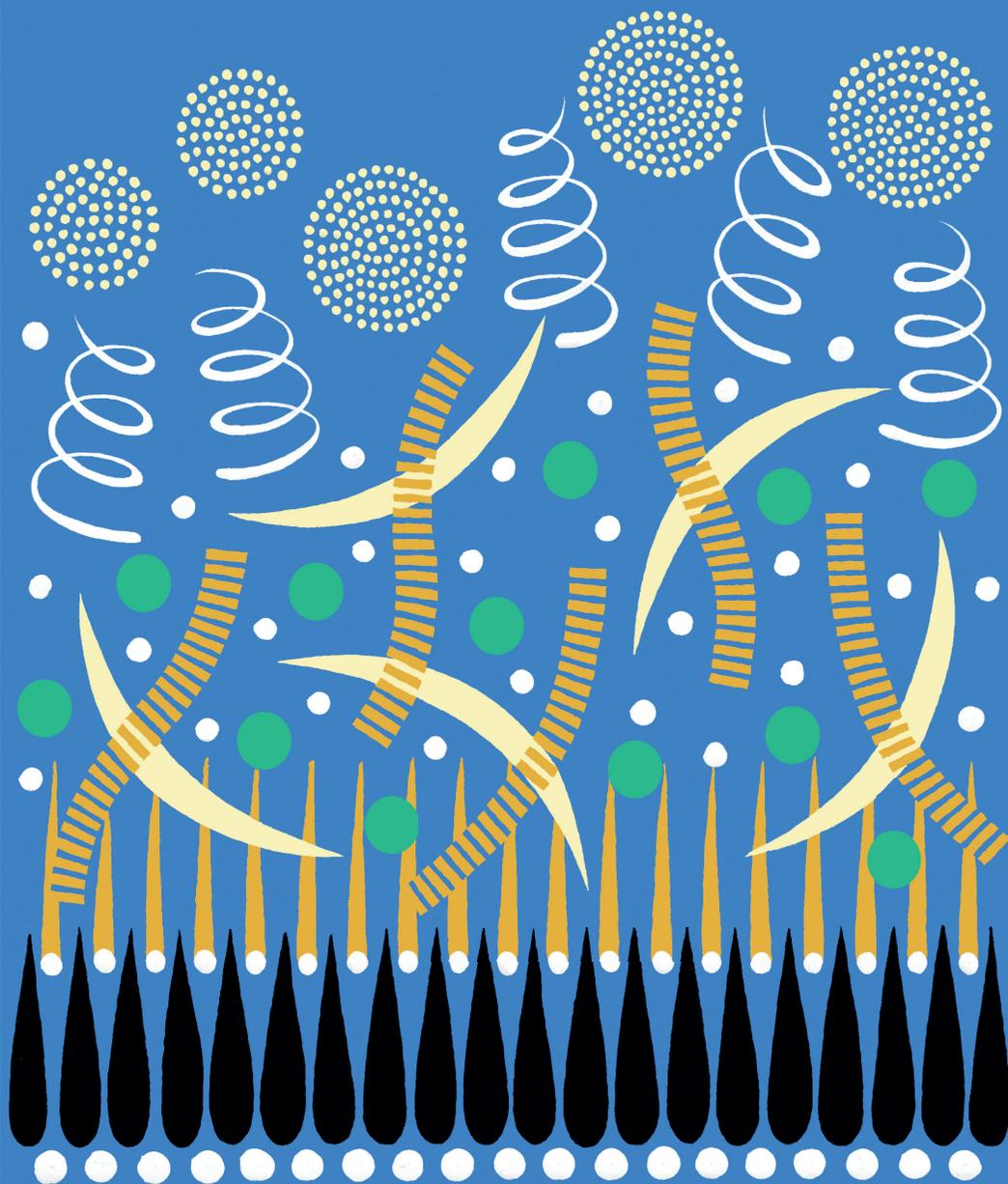


# THE ATHEIST'S BIBLE

Diderot and the  
*Éléments de physiologie*

Caroline Warman





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ISBN Paperback: 9781783748969

