

H-France Review Vol. 15 (April 2015), No. 54

Charles Vincent, *Diderot en quête d'éthique (1773-1784)*, coll. 'Europe des Lumières', 28. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014., 679 pages. 70€ (cl). ISBN-10: 2812420189

Review by Kate E. Tunstall, University of Oxford.

This is an impressively erudite and intellectually ambitious book, which makes for stimulating reading. It is centred on Diderot's late works produced in the period from his journey to the court of Catherine the Great in St Petersburg in 1773-4 until his death in Paris in 1784. It is a period which, despite the work of Peter France, Anthony Strugnell, Gianluigi Goggi and others,[1] has received comparatively little scholarly attention, no doubt because all the works we consider to be canonical—the *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749), *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* (1769), *La Religieuse* (1760), the major *Salons* (1765, 1767), *Le Neveu de Rameau* (1761?-72)—had already been composed by then or, at least, in large part conceived, with the exception of *Jacques le fataliste* (1771-8). This is instead the period of the *Réfutation d'Helvétius* (1773), *Observations sur Hemsterhuis* (1774), *Observations sur le Nakaz* (1774), *Plan d'une université* (1775), Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire des Deux Indes* (3rd edition, 1780), as well as his fierce defence of Raynal in the *Lettre apologétique de l'abbé Raynal à Monsieur Grimm* (1781), and his final works, the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* (1st version 1778; second, 1782), famous for its attack on Rousseau, and the *Eléments de physiologie* (1778-82).

The central focus of Vincent's study is ethics or, rather, Diderot's "quest" for ethics, "quest" also being a key term in that it suggests, as Diderot's "penseur" had also done in the *Pensées philosophiques* much earlier on in his career (1746), that seeking is more important than finding, and Vincent makes it clear that Diderot's *œuvre* did not culminate in any coherent or stable objective moral or ethical code. The notion of a "quest" has one downside in relation to Vincent's project, however, namely that, while it suggests a linear object of study, the study itself does not proceed in a linear manner. It is not that the works in question are not studied in chronological order. That might not have been desirable for any number of reasons. Rather, it is that each section of the book does not build on the preceding section to culminate in a study of the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, which is what the "Introduction" leads us to expect.[2] Instead, we are offered what Vincent retrospectively refers to as "quatre regards complémentaires sur la morale des dernières œuvres du philosophe" (p. 623).

The richness and erudition of each of those four "regards" are not in any doubt here.[3] The question is how and perhaps whether the four quite fit together. In my view, Vincent has the material for not one but two books: one, primarily literary and focused on what he calls "an ethics of interpretation," which would primarily draw on the material found in sections one and four; another, essentially a work of intellectual history but nonetheless attentive to textual form, metaphor and image, exploring the place of morality in the academic disciplines of the late eighteenth century in general, and in Diderot's materialist writings in particular, and which would draw primarily on the material found in sections two and three. What we have instead is one extremely full book, the overarching thesis and direction of which are not always easy to grasp.[4]

Let us turn now to the four main sections: 1. "La controverse sur la morale dans les années 1770 en France" (pp. 35-160); 2. "Les langues de la morale chez Diderot" (pp. 161-329); 3. "La morale au carrefour des savoirs" (pp. 341-489); and 4. "Diderot herméneute: vers une éthique de l'interprétation" (pp. 451-633). Each is a veritable mine of interesting information and discussion. We find, for instance, a fascinating discussion of the competing interpretations of Hobbes's phrase

“*malus est puer robustus*” in the period (pp. 180-3); new evidence and sources for Diderot's interest in the history of duels and duelling (pp. 256-61) that might shed further light on *Jacques le fataliste*; and an exploration of Diderot's interest in the Calas affair, which, though not as well known nor as public as that of Voltaire, was significant and led Diderot to formulate an idiosyncratic version of the notion of the presumption of innocence (pp. 454-7). Vincent's book also provides further evidence for some things we already knew or suspected, for example, Diderot's frequent channelling of Montaigne (pp. 115-7, 326-8, 394-5), his enduring interest in calculation (pp. 171-5), the way his writing exploits point of view to produce different and sometimes conflicting meanings, a technique that earns them, following Pierre Hartman and others, the label, “anamorphoses” (pp. 361-71).^[5] Vincent has not only read widely in Diderot's *œuvre*, canonical and not, but he also has an excellent knowledge of the textual production of the period, including many non-canonical works, such as Barruel's *Les Helviennes* (1812). If I focus my attention in this review largely on the first and the fourth sections, it is because they seem to me the most stimulating.

