to only one of them, and in part because the most recent edition massively expands our understanding of the sources Diderot used when composing this work, and is therefore immediately a crucial referent. First, Jean Mayer’s 1987 edition: Denis Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie*, ed. by Jean Mayer, vol. 17 (Paris: Hermann, 1987). This constitutes volume 17 of the ongoing *Œuvres complètes* of Diderot, known as DPV, after three of its founding editors, Herbert Dieckmann, Jacques Proust, and Jean Varloot. Second, Paolo Quintili’s stand-alone edition: Denis Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie*, ed. by Paolo Quintili (Paris: Champion, 2004). Third, Motoichi Terada’s edition: Denis Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie*, ed. by Motoichi Terada (Paris: Éditions Matériologiques, 2019). This makes available Terada’s immense work on Diderot’s sources, which very helpfully appeared as I was revising this manuscript. I will always signal when his indication of a source should be taken into account in our understanding of any given passage. Thus: DPV 494/PQ 328/MT 307.
Diderot is taking us, towards an analysis of hunger and love as appetites of different but recognisable sorts. But that is not where the sentence goes! The reason he gives for love being harder to explain than hunger is that a piece of fruit does not feel the desire to be eaten. What? We suddenly halt.

The perspective has switched, from the person who feels appetites to the object of their appetite, be that a piece of fruit or, implicitly, the desired person. Does a piece of fruit feel anything at all? By stating that the fruit has no desire to be eaten, Diderot raises the possibility that it might indeed have feelings of some sort, even desires, even if this particular one, not to be eaten, is negative. Furthermore, in saying that the piece of fruit does not want to be eaten, the proposed self-protective position of the piece of fruit sounds perfectly reasonable. So here we are, in agreement with the imaginary point of view of a piece of fruit. Look what he has reduced us to! We are obliged to pause and take stock; and although we do not really think that a piece of fruit has sensation or feeling, we are wondering about the relationship between an eater and an eaten thing, and seeing that it raises questions about reciprocity that might need further thought. These same questions about reciprocity return us to the other factor in this equation: love, or rather, those feeling the love, the lovers. Does a lover pulsate with the desire to be eaten? We appear to be bordering on the sexually explicit. Certainly, Diderot is presenting us with a complex knot that brings together and literally equates not only bodily urges, emotions, and feelings, but also fruitly feelings. And this all feels rather challenging, to put it no more strongly than that.

The Éléments de physiologie quite frequently exerts a sort of Alice in Wonderland pressure on the reader, inverting proportions, shaking assumptions, making bizarre comparisons, asserting relationships between phenomena we would never have thought of associating. For instance, we read that blood flows round the body faster than the fastest river.\(^2\) That is not just an analogy to make us understand the point more quickly, not just an image that evokes coursing water only to project an internal picture of our rivery arteries, it’s also an exact statement about the relative speeds of fluids in nature which requires us to think

\(^2\) DPV 376/PQ 195/MT 196.
about them comparatively. Or, as we find on another page, ‘un œil se fait comme une anémone’ [an eye grows like an anemone] and ‘un homme se fait comme un œil’ [a man grows like an eye]. Here, rather than moving progressively from simple to complex and thus from an anemone to an eye and thence to a human being, Diderot criss-crosses the different organisms so that we never settle into some complacent supremacist hierarchy. In fact, he is more likely to do the exact opposite, as here:

Les animaux carnassiers sont plus sujets au vomissement que les frugivores.
Les ruminants ne vomissent point.
L’huître n’a point de bouche.¹

Carnivorous animals are more subject to vomiting than herbivores.
Ruminants don’t vomit at all.
The oyster has no mouth.

There is a visible sequence to the order in which Diderot presents digestion here: he moves from the top of the food chain to the bottom; from complex meat-eater to simple oyster (oysters are the typical example of a crude life form in writing of the period).² And yet the bodily function he chooses, the ability to vomit, might not be the normal way of establishing a top-down hierarchy. Furthermore, the mouthless oyster somehow seems seriously incapacitated in this series: it is not that the oyster does not vomit because it never needs to, but that it has no mouth so it cannot.

