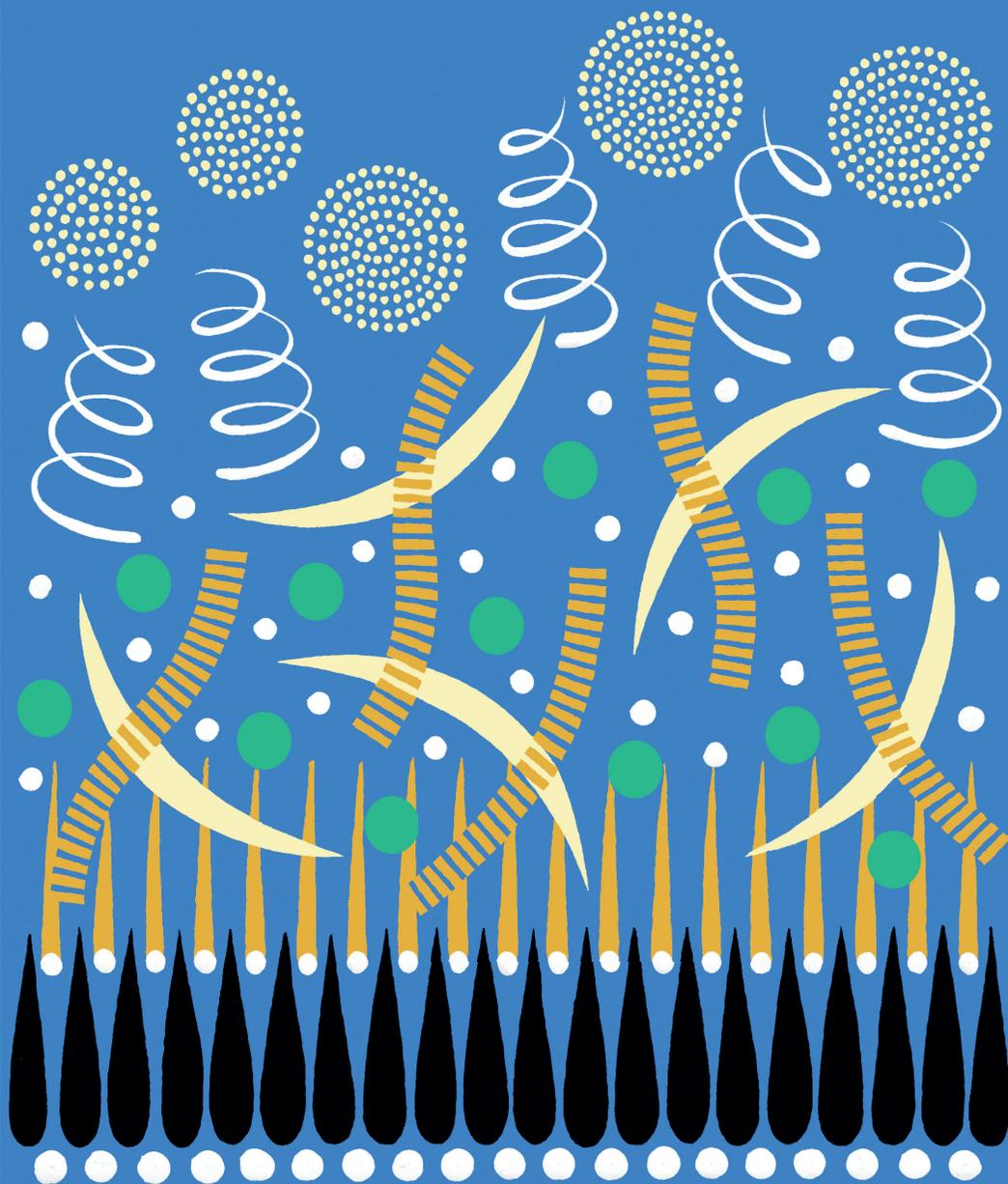


THE ATHEIST'S BIBLE

Diderot and the
Éléments de physiologie

Caroline Warman





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13. Conclusion

As Jean Mayer feelingly put it when describing his difficulties with editing the *Éléments de physiologie* (for the second time), ‘l’éditeur, celui de Diderot surtout, est condamné à inventer pour chaque problème des solutions spécifiques’ [the editor, particularly in the case of Diderot, is condemned to come up with an individualized solution for every single problem].¹ I could not agree more, as I extend his lament about critical editions to apply also to this monograph. And the result is a rather oddly-shaped book that has developed organically from following the *Éléments de physiologie* and its fate, while simultaneously sprouting a digital edition of the relevant pages of Naigeon’s *Mémoires sur Diderot*. It has become a study not only of a late work of Diderot’s, but also, quite substantially, of Naigeon, Diderot’s disciple and literary executor, and furthermore of the educational and research committees and institutions of the French Revolution in its swiftly revolving and ever convulsive phases.² It is to some extent therefore also a history of this period from a very particular point of view. It offers new readings of the Ideologues, Cabanis and Destutt de Tracy, and of their avowed influence, minister and educator Garat. Fresh materials have appeared in all these sections.

