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Stéphane Pujol, *Morale et sciences des mœurs dans l'Encyclopédie*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2021. 462 pp. Bibliography and index. €58.00. ISBN 9782745355669.

Review by Devin Vartija, Utrecht University.

In this rich and clearly argued book, Stéphane Pujol investigates the moral theories in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, as well as considering the *Dictionnaire raisonné* as a moral project in and of itself. His ability to track down the precise texts and thinkers that underpin hundreds of encyclopedia articles is impressive, and his book highlights the tensions and even paradoxes that one finds regarding Enlightenment moral theories in general and those in the *Encyclopédie* in particular. His central thesis itself concentrates on a paradox: "en même temps qu'elle participe activement à la fondation d'une science des mœurs, l'*Encyclopédie* tend à poursuivre le mouvement esquissé par le siècle, soit celui d'une dissolution de la morale en tant que discipline purement normative" (p. 37). His vast knowledge of the broader seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical and political debates concerning morality and "sciences des mœurs" make this a valuable book not only for students and scholars interested in the *Encyclopédie*, but also for those interested in the more general topic of early modern moral philosophy and its transformation by Enlightenment thinkers.

His book furthers some of the main lines of historical inquiry in Enlightenment and *Encyclopédie* studies in two ways in particular. First, he highlights the importance of the *Encyclopédie* as a debating platform rather than seeing it as a more or less coherent body of work that advanced a central political or philosophical message.<sup>[1]</sup> In this regard, he does a superb job of demonstrating the diverse and sometimes contradictory uses to which a given idea or theory could be put, thus eschewing the rigid demarcation of the Enlightenment into "moderate," "radical," "deist," "atheistic," or any number of other camps, while simultaneously highlighting the importance of doctrinal commitments or argumentative coherence. Second, he demonstrates that within the cacophony of voices and opinions concerning morality in the *Encyclopédie*, one finds two important developments that are characteristic of the Enlightenment as a whole: the establishment of a new order of values that links the good to utility, and the individual point of view to that of the collective. Morality in the Enlightenment and the *Encyclopédie*—Pujol essentially treats them as metonyms—is particularly interesting because these thinkers sought the foundation of morality in a redefined "nature of man," not in divine precepts external to him.<sup>[2]</sup>

While Pujol rightly points out that the philosophy of materialist-monism seldom comes to the fore in the *Encyclopédie*, we must place many of the arguments concerning the basis of morality

in the context of the immense challenge posed by materialism, in this instance, the French materialist interpretation of John Locke and Baruch de Spinoza in such thinkers as Diderot, Claude-Adrien Helvétius, and Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach. Materialists generally postulated that morality can be reduced to the experience of pleasure and pain. That which produces pleasure is dubbed morally good, and that which produces pain morally bad. But the nuance of his analysis and breadth of his knowledge are on full display in his treatment of materialism, as he demonstrates that some materialists, such as Diderot and d'Holbach, held that justice exists as a kind of natural law, prior to any positive laws in civil society, while other materialists, such as Thomas Hobbes and Helvétius, argued that justice is only present in civil society after the conclusion of the social contract.

One of the central arguments of the book is that modern natural law lies at the basis of most of the encyclopedists' reflections on morality and that modern natural law formed an integral part of the advancement of Enlightenment moral theory. He states that the moral philosophy of natural law, while it took on diverse modes depending on the thinker and period, consisted of three basic characteristics or tenets: the concern to create a morality that is not immanent in human beings but independent (a product of reason); a rejection of the Hobbesian thesis, which presupposes natural selfishness and holds that moral conventions do not precede positive law; and the conviction that there exists a natural and universal morality. The encyclopedists found themselves at a crossroads in the development of natural law and a concomitant moral theory, as the critiques of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and d'Holbach that challenged the equation of natural law with morality were formulated at mid-century.

In the first of this three-part book, Pujol analyzes the place of morality in the wider classificatory scheme of the *Encyclopédie*. He highlights the importance of d'Alembert's explicitly secular genealogy of morality, as the editor grounds the notion of (in)justice in the sensory experience of pleasure and pain in his "Discours préliminaire" and other writings. In the famous "Système figuré des connaissances humaines," morality is one of the two principal branches of the "Science de l'homme," alongside logic. Pujol stresses that because morality touches upon so many fields of inquiry, its "centre est (presque) partout, et la circonference nulle part" (p. 55), but also that it rests on a novel anthropology, an idea shared by eighteenth-century thinkers of many different philosophical and religious persuasions. He demonstrates that the classificatory strategies used by the encyclopedists in the realm of morality could be subversive, as with Diderot's article "Jouissance," classified under "Grammaire et Morale."

In the second part of the book, "Y a-t-il une théorie morale dans l'*Encyclopédie*?", Pujol highlights three strands of moral theory to be found in the *Encyclopédie* and the tensions within each strand: natural law, the sensory model largely inspired by John Locke, and moral relativism and utilitarianism. He argues that the morality of the Enlightenment was one not only of obligations but also of rights and reinforces the more common argument that many philosophes sought to rehabilitate the passions, not necessarily suppress or control them as was dominant in pre-eighteenth-century reflections on the passions. These developments in moral theory came largely from the philosophes' engagement with the natural law tradition, as some key encyclopedists, such as d'Alembert, purified the tradition of its religious moorings to stress only the duties of humans in society. Pujol is particularly good at demonstrating the wider philosophical debates into which the encyclopedists entered. They are on full display in his fascinating discussion of the problem of obligation in the *Encyclopédie*. What is it in obligation that obliges us? Can one oblige oneself, independent of the will of a superior or of a law giver? One can locate obligation

in a metaphysical truth that transcends the material world, in a universal principle accessible to all peoples, or in the material and practical organization of human beings in society, thus arriving at the response of theologians, adherents of natural religion, and atheist materialists, respectively, to the problem of obligation. In the *Encyclopédie*, Jaucourt drew on Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui to argue that reason alone can obligate us, while other encyclopedists held that religion must be the guarantor of morality, and obligation is ultimately grounded in God's will. Pujol highlights that many materialist thinkers grounded obligation in humanity's natural needs, although the case of Diderot demonstrates that materialism did not necessarily exclude natural law, as Pujol follows Jacques Proust in arguing that Diderot held to the principle of a universal law.