The first section is focused on a number of interrelated controversies of the 1770s with the dual aim of setting out the polemical context that Vincent argues is crucial for understanding the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, and of gaining better purchase on the original manner in which Diderot integrated polemic into the second version of the *Essai*, the form of which perplexed editors for some time (pp. 533-4). Certainly disputes, controversies and *querelles* in the Ancien Régime have recently been the object of some important scholarship, notably that done by the research group AGON,^[6] and Vincent, drawing on the work of Didier Masseau, Olivier Ferret and Antoine Lilti,^[7] sets out the fractious nature of the public sphere of the 1770s (pp. 45-83). He highlights the ways in which the “différends” of the 1750s and 60s persisted into the 70s, notably the question of the relationship that an *homme de lettres* should have to power (pp. 69-75), and how the camps and polemical identities of “philosophe” and “anti-philosophe,” which were forged around the *Encyclopédie*, both hardened and shifted under new pressures (pp. 45-54). He also examines a series of interrelated controversies (utilitarianism, man's relationship to animals, luxury, equality of the sexes, and education, pp. 127-58), with the aim of demonstrating that morality was a constant concern in the period. There is one rather bizarre omission here, namely any discussion of the “*querelle* sur Sénèque.” Vincent does later mention it, but only in passing, asserting that it provided merely “un décor recurrent” (p. 536) for the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, and that it cannot alone explain Diderot's motivations for writing the *Essai*. That may be right, but in the absence of any account of the *querelle*, either in the first section or later on,^[8] the reader is not in a position evaluate that assertion, and moreover, if the Seneca quarrel was indeed “un décor recurrent,” then surely an account of its stakes, its actors, and its spaces would have been pertinent in a section devoted to the polemical context for Diderot's late works.

Most interesting here to my mind is Vincent's analysis of the quarrel over Thomas's *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs et l'esprit des femmes* of 1772 (pp. 142-51), in which he takes issue with Elisabeth Badinter's influential presentation of the *querelle*. She argued that, of the three participants, d'Épinay was the only champion of the equality of the sexes, since Thomas was undecided and Diderot was of the view that inequality of the sexes was natural.^[9] Vincent argues that Badinter accentuates the differences between the *querelleurs* with the aim of recuperating d'Épinay to an egalitarian Cartesian tradition, and that, in so doing, she pays insufficient attention to the social context of the debate (pp. 144-5). He demonstrates that while Diderot did indeed make a number of essentializing and derogatory claims about women, he also made it clear that for “un homme de lettres,” conversation with women was essential because it enabled him to acquire “un ramage, délicat, à l'aide duquel on dit honnêtement tout ce qu'on veut” (“Sur les femmes”, quoted on p. 147). He concludes that although Diderot did indeed conceive of the differences between the sexes in natural terms, he also made the case for society as a space for generic hybridisation: “[Diderot] naturalise une différence pour mieux socialiser une hybridité” (p. 148). This is persuasive, and Vincent's next move is therefore intriguing. He calls his own interpretation into question, asking: “faut-il cependant, faire crédit au texte et à l'auteur d'une telle *intention*? Pour quelle raison? Nous serons amenés à discuter cette épineuse question dans la dernière partie de cet ouvrage, lorsque nous observerons Diderot lui-même cherchant à sauver le sens de certains écrits de Sénèque contre les apparences et les lectures coutumières” (p. 148-9). Leaving aside for the moment the strange suggestion that one might

attribute an intention to a text, Vincent appears to be suggesting here that he may have done for Diderot what Diderot did for Seneca, and so before exploring the implications of his intriguing suggestion, it might be useful to turn to Vincent's discussion of Diderot's interpretation of Seneca.