ISBN Hardback: 9781783748976

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781783748983

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781783748990

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781783749003

ISBN XML: 9781783749010

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0199

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## 6. 1792: Naigeon's Article on 'Diderot' in the *Encyclopédie méthodique* *Philosophie ancienne et moderne*

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The article 'Diderot' which we find in the second volume of Jacques-André Naigeon's philosophical dictionary does not, of course, hide either Denis Diderot's name or the extracts from his work.<sup>1</sup> Published in 1792, it was written, Naigeon tells us, in November 1789, very close to (and quite possibly overlapping with) the writing and publication of the *Adresse à l'Assemblée nationale* in February 1790 (another date which Naigeon himself supplies).<sup>2</sup> At seventy-five double-columned pages, it is a substantial article, and indeed it is here that Diderot's significant if brief *Principes philosophiques sur la matière et le mouvement*, written in 1770, are first published, as Naigeon is pleased to announce, all three pages of them.<sup>3</sup> So this article holds an important place in the story of the publication of Diderot's works, in part for the *Principes philosophiques* and in part for the details Naigeon supplies about his 'intime ami'

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1 Jacques-André Naigeon, 'Diderot', in *Encyclopédie méthodique: Philosophie ancienne et moderne* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1792), vol. 2, pp. 153–228.

2 Naigeon, 'Diderot', *Philosophie ancienne et moderne*, vol. 2 (1792), p. 153, n. 3: 'on écrit ceci au mois de novembre'. For the dating of the *Adresse*, see above.

3 Naigeon, 'Diderot', pp. 192–95. See also Michel Delon's edition, in Denis Diderot, *Ceuvres complètes*, ed. by H. Dieckmann, Jacques Proust, Jean Varloot (Paris: Hermann, 1975), [hereafter DPV], vol. 17 (1987), p. 10.

[intimate friend].<sup>4</sup> And yet it is not quite what one might expect. It does not give a comprehensive list let alone survey of Diderot's works, which, for example, Naigeon does do in the case of Condillac, the article about whom fills the first 135 pages of this same volume, even though he complains bitterly about the 'extrême secheresse' [extreme dryness] of Condillac's writing and the courage and patience needed to wade through it all, and even though the first extracts he quotes in it are in fact from Diderot, as part of his demonstration that the 'idée mère' [mother idea] for Condillac's famous statue was Diderot's.<sup>5</sup> So there is an odd disproportion here; odd in that Condillac gets almost twice as many pages despite the philosophical priority being given very clearly to Diderot, and despite the fact that Naigeon claims to find Condillac hard going. Why is this?

There seem to be two connected reasons; firstly and most explicitly, because Naigeon states on the first page of the article that he has reserved the longer discussion of Diderot's *Œuvres* for his *Mémoires*, but possibly also out of caution. It is an article that does not foray far into the Diderot oeuvre; apart from the brief *Principes philosophiques* mentioned above, Naigeon limits discussion to Diderot's published works and to various extracts and reviews. Thus we also hear about the *Pensées philosophiques* (pub. 1746), the *Additions aux pensées philosophiques* (pub. 1770), the *Lettre sur les aveugles* (pub. 1749)—presented in gobbet form as twenty-nine numbered 'pensées' along with an exposition of its treatment of the Molyneux problem—the *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (pub. 1751), the *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* (pub. 1753), along with some extracts on education, some sixty 'Reflexions philosophiques sur divers sujets', and various reviews emphasising the importance of style. This is a presentation of Diderot's writings that has four distinguishing features; firstly, their status as (mostly) published; secondly, their speculative philosophical nature; thirdly, the emphasis on the importance of style in philosophical writing; and fourthly, their arrangement in 'pensée' or

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4 Naigeon, 'Diderot', p. 153.