1 Jean Mayer, ‘La composition fragmentaire des *Éléments de physiologie* (problèmes d’édition)’, in *Éditer Diderot*, ed. by Georges Dulac, SVEC, 254 (1988), pp. 253–305 (p. 255).

2 2020 is a big year for Naigeon studies! Mario Cosenza has just published his intellectual biography of Naigeon, which unfortunately came out too late for my research to benefit from it. Others will be luckier! *All’ombra dei Lumi: Jacques-André Naigeon philosophe* (Naples: FedOAPress, 2020): <http://www.fedoabooks.unina.it/index.php/fedoapress/catalog/book/190>.

The first part of the book contemplated the *Éléments de physiologie* itself. It offers a tour of this extraordinary work, yet bizarrely, even to make a claim so simple and basic as to say that it is extraordinary and worth taking a tour of, seems somewhat new. Our second chapter assesses the reasons for this strange state of affairs and emerges with a discussion of Pascal, having argued that the *Éléments de physiologie*, this 'Atheist's Bible', throws down the opening words about its fragmentary and incomplete state as a signal that it is accepting Pascal's challenge to the atheist to be anything other than disordered and incoherent. We muse on the irony of Pascal's own defence of his faith having remained unfinished, and also at the even greater irony implicit in Diderot's counter-defence having been thought to be fragmentary and unfinished. We don't know whether to laugh or cry.

Diderot, as a materialist philosopher writing about physiology, is directly engaging with two noisy areas—the philosophical tradition, and human physiology as it was understood in the late eighteenth century. We look at each in turn. The point we make in Chapter 3 ('Material World and Embodied Mind') is that what we find in the *Éléments de physiologie* is Diderot's ultimate iteration of the arguments to establish that man was devoid of divine parts and needed to be understood and investigated in merely material terms. *Iteration* is an important term in this context, as Diderot is repeating arguments that had been being made for more than a century prior to his composing the *Éléments de physiologie*. What is specific or original to this work is not necessarily the arguments themselves, but that he brings them all together in one place. What makes them explosive is that he frames them unapologetically and overtly within a materialist context and also demonstrates them with reference to the physiology of the human body. This makes the *Éléments de physiologie* into a book of unrivalled audacity for the period.

As an introduction to physiology, we argue that it is better than equivalent or rival introductory works for its succinct clarity, its ability to ask questions of its material, and its consistent indication of lived experience across natural forms so various—like the girl with only a stump for a tongue who still had a sense of taste, or the man who fell pregnant—that 'natural' can no longer be defined by contrast to a supposed 'unnatural'. The spare directness of its descriptions are the result of Diderot's experience as a writer of many articles for the

Encyclopédie (and editor of all of them) in combination with the often virtuoso ekphrastic writing of his *Salons*, and to put it bluntly, they make a whole lot more sense than the often incomprehensible and always long descriptions generated by 'real' physiologists. Diderot's physiological descriptions are set within a clear presentation of the functions of the human body as a whole, following an introduction considering natural beings and life forms more generally, and leading into an enquiry of the human mind. As the 'real' physiologist, Théophile de Bordeu, put it, and as we quoted earlier, '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' [ultimately what is needed is a Descartes or a Leibniz to disentangle that which concerns the causes, the order, the relationship, the variations, the harmony, and the laws governing the functions of the animal economy].³ We argue that Diderot's response to this plea was the *Éléments de physiologie*.

Part 2 looks at what happened next. Each chapter looks at an episode of publication in which Diderot's work on physiology was being mentioned, quoted, or drawn on (each case is different), and we chart these episodes in strictly chronological order. This was the only possible approach, given that each publication event was not just attentively engaging with its immediate Revolutionary and political context, but seemingly adjusting its techniques in the light of reactions to the previous episodes. Whether we are talking about Nageon's strident statements and structured approach to the exercise of his duties as Diderot's literary executor, about the fate of the floating manuscript of the *Éléments de physiologie*, gifted to the Comité d'instruction publique [Committee of Public Education] on 24 March 1794, or what seem to be the numerous allusions to the *Éléments* on the part of Garat, Cabanis, and Destutt de Tracy, this is an unfurling and multi-referential story in which all players are working in close proximity, unavoidably aware of what the others are doing, and of needing to take every intervention into account. During this period, what is not said and who is not mentioned are as defining as their positive opposites.

3 Théophile de Bordeu, *Recherches sur les glandes* (1759), in *Œuvres complètes de Bordeu: précédées d'une notice sur sa vie et sur ses ouvrages*, ed. by Anthelme Richerand, 2 vols (Paris: Caille et Ravier, 1818), vol. 1, p. 208.