In his fourth and final section, Vincent focuses on the complex and slippery text that is the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, which had until fairly recently been rather neglected by scholars. [10] In it, Diderot offers both an apology for Seneca, the philosopher who was moral tutor to the emperor Nero, the moral monster, and an apology for himself, the *philosophe* who had been accused of all kinds of hypocrisies by the *anti-philosophes* and by his one-time friend, Rousseau, whose *Confessions* were about to be published. The *Essai* is thus a work in which Diderot has one eye firmly fixed on posterity—the work has been described as Diderot's “testament” [11]—and the other on contemporary polemics, some of which relate to the *Essai* itself (the second version responding to some of the criticisms of the first), all the while having both eyes ostensibly focused on Seneca and Ancient Rome. As Vincent ably shows, Diderot played a number of roles, such as a reader, interpreter, and judge of Seneca. He was himself Seneca, the philosopher, moral advisor to a tyrannical emperor, accused by posterity of hypocrisy, and he was himself, an author, acutely aware that he would be read, interpreted, and judged by posterity. And Diderot described his own tricky moves in the work as follows: “présentant au censeur le philosophe derrière lequel je me tiens caché; là faisant le rôle contraire, et m'offrant à des flèches qui ne blesseront que Sénèque caché derrière moi” (quoted on p. 548).

One of Diderot's aims in the *Essai* was to prove Seneca's innocence or, rather, to find some grounds on which it might be claimed. Vincent reveals to us Diderot the philologist, which sounds rather incongruous until he supplies Rollin's definition of philology: “une espèce de science composée de grammaire, de poétique, d'antiquités, d'histoire, de philosophie, quelquefois même de mathématiques, de médecine, de jurisprudence, sans traiter aucune de ces matières à fond, ni séparément, mais les effleurant toutes, ou en partie” (quoted on p. 503). Put like that, it is rather surprising that the eclectic encyclopedist didn't turn to philology sooner! As Vincent shows, however, the result of Diderot's philological turn was historiographical scepticism. According to Diderot's presentation of the debate surrounding the authorship of “Of Consolation for Polybius” (pp. 559-565), any text or event witnessed will always produce a number of competing and equally plausible interpretations between which no amount of erudition will enable the scholar to decide. And so, in the absence of reasoned proof, Diderot advanced what Vincent terms “une éthique de l'interprétation.”

This involves Diderot's somewhat idiosyncratic version of the legal presumption of innocence, which he had developed in the 1760s, according to which *un grand homme* or *un homme de bien* has earned himself the presumption of innocence by virtue of being *grand* or *de bien*. Moreover, Diderot suggested that it is an act of virtue on the part of the judge to presume such a man to be innocent, whereas the wicked reveal their wickedness when they find reasons to incriminate him: “Soyons indulgents, et n'imitons pas les hommes corrompus qui, pour se trouver des semblables, sont de plus cruels accusateurs que les gens de bien” (quoted on p. 570). So Diderot condemned those who “[s'acharnent] à tourmenter Tacite pour trouver des torts à Sénèque,” while applauding those who “se tourmentent, qui même s'en imposent, pour trouver des excuses aux grands homes” (quoted on p. 571), and in this shape-shifting work in which Diderot became not only Seneca's judge but also Seneca himself, and in which the reader is therefore his judge, Diderot suggested that, since posterity will be unable to decide whether he was, as the *anti-philosophes* claimed, a hypocrite (because the textual evidence will be susceptible to a number of equally plausible interpretations), the reader ought to make every effort to adopt a benevolent interpretation and find the *philosophe*, the archetypal *homme de bien*, not guilty.

There are a number of problems here, and they emerge from Vincent appearing to endorse the “ethical” stance as ethical. Vincent does at least allude to one of the problems when he quotes Diderot's admiration for those who go so far as to deceive themselves in order to adopt the so-called “ethical” stance (“qui même s'en imposent”, p. 571), and he does also acknowledge that, as far as ethical turns go, it is logically circular (pp. 528-9) and involves a disconcerting conflation of people with books (pp. 520-22). Moreover, his section entitled “l'interprétation engage” (pp. 599-622)

suggests that “ethical” is synonymous with “politically partisan.” And yet Vincent consistently writes of Diderot’s “ethical hermeneutics” as though he holds them really to be ethical rather than political, polemical, tricky, and manipulative, or even downright passive aggressive. Witness the final line of the work, which is surely asking for a *querelle*: “Si le dernier qui parle est celui qui a raison, censeurs, parlez et ayez raison” (quoted on p. 299)