Diderot’s human being is not a supreme life form, but a composite of life forms in all their stages: ‘l’homme a toutes les sortes d’existence: l’inertie, la sensibilité, la vie végétale, la vie polypeuse, la vie humaine’ [man has every kind of existence: inertia, feeling, vegetable life, polypous life, human life].³ Thus, analogies whereby the nervous system is like ‘une écrevisse’ [a crayfish],⁴ or the blood vessels around the heart

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3 DPV 432/PQ 253/MT 250.
4 DPV 402/PQ 202/MT 220.
6 DPV 337/PQ 154/MT 157.
7 DPV 355/PQ 175/MT 174.
are like its ‘pattes’ [paws], are not just imaginative comparisons that draw the reader in by giving them a rapid and vivid visualisation, but also genuine investigations into the cohabitation of different life systems within one complex organism. The Éléments de physiologie is as much about the elements as it is about the physiology: it looks at the shifting forms and patterns of matter and it considers humans in their material embodiment, as an expression thereof. It asks how the being and behaviour of any given person express that material identity, in sickness and in health. Bodily sensation, emotion, and perception are thus directly connected, as Diderot shows, using himself as an example:

Je suis heureux, tout ce qui m’entoure s’embellit. Je souffre, tout ce qui m’entoure s’obscurcit.  
I am happy, and everything around me grows beautiful. I am in pain, and everything around me is plunged in gloom.

And he asks what, in a context whereby physiological embodiment is all-determining, selfhood might be? The answer is that self is memory:

La mémoire constitue le soi. La conscience du soi et la conscience de son existence sont différentes. Des sensations continues sans mémoire donneraient la conscience ininterrompue de son existence: elles ne produiraient nulle conscience de soi.

Memory constitutes the self. The consciousness of self and the consciousness of one’s existence are different. What continuous sensation without any memory would impart would be the uninterrupted sense of existence, not any consciousness of self.

Selfhood is not a given, and its lack or loss have to be envisaged. It may exist for only part of life, between childhood and old age. The processes of growth and decline cannot be controlled, but are impelled forward naturally, passively. Change and flux are constant:

Nul état fixe dans le corps animal: il décroît quand il ne croît plus.
There is no fixed state in the animal body: it starts shrinking once it stops growing.

There is always movement and variation: this is a premise of materialist thought. In the context of human physiology, that means growth, age, illness, and also, inevitably, malformation. The curious materialist will be fascinated by all these variations in bodily condition, and will want to know what effect they have on perception, experience, and happiness. Diderot is this curious materialist, and while one could no doubt argue that all of his works explore aspects of human embodiment and experience in some way, it is in the *Éléments de physiologie* that he focuses on it most directly, thoroughly and systematically. Furthermore, written at the end of his life, it contains and distills aspects of everything he has hitherto engaged with; it has great range and depth of allusion, and great writerly control, such that images, phrases, stories, and subjects work their way into the reading mind and stick there. As Diderot comments with a witty and virtuoso command of rhythm and onomatopoeia, ‘un plat ouvrage nous endort comme le murmure monotone d’un ruisseau’ [a flat piece of work sends us to sleep like the monotonous murmur of a stream].

This work is one long series of jolts. The chapter opened with one such, and indeed it is woven through with bizarre one-liners that specialise in startling juxtapositions.