Natural law thinkers aimed to base their theories on human nature as it is, not as it should be, and thus the question of whether human beings are naturally selfish, sociable, or somewhere in between reared its head with particular force in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Augustinianism or its secularized variations in Pierre Nicole, Blaise Pascal, Hobbes, and others that made *amour de soi* or *amour propre* (the two would not be conceptually separated until the eighteenth century) a fundamental part of human nature inspired strong engagement and sometimes spirited rejection among the encyclopedists. Pujol argues that the encyclopedists generally contributed to the rehabilitation of *amour de soi* by arguing that it is the basis of both our rights and our duties. Concerning sociability, Pujol demonstrates that there is a rough consensus in the *Encyclopédie* that sociability is a natural sentiment, though based in the biology of human beings according to materialists such as Diderot and d'Holbach rather than in the designs of God according to those encyclopedists who drew on Jean Barbeyrac and Burlamaqui. In an excellent analysis of Diderot's article "Droit naturel," Pujol demonstrates that Diderot disputed certain aspects of natural law without completely rejecting the legitimacy of this principle. Rather, he transformed it by grounding it in the general will. Diderot aimed to give a foundation to natural rights that was not metaphysical or abstract and that took into account the disparate, seemingly random and sometimes even contradictory positive laws that exist in societies across time and space. The general will was the solution to the problem of providing morality with a firm foundation in a world without God.

Pujol ignores the many passages in Locke that actually place him firmly in the natural law tradition of moral theory.<sup>[3]</sup> He is nonetheless correct that Locke's rejection of innate ideas was one aspect of his philosophy that greatly impacted French Enlightenment thinkers as well as their adversaries: the anti-*Encyclopédie* thinker Abraham Chaumeix saw clearly that if one attacks innate ideas, one can more easily attack the idea of a single, universal (Christian) morality. However, many Christians embraced the Lockean critique of innate ideas, just as materialists such as Diderot and d'Holbach rejected innate ideas while still holding to the principle of a universal morality. One of the most influential philosophers to engage with Locke's morality was Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, who rejected the strand of Lockean morality that views it as being acquired through experience and therefore entirely contingent and non-natural, developing his concept of an innate "moral sense" from the late 1690s until his death in 1713. While Diderot translated Shaftesbury's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699), he distanced himself from the concept of a "moral sense" as his thinking evolved in the 1750s and 1760s, emphasizing the importance of experience in the acquisition of ideas of right and wrong. In the *Encyclopédie*, one finds acceptance, rejection, and qualified defenses of the moral sense.

In the second section, Pujol investigates moral relativism and utilitarianism together. Diderot used Hobbes to advance a measure of moral relativism but did not follow the English thinker to

the extreme of making morality purely a consequence of positive law. Pujol brings to the fore that Diderot and many other encyclopedists advanced a “non-radical nominalism.” While there are no absolute moral and immoral principles, notions of the just and unjust are nonetheless founded in reason’s discovery of natural laws. Likewise, Diderot and many of his collaborators held to a strong confluence of the good, the true, and the useful. Pujol argues that Diderot’s perspective was one of amorality concerning the individual but one that reached towards moral universalism concerning human beings in society, in addition to being based in his materialism and therefore premised on physical sensations or “l’identité d’organisation,” as Diderot put it.

In the third and final section of the book, Pujol analyzes the place of the passions and moral education in the *Encyclopédie*. The encyclopedists generally contributed to the wider Enlightenment trend of rehabilitating the passions, drawing from both Christian and secular sources to defend the necessity and usefulness of emotion in many areas of human conduct, including morality. For example, Saint-Lambert, in his article “Législateur,” stressed that good legislation utilizes human passions and orients them towards the public good. And while the encyclopedists did not make virtue a political principle like Montesquieu had done, they nonetheless stressed the social and political importance of virtue, arguing in the article “Vertu,” for example, that virtue precedes the law, and the laws only gain force from the virtue of those who live under their jurisdiction. Pujol presents an excellent overview of the discussion of free will versus determinism that bears so heavily on the issue of morality, as d’Alembert, for example, noted that liberty is necessary for morality to have any meaning. For Diderot and other materialists, emphasizing determinism does not threaten the order of society or morality, but rightfully strips morality of a wrongful and destructive metaphysics. Materialists such as Diderot then had to address the problem of why the education that a book such as the *Encyclopédie* was meant to provide could make any difference in a morally determined world. Diderot addressed this issue directly in the article “Mal Faisant”: “s’il n’y a point de liberté, il n’y a plus que des hommes bien faisans et des hommes mal-faisans ; mais les hommes n’en sont pas moins modéfiables en bien & en mal ; les bons exemples, les bons discours, les châtimens, les récompenses, le blâme, la louange, les lois ont toujours leur effet” (p. 326). As Pujol remarks, it is precisely because human beings are not free and are subject to myriad causes that they themselves are not fully cognizant that moral education is important.

In the conclusion to his book, it is unfortunate that Pujol relegates to a footnote a very significant observation: perhaps one of the most significant contributions of Enlightenment thinkers to moral theory was to have shifted the discussion away from the “foundations” of morality to its “origins,” having laid the groundwork for a novel human science. Pujol rightly emphasizes that while some Enlightenment thinkers may have