Indeed, on many occasions, and most markedly in his conclusion, Vincent does not so much analyze the so-called ethical strain he had identified in Diderot’s writing as channel it in his own: “Le philosophe doit être en premier lieu un *bon* lecteur, c’est-à-dire un lecteur qui pèse les documents, les témoignages, les preuves, mais aussi un lecteur qui adopte une attitude bienveillante à l’égard de l’univers de signes qu’il est amené à décrypter. Conscient de n’avoir à faire qu’à des traces du passé, qu’à des bribes du présent, il *construit* le reel en l’orientant vers le bien, selon une logique performative où le bien advient d’autant plus qu’on le recherché” (p. 631). Vincent sounds here as though he might actually be proposing such a way of reading, and indeed, as we saw earlier, he does hint that his own study might in fact perform such a reading of Diderot: his self-reflexive remark about his interpretation of “Sur les femmes” suggests not only that it might have been motivated by a desire to “save” Diderot from the charge of sexist anti-egalitarianism, but also that it might be superior to Badinter’s interpretation, not in the sense of being more accurate (the evidence being susceptible to equal and opposite interpretations), but in the sense that it seeks to exonerate “the great man.” And so, whereas Vincent performs an “ethical” interpretation, Badinter reveals herself to be a “bad” reader, which is to say, one who is uncharitable to an *homme de bien*. It had not occurred to me that when Vincent quoted in his Introduction the (bizarre) opening lines of France and Strugnell’s 1984 study of late Diderot, “Pourquoi Diderot? Parce que nous l’aimons” (quoted on p. 23), he might be endorsing love as an “orientation critique” (*ibid.*), and yet by the end of his study, it seems perhaps he was. If so, he too is asking for a *querelle*.

NOTES

[1] Peter France and Anthony Strugnell, *Diderot Les dernières années* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984); Gianluigi Goggi and Diderot Kahn, *L’édition du dernier Diderot* (Paris: Hermann, 2007).

[2] In the second paragraph of the Introduction, for instance, Vincent speaks of how he intends to “poursuivre aujourd’hui le questionnement de John Robert Loy: quel est le ‘projet’ de Diderot lorsqu’il écrit *l’Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*? Comment s’articule cette œuvre avec le reste de sa philosophie morale?” (p. 10).

[3] Nor is the quality of the writing, which is also very good. And there are remarkably few errors, typographical or otherwise. It should be “Gianluigi Goggi,” not “Ganluiggi” (p. 400), nor “Gianluiggi” (p. 470); it should be “Dryden,” not “Druyden” (p. 525); and Berkeley was Irish, not Scottish (p. 196).

[4] The book is also rather undecided as to whether it is a study of Diderot’s later works that seeks to argue that what they have in common is an ethical quest, which, if not absent from the earlier works, is less urgently present in them, or a study of Diderot’s ethical quest that focuses on the later works because they have been comparatively neglected.

[5] Pierre Hartmann, “Les Adieux du Vieillard’ comme anamorphose littéraire,” *Recherches sur Diderot et l’Encyclopédie*, 16 (1994), pp. 61-70.

[6] See <http://www.agon.paris-sorbonne.fr/>

[7] Didier Masseur, *Les ennemis des philosophes, l’anti-philosophie au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000); Olivier Ferret, *La fureur de nuire, échanges pamphlétaires entre philosophes et*

antiphilosophes (1750-1770), (Oxford: SVEC, 2007); Antoine Lilti, "Querelles et controverses," *Revue Mille neuf cent*, 25 (2007), pp. 13-28.

[8] He refers his reader in a footnote to William Conroy's study, *Diderot's "Essai sur Sénèque," Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 131 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1975).

[9] Elisabeth Badinter, "Préface," in Antoine-Louis Thomas, *Qu'est-ce qu'une femme?* (Paris: POL, 1989).

[10] See *Recherches sur Diderot et l'Encyclopédie*, 36 (2004).

[11] Jean Ehrard, "Pourquoi Sénèque?" in Denis Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. DPV (Paris: Hermann, 1975-), vol. XXV, p. 6.

Kate E. Tunstall
University of Oxford
kate.tunstall@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172