Diderot probably started working on the *Éléments* soon after he completed the first draft of his experimental poetico-materialist dialogue *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* [*D’Alembert’s Dream*] in 1769, with its quartet of truly existing but fictionalised speakers, *philosophe* Diderot, mathematician Jean le Rond d’Alembert, doctor Théophile de Bordeaux, female Julie de Lespinasse. *D’Alembert’s Dream* in fact serves as an imaginative introduction to the substantial materialist treatise that is the *Éléments de physiologie*, which Diderot probably continued to work on until relatively close to his death in 1784. In terms of genre it is quite unlike his earlier writings in this area, be they the allusive *Lettres* (on

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12 DPV 506/PQ 345/MT 320.
13 We know this because there are references to it in his *Réfutation d’Helvétius* and *Observations sur Hemsterhuis*, from 1773–74, and within the *Éléments* itself he remarks that he was more than 66 years old when he working on a particular section, which would date that part to after October 1779 [DPV 313/PQ 129/MT 136], and finally, the most developed manuscript version we have, from his daughter’s archive the *Fonds Vandeul*, has additions that could not have been made before 1782. So, this
the blind or on the deaf and dumb), the aphoristic *Pensées* or indeed the audacious dialogues that form *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*. It advertises its claim to seriousness overtly. This is obvious from the title itself, whether that title is indeed the *Éléments de physiologie* or simply *Physiologie* (there is some dispute about this). And despite the many startling one-liners, cunningly designed to jolt the sleepy and passive reader into wakefulness, its attentive approach to the thorough but succinct description of the human body aligns it more with the knowledge-disseminating *Encyclopédie* he edited for more than twenty years than with the rest of his generally elliptical writings, with the crucial difference that here he presents his highly contentious theories about matter, life, thought, and the human mind unmasked, and step by censorable step. As Diderot puts it, while nonetheless admitting that this method is not infallible, ‘il n’y a qu’un moyen de connaître la vérité, c’est de ne procéder que par partie et de ne conclure qu’après une énumération exacte et entière’ [there’s only one way of getting to the truth, to proceed from one part to the next and to conclude only after an exact and total enumeration].

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15 The (early draft) St Petersburg manuscript is entitled *Éléments de physiologie*; the (mature draft) Fonds Vandeul manuscript also has *Élémens de physiologie* on the title page; Hippolyte Walferdin, describing a lost manuscript copy in 1837, gives its title as *Physiologie* (see DPV 270–71, discussed below, in the chapter entitled ‘1823: Naigeon’s Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de Denis Diderot’); Gerhardt Stenger considers that ‘l’ouvrage fini devait s’intituler “Physiologie” tout court’ [the finished work was supposed simply to be called *Physiology*] (*Diderot, le combattant de la liberté* (Paris: Perrin, 2013), p. 740, n. 144); Naigeon confuses matters by alluding to it as Diderot’s ‘système particulier de physiologie’ [his particular system of physiology] and also as ‘une nouvelle théorie, ou plutôt une histoire naturelle et expérimentale de l’homme’ [a new theory, or rather, a natural and experimental history of man] (*Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de Denis Diderot* (Paris: J. L. L. Brière, ‘1821’ [1823]; repr. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), p. 291); Terada, presumably on the basis of Naigeon’s description, also calls it by the name *Histoire naturelle et expérimentale de l’homme* (MT 54, 57).

It seems most probable, given that both manuscript versions carry the full title of *Éléments de physiologie* and that the ‘Avertissement’ of the Vandeul version explicitly names the title ‘Éléments de physiologie’, that this was indeed the proposed title.

16 DPV 464/PQ 290/MT 280.
profundity and exploratory discussion, was not ‘an exact and total enumeration’, and nor does it proceed systematically, but the Éléments de physiologie is and does. In the Rêve, Diderot has the fictionalised Bordeu offer the thought that ‘la fibre est un animal simple; l’homme est un animal composé. Mais gardons ce texte pour une autre fois’ [the fibre is a simple animal; man is a composite animal. But let’s keep that thought for another time], and in so doing, he plants an allusion to a more systematic treatment of this idea. That more systematic treatment is to be found in the Éléments de physiologie. We have already quoted the passage proposing that ‘l’homme a toutes les sortes d’existence’; this is a recurrent theme which is repeatedly revisited, and later we read that ‘l’homme est un assemblage d’animaux où chacun garde sa fonction’ [man is an assemblage of animals, each one with its own function].