Nonetheless, and despite the fact that the chronology is the only thing that helps bring clarity and readability to this complex history, it needs to be said that there are really two separate stories taking place. The first is the story of Naigeon's repeated allusions to his *Mémoires sur Diderot*, to the importance of the work he was going to discuss in it, and to the imminence of its in fact always-deferred publication. This story has involved tracking Naigeon's drum-rolling mentions of the *Mémoires* and quotations from the *Éléments de physiologie* all the way from the furore-inducing *Adresse à l'Assemblée nationale* of 1790 and the 1792 article on 'Diderot', the fifteen-volume edition of Diderot's *Œuvres* in 1798 with its selections, omissions, and statements, to the claims he makes in the *Mémoires* themselves. Here we analyse what it is that Naigeon has done with the *Éléments de physiologie* and, to a lesser extent, with the *Rêve de d'Alembert*. We look at his text in the light of his previous assertions about Diderot and about editing, not least in the censored preface to his 1802 edition of the Bordeaux copy of Montaigne's *Essais*. The immense and busy collage of interwoven snippets that he produces has to be credited for being the first publication of either of these two texts of Diderot's, given that quotation from them is exact and incessant, as the connected digital edition of these hundred pages shows immediately and comprehensively, and despite the fact that his reweaving techniques produce something completely different from either source text. Perhaps the questions of whether or not we recognise the original, and connectedly, whether or not we like what he has done, distract us from seeing something else, which is that this particular case may be providing us with invaluable details about his composition practices in earlier collaborations such as that other infamous atheist text, d'Holbach's *Système de la nature*, a collaboration, moreover, that he undertook with Diderot. Paying attention to this may indicate the route to further research on the text factory of the Encyclopédistes and in d'Holbach's circle.

Our own approach is somewhat in the style of a textual detective. We have used a metaphorical magnifying glass to compare texts and watch out for hints and traces. This is even more the case for the second of the two stories mentioned, which follows the third manuscript copy of the *Éléments de physiologie*, now lost, and the work of Garat at the *École normale* in 1795 and of the Ideologues at the Institut National in

the late 1790s. Here we conclude on the basis of extensive comparison that they did have access to the *Éléments de physiologie* in some version, whether it was specifically by means of this third manuscript, via Naigeon, or in some other way, and that they were channelling its insights directly into their own very successful lectures. This story is a separate one from Naigeon's for one principal reason: that whereas we have incontrovertible proof of Naigeon's knowledge of the *Éléments de physiologie* in the form of his quotation of about fifty pages from it, there is nothing explicit in the cases of Garat, Cabanis, and Destutt. With them, the argument gathers force (hopefully) from the sheer weight of cumulative resonances and parallels, and although there are some striking textual resemblances, these are infrequent. The story of Garat, Cabanis, and Destutt is marked by much greater circumspection on their part. Garat indeed was famous for his circumspect style, and much mocked for it. His odd two-volume *Mémoires historiques sur la vie de M. Suard, sur ses écrits, et sur le XVIIIe siècle* of 1820 provides a perfect example of volubility and circumspection, one in which, I argue, he repeatedly alludes to Diderot's *Éléments de physiologie*.

Interwoven, these two broad strands tell a vastly different story about Diderot's influence from the one that we are used to. This new story says that there was a concerted programme on the part of those philosophers who had been close to Diderot or to his circles to disseminate his thinking on materialism, physiology, and the mind, and that the pressures operating on the public sphere during the French Revolution and in the subsequent years of reaction, first Napoleonic and then monarchical, dictated absolutely the forms that dissemination was able to take. It also tells us something about how Naigeon, Garat, Cabanis, and Destutt de Tracy related to materialist thought, something which itself resonates with what we saw in Chapter 3. This is that these people seem all to have been more committed to transmitting materialist arguments and insights than to acknowledging those who generated those arguments and insights or to preserving the characteristics or form of one particular text. Or, to put it another way, they show their commitment to Diderot, whose works they have to present very carefully (if at all), by finding new ways and forms for his thought to continue to circulate that tend to remove him from the story. This, it seems, is how unorthodox thought survived at this time and under these circumstances. As Nicholas Cronk

has remarked, the re-use of texts is so extensive during this period that it could be called a defining feature of Enlightenment discourse.⁴

Ursula Le Guin wrote that 'The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story.'⁵ And although the *Éléments de physiologie* is not a story, this unreadness, this zombie existence as an unpublished, unread manuscript without a future, a present, or very much past, was not in fact its fate. It was a live thing. And I would argue that its reception is a story worth telling in itself.

This study is a deeply historicist one. Even the point in the previous paragraph has a historicist anchoring to it: scholars can henceforth take the *Éléments de physiologie* seriously because it was read *during the period of study* and therefore has historical value. But my final point will be a different one, an invitation not just to historians and scholars, but to those thinkers engaged with the perspectives and questions of new materialism, gender theory, and ecology, those looking with anxious urgency at the climactic and social effects of global capitalism. Might not Diderot's attention to reciprocity, equality, assemblages, his understanding of connections and relations, his up-tipping of normal hierarchies, and his view of people as vegetable, animal, and human all at once, offer ways of thinking we need to revisit?

4 Nicholas Cronk, 'Digitizing Enlightenment', paper delivered at the inaugural conference of The Berlin-Oxford Enlightenment Hub, St John's College, Oxford, 2 October 2019.

5 Ursula Le Guin, 'Where Do You Get Your Ideas from?', in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (London: Paladin, 1992 [1987]), pp. 192–200 (p. 198), cited by Ika Willis, *Reception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018) p. 2.