5 Naigeon, 'Condillac', *Philosophie ancienne et moderne*, vol. 2 (1792), pp. 1–135 ('extrême secheresse', p. 105; pp. 5–7 for the discussion of how Condillac's *Traité des sensations* was inspired by Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*; the quotation fills more than two columns, pp. 6–7).

gobbet form.<sup>6</sup> This version of Diderot is an authoritative, predominantly published, often gnomic thinker, who pronounces on important matters connected to the philosophical or educational matters of the day. If Naigeon is stoutly defending and often re-stating Diderot's importance here, then, he is nonetheless not adding very much to what is already published and known, apart from the three pages of the *Principes philosophiques*. So there are some reasons to think that this version of Diderot is indeed a cautious one.

However, as mentioned, this article comes complete with opening and closing references to the *Mémoires historiques et philosophiques*, references which make clear its subservience to this grander, deeper, longer work which readers are explicitly advised to consult despite the fact that it hasn't yet been published. Furthermore, of the three paragraphs on the first page of this article, two of them discuss not Diderot and his writing but Naigeon's internal debates about when to publish these *Mémoires*. The dominant position this discussion is given, at the very head of the article, communicate how difficult it was for Naigeon to work out how to publish what and when, and how continuously the political situation affected his choices. So if there was a strategy on Naigeon's part to publish Diderot's work in phases, we can see how it was repeatedly changed and updated. Thus he talks of 'ces mémoires que je n'aurais pu faire imprimer, il y a six mois' [these memoirs which I would not have been able to publish six months ago] without inviting the persecution of ministers and judges—and it is here that he inserts the footnote dating the writing of the article to November 1789—and of 'ces mémoires pensés & écrits par-tout avec cette liberté si nécessaire dans les matières philosophiques' [these memoirs were thoroughly conceptualised and written with that freedom which is so crucial in philosophical matters] and which *now*, thanks to the 'heureuse révolution qui s'est opérée dans l'ordre des choses' [happy revolution which has occurred in the order of things] 'pourroient être insérés tout entiers dans cet article' [could be inserted entire into this article].<sup>7</sup> 'Liberté' here is in no way an empty rhetorical flourish, nor even an uncomplicated echo of one of the Revolution's slogans; it has a specific meaning in this context, of course,

6 For Naigeon's remarks on Diderot's style, see 'Diderot', pp. 154, 164, 217; for Diderot's stinging review of the translation of Beccaria's *Recherches sur le style*, see p. 223.

7 All quotations from Naigeon, 'Diderot', p. 153.

related to free-thinking and the 'libertins' or free-thinkers, who are to be understood in seventeenth-century terms as those who do not conform to the orthodoxy of the church, and in eighteenth-century terms more insultingly as those who are immoral or amoral, and is therefore a term directly associated with atheism and materialism. This is Nageon's 'liberté' [freedom], and it is an attitude and a style, as he tells us, that one writes and thinks with: 'pensés & écrits par-tout avec cette liberté'. So the printed matter discussed in the article comes attached to a silent and extensive supplement in the form of these free-thinking *Mémoires*: 'quoiqu'ils ne soient point encore imprimés, j'y renvoye néanmoins le lecteur' [although they have not yet been published, I nonetheless refer the reader to them].<sup>8</sup>

So why, if the 'heureuse révolution' [happy revolution] is now propitious to free expression, does he choose *not* to publish them within the article? He gives four reasons in his first explanation, and two in his second. Firstly, then, they would take up too much space; secondly, they have a different 'objet' or aim, thirdly, they could not be written in the same style and with the same details, and fourthly, he would not be able to have the same 'excursions' or digressions. His subsequent explanation makes a pact with the reader to fulfil a duty towards his late friend and write these *Mémoires* which his predilection for peace and quiet ('l'amour du repos'), along with some other, more urgent, more imperious considerations ('des considérations peut-être encore plus fortes, plus impérieuses'), have prevented him from doing. 'Mais un jour plus pur nous luit': a brighter day beckons. Six reasons for not publishing or not having written them yet, including this ominous last one, with its allusion to important considerations! No one has ever accused Nageon of being a minimalist, but this is a clear case not purely of maximalism but of making sure that the reader's attention is repeatedly fixed on these *Mémoires*. Six reasons, a cross-reference to the unpublished memoirs, and substantial discussion on this opening page, along with a further cross-reference within the body of the article, and a final one on the closing page serve to emphasise and re-emphasise how incomplete the article is without the *Mémoires*, and how important