The Éléments de physiologie is organised into three parts, each of which is subdivided into numerous chapters. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, in the most traditional way possible, and let it be said, in a more traditional way than we normally find in Diderot’s works. The first part, simply entitled ‘Des Etres’ [On Beings], opens with a tableau of nature in general, looking at the links in a chain of being organised according to complexity of organism. It is divided into three chapters on, in order of increasing complexity, the ‘végéto-animal’, the ‘animal’ and ‘homme’. In these, he rapidly sketches the classification of living beings according to their differences and similarities, repeatedly enquiring about the ability to feel sensation across nature. What is original about this part is perhaps more than anything the way in which it fuses philosophy

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17 Denis Diderot, Le Rêve de d’Alembert, ed. by Colas Duflo (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2002), p. 138; or DPV 17, p. 166. Duflo supplies a footnote reference to a slightly different passage of the Éléments, ‘Il y a certainement dans un même animal trois vies distinctes [etc]’ [there are certainly three distinct life forms in a single animal], although his reference is in fact to a very early draft of the Éléments de physiologie, called the Fragments dont on n’a pu trouver la véritable place, DPV 17, p. 226. In the Éléments de physiologie proper, this passage is DPV 310/PQ 126/MT 134. I discuss the relationship of these drafts to each other below, see the section in Chapter 2 titled ‘From Elements to Fragments’.

18 DPV 337/PQ 154/MT 157.

19 DPV 501/PQ 338/MT 314. Terada points out that Diderot’s source here is Bordeu’s Recherches sur les maladies chroniques (1775), in which he variously writes that ‘le corps vivant’ [the living body] is an ‘assemblage de divers organes’ [assemblage of different organs] and an ‘assemblage de plusieurs organes’ [assemblage of many organs]. Éléments, ed. by Terada, p. 496, Source XI.
and natural history so totally, that it does it so briefly, and that it is so explicit in its views. Others such as the famous and successful author of the *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière* (1749–89) in 36 volumes, Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, or the Swiss naturalist Charles Bonnet might be diffusely, ever so cautiously, hovering on the point of suggesting similar sorts of points, but apart from needing to penetrate their actual meaning, first of all you’d have to find the passage, buried somewhere in volume 12. This is not even a joke: that is where Buffon first gets round to defining Nature, in volume 12 of 36. In the *Éléments de physiologie*, it’s line 1.

The second part, entitled the ‘Éléments et parties du corps humain’ [Elements and parts of the human body], focuses on human physiology. It displays a remarkable synthesis of disciplinary erudition, this time very specifically from the field of physiology and much bolstered by the work of the pre-eminent Swiss physiologist Albrecht von Haller, and made comprehensible and meaningful thanks to Diderot’s extraordinary style, consisting at once in concise lucidity of description and in the ability to know when to puncture the description, pause, and start asking questions or drawing strange and destabilising analogies which breathe new meaning into the text. This second part does not attempt a complete synthesis of existing accounts of the workings of the human body and of its elements. There is nothing about the skeleton, for example. Instead, it focuses its attention on the basic material of the human body (fibres, cellular tissues) and on how it functions (blood, muscles, reproduction, the separate organs). Diderot repeatedly returns to two groups of questions: firstly, what is the difference between organised beings and an animal or what we’d now call an organism (can an organ be considered an animal in itself, for example?), and secondly, how is sensation communicated from one part of the body to another, what happens when that communication is interrupted, and what is the significance of that interruption?

The third and final part contains a detailed discussion of the senses and the mind, memory, imagination, thought, what it terms ‘les phénomènes du cerveau’ [the phenomena of the brain]. It proposes

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that human experience of self and other is first and last the product of relational material organisation in time and space, entirely determined by it, yet no less conscious and lived for all that it is determined. Thus there is no soul, no supernatural element, and also no place for the faculty supposedly exclusive to man, ‘reason’. Reason is replaced with ‘instinct’ on the one hand, and ‘understanding’ on the other. Diderot rounds off the Éléments de physiologie with an extraordinary meditation on death in the Stoic tradition—in Montaigne’s version, ‘que philosopher c’est apprendre à mourir’ [to philosophise is to learn to die] and in Diderot’s chiastic mirroring: ‘un autre apprentissage de la mort est la philosophie’ [another apprenticeship of death is what philosophy is].

In sum, the Éléments de physiologie is overtly atheist and materialist. Materialism refers to the view that the universe and everything in it is made entirely from matter in different shapes and forms; in this eighteenth-century context, it is also automatically understood to be an atheist position, and therefore dangerous, both for the person who holds it and might be imprisoned because of it (as Diderot was in 1749, for the suspect views about the existence of God expressed in his Letter on the Blind), and for the general population, who, the (ecclesiastical) authorities considered, would be at risk of contamination.

It is a substantial materialist treatise and there is nothing else of its time like it (and nor would there be for at least another century), nothing else that places a detailed physiological account of humans and human consciousness within an overtly materialist presentation of nature. It draws on the work of physiologists like Haller and others, and on the work of naturalists like Buffon or Bonnet. It dialogues with philosophers like the polemical Julien Offray de La Mettrie and the more mainstream Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, and re-visits many of the same examples and topoi that we find across all these writers, and which Diderot had also treated in earlier works, examples such as the man plunged in thought and perfectly unaware of his surroundings who nonetheless unhesitatingly navigates obstacles as he paces along, or the abilities of the imbecile or the mad, or the surprising strength ill men discover in themselves when rescuing possessions from fire, and so on. It extends all this into an open investigation of conscious and unconscious states.

21 DPV 516/PQ 361/MT 328.
in all their bizarre variety. In 1759, Théophile de Bordeu (the real one, and Diderot’s friend, not the loquacious fictionalised version we meet in the *Rêve de d’Alembert*) had implored some great philosopher to come forward and help make sense of what he called the ‘animal economy’, that is to say, the human being in both physical and moral aspects.\(^\text{22}\)

Il faudroit enfin un Descartes ou un Leibniz, pour débrouiller ce qui concerne les causes, l’ordre, le rapport, les variations, l’harmonie, et les lois des fonctions de l’économie animale.\(^\text{23}\)

Ultimately what is needed is a Descartes or a Leibniz to disentangle everything concerning the causes, the order, the relationship, the variations, the harmony, and the laws governing the functions of the animal economy.

It seems that the *Éléments de physiologie* is Diderot’s answer to that challenge.

And yet, for all its manifest stature, both within Diderot’s own œuvre and beyond it, as a bravely explicit exploration of what it is to be human in the absence of the soul, and also as a response to the need expressed by vitalist doctors like Bordeu for some new ways of understanding how the body, in its physical and emotional aspects, connects up, the *Éléments de physiologie* is little known and little studied. It is really only the third part, with its discussions of thought and memory, its bravura set pieces about sensation and recall which prefigure the writings of Henri Bergson or Marcel Proust, that have interested Diderot scholars. Indeed two mainstream editions of Diderot’s philosophical works do not consider it worth including the first two parts, and only print the last one; they abridge no other work by so much as a paragraph, let alone

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two thirds of the whole text. The current book is, for all its faults, the only monograph devoted to it thus far. How could this be?

There seem to be a number of rather fascinating reasons for this bizarre neglect, as we will see. This book falls into two parts: the first looks at how Diderot’s *Éléments de physiologie* makes an intervention in the philosophy and physiology of his time (part of the intervention in the former, having been misunderstood, is part of the reason for the neglect), deepening our understanding of what is at stake beyond what has been sketched out thus far. The second part looks at what would normally be called its dissemination and reception, but cannot yet be, seeing as scholarship as it currently stands does not think that it was disseminated in the first place. Perhaps we can say instead that the second part presents its reasons for supposing that the *Éléments de physiologie* was being read at least to some extent in the 1790s, those turbulent and unstable years of frequent régime change, and furthermore, its reasons for thinking that it exerted influence almost immediately. The book ends with a study of what I will argue is the first publication of the *Éléments de physiologie* in 1823, in a form which is almost but not quite unrecognisable, thanks to a substantial reorganisation operation carried out on it by Diderot’s intellectual disciple and literary executor, the industrious Jacques-André Naigeon.

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24 Laurent Versini’s five-volume edition of Diderot’s work only contains this last part: Denis Diderot, *Œuvres*, ed. by Laurent Versini, 5 vols (Paris: R. Laffont, 1994–97). More recently, Michel Delon and Barbara de Negroni’s edition of Diderot’s *Œuvres philosophiques* reproduces very short extracts from parts 1 and 2, and slightly longer extracts (although also cut) from part 3, and downgrades it to an Appendix to the *Rêve*. Denis Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. by Michel Delon and Barbara de Negroni (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp. 411–44. We discuss this further below, see Chapter 2.


26 Naigeon’s *Mémoires* came out as the twenty-second volume of the Brière edition of Diderot’s *Œuvres*; all are date-stamped as having been published in 1821, but in fact they came out gradually between 1821–23. See David Adams, *Bibliographie des œuvres de Diderot*, 1739–1900, 2 vols (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d’étude du XVIIIe siècle, 2000), vol. 2, p. 141. Naigeon’s *Mémoires* therefore came out in 1823, and I will consistently refer to them in that way, despite the prevailing dating
Perhaps this is the moment therefore to mention that the *Éléments de physiologie* was not published during Diderot’s lifetime. Those who already frequent the works of Diderot know that this puts it in good company, and indeed in the same camp as most of his work. In order to secure his release from prison in 1749, he had had to promise never to publish anything that might disturb or undermine the authorities ever again, and nor did he. The *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, on which he was already in 1749 hard at work (and which his imprisonment interrupted), which he co-edited with Jean le Rond d’Alembert until its publication was banned in 1759 and d’Alembert gave up on it, and which Diderot carried on preparing in secret, bringing out the remaining volumes of text in 1765 (there were 17 in all), and 11 volumes of plates in 1772, bringing the grand total to 28 volumes, was too massive an enterprise to endanger, and in itself exposed him to a good deal of risk anyway. Instead, from then on, he only published a couple of philosophical works (*Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, 1751; *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature*, 1753), a few plays (*Le Fils naturel*, 1757; *Le Père de famille*, 1758), and various other short texts, including the *Additions aux pensées philosophiques* (1770) and the *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre* (1772). 27 And of this, only the *Lettre de M. Diderot à MM. Briasson et Le Breton*, Diderot’s intervention in the case brought by Luneau de Boisjermain against the publishers of the *Encyclopédie*, actually carried his name in black and white. 28 Indeed, the plays caused a scandal anyway, as he was accused of plagiarism, while he himself was mercilessly satirised in Palissot’s play *Les philosophes* of 1760 as part of a large-scale anti-Encyclopédie campaign; in sum, he was already a target, and already at risk. Thus, many of the works for which he is now most famous—his novels *Jacques le fataliste* or *La Religieuse*, or his dialogues, the scientifically exploratory *Rêve de d’Alembert* and the morally outrageous *Neveu de Rameau*, went to 1821. See below for further information about the precise circumstances of their publication.

27 For the complete list, see Adams, ‘Liste chronologique des éditions’, in his *Bibliographie des œuvres de Diderot*, 1739–1900 (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d’étude du XVIIIe siècle, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 53–76.

unpublished during his lifetime. However, all of these works, with the exception of the then completely unknown *Neveu de Rameau* and also the *Éléments de physiologie*, had been circulated in a manuscript periodical, the *Correspondance littéraire*, sent only to a very restricted number of very elevated personages, including Catherine II, across Europe and in Russia. Manuscripts were not subject to the same censorship laws, and in any case this manuscript magazine’s royal readers extended their protection to it; Catherine indeed extended her protection directly to Diderot, buying his books and manuscripts and making him the salaried-librarian of his own books. Diderot died in 1784, and his books and a set of his manuscripts were sent off to Catherine; the books are now lost but the manuscripts are still in St Petersburg.

His novels and various short stories started leaking into print from copies of the *Correspondance littéraire* in the 1790s, and at this point, his literary executor, Naigeon, as we will hear, was galvanized into action, bringing out his edition of Diderot’s *Œuvres* in fifteen volumes in 1798; he still omitted the *Rêve de d’Alembert*, the *Éléments de physiologie*, and the *Neveu de Rameau*, judging them too dangerous. In 1805, the *Neveu de Rameau* came out as *Rameaus Neffe*, in German, translated by none other than that titan of German letters, Goethe. So it was out of the bag. That left the *Rêve de d’Alembert* and the *Éléments de physiologie*, which Naigeon meshed into a new work, taking up one quarter of the *Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de Denis Diderot*, and which, as mentioned, would be published in 1823, thirteen years after Naigeon’s death, and which therefore constitutes the first sort-of publication of both of those works. The *Rêve de d’Alembert* itself would be published entire in 1830, and from that moment it has had its own separate life. I say ‘sort-of publication’: we will see exactly what I mean in the chapter devoted to it, and in the connected digital edition of Naigeon’s *Mémoires* that I offer as part of this study. Suffice it to say that in the published version of the *Mémoires*, the discussion of these two texts take up 100 pages, and that of those 100 pages, 80 are woven from verbatim but unacknowledged and massively reorganised passages from these two works, with about 30 pages from the *Rêve* and about 50 from the *Éléments*. So this means that there are 80 pages of Diderot’s writing in the *Mémoires*, and they are all about physiology.

29 See [https://naigeons-diderot.mml.ox.ac.uk/index.htm](https://naigeons-diderot.mml.ox.ac.uk/index.htm).
So this is the extent to which we can and cannot say that the Mémoires constitute the first publication of both the Rêve de d'Alembert and the Éléments de physiologie. It is the first time that lines written by Diderot from both works appeared in print, but they did not appear as he wrote them; it wasn’t clear that they were quotation—it looks like a paraphrase of what Diderot thought—and they are in a book whose author is not Diderot but Naigeon. The sheer extent of his reworking, as well, perhaps, as the relative unpopularity of the Mémoires—they have been plundered for anecdotes about Diderot but not taken seriously otherwise, and not been the object of any research in themselves—along with the availability from 1830 of the engaging and quirky Rêve de d’Alembert, has meant that it has never been contemplated that the Mémoires might constitute their first publication.\(^{30}\) The Éléments de physiologie, unlike every other one of his works, did not come out separately and acquire its own identity in those crucial first fifty years after Diderot’s death when his œuvre was being pieced together. It would not come out until 1875, in the critical edition in 20 volumes by scholars Jules Assézat and Maurice Tourneux. However, this was another bad moment for the Éléments de physiologie: Assézat and Tourneux published the early draft they had found in the St Petersburg archive of Diderot manuscripts. And so the reputation of the Éléments de physiologie was fixed: insofar as it existed at all, it was as an unfinished project. Not even the publication of the complete draft in 1964, subsequent to the emergence in 1948 of the complete set of Diderot’s manuscripts which had gone to his daughter (a thrilling story),\(^ {31}\) has shifted that view. This book, however, attempts to overturn it.

The next chapter maps current scholarship on the Éléments de physiologie, and explores why it has stuck with the view of the Éléments de physiologie as an incomplete text; there is a perfect storm of reasons.

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30 I should add though that Motoichi Terada’s 2019 edition gives the relevant pages from Naigeon in an appendix, fully referenced to the Rêve de d’Alembert and to the Éléments de physiologie in its early draft form. This is a question we will return to in Chapter 12.