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8 All quotations from *ibid.*

this latter work is for the understanding of Diderot.<sup>9</sup> And we know that what specifically characterises the *Mémoires* is 'cette liberté si nécessaire dans les matières philosophiques' [that freedom which is so crucial in philosophical matters]. In fact, the cross-reference on the closing page is even more specific. Here it is:

Ce seroit ici le lieu de parler de plusieurs ouvrages purement philosophiques qui se trouvent parmi les manuscrits de Diderot ; mais j'ai donné, dans les mémoires sur sa vie, une analyse raisonnée de celui de ces ouvrages qui m'a paru le plus profond : j'entre même à ce sujet dans des détails qui ne seront pas sans quelque utilité pour les lecteurs qui s'occupent de ces matières difficiles, et qui, déjà éclairés par leurs propres méditations, seront capables de suivre et de cultiver les idées de ce philosophe.<sup>10</sup>

This would be the place to speak about the many purely philosophical works amongst Diderot's manuscripts. However, I have given, in the memoirs about his life, an analytical account of the particular work of his that I thought most profound: I even go, on this subject, into details which will not be without some use for those readers who make it their business to consider these difficult matters, and who, already enlightened by their own meditations, will be capable of following and developing the ideas of this philosopher.

Here we meet again that invitation which we saw in the *Adresse* to those special readers who engage with difficult matters and are capable of following and developing Diderot's ideas. And in fact it is not all Diderot's writings or a group of them that Naigeon wishes to draw attention to here, it is a single one: 'celui de ces ouvrages qui m'a paru le plus profond'—the particular one he considers to be the most profound. Examination of the *Mémoires*—which, despite these repeated references to its existence and imminent publication will remain unpublished until 1823—will show that he was talking about the *Éléments de physiologie*, which, with a tally of fifty pages of re-woven quotation, the *Rêve* coming

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9 Naigeon writes, regarding Diderot's imprisonment at the château de Vincennes in 1749: 'De plus longs détails sur cette affaire seroient déplacés dans cet article; on les trouvera dans les *mémoires* dont j'ai parlé ci-dessus, & j'y renvoie le lecteur' [it would be misplaced to give more detail on this affair in this article ; more information can be found in the *memoirs* I mentioned above, and I refer the reader to them] ('Diderot', p. 166).

10 Naigeon, 'Diderot', p. 228.

in second at about thirty, and no other work anywhere near, is the single text to which he gives most prominence. As we will see, he is still advertising it as well as advertising that he is still working on it in the preface to the *Œuvres de Diderot* which he published in 1798. We will come to that preface, as well as to the *Mémoires* themselves in due course, according to the chronological approach which we adopt here and which aims on the one hand to provide some order and sense of an unfurling narrative, whereby what follows is aware of and informed by what has preceded, and on the other to give a sense of the complexity and unpredictability of the context. In the meantime, we will leave Naigeon, so active and vocal in these early 1790s, with his repeated allusions to Diderot and to the *Mémoires*, and his intimations of a work characterised by particular freedom, one that was more profound than any other. Naigeon was not a marginal figure, as the many reactions to his *Adresse*, and the centrality of his position as editor of the *Philosophie ancienne et moderne* volumes, go to show. His readers, and perhaps not just those especially alert and erudite ones he kept winking at, will have been aware that there was more Diderot in the offing, that there was a particularly important free-thinking text which they had not yet seen. The *Éléments de physiologie*, unnamed at this point though it was, but quoted in the *Adresse* and alluded to in 'Diderot', thus already has a shadowy presence in print, repeatedly signalled both as imminent and as hugely important. And for any readers who knew how, or who simply knew where Naigeon lived, the *Mémoires* were accessible in draft manuscript form, perhaps even the *Éléments de physiologie* themselves. In any case, someone apart from Naigeon had a copy, as we will now go on to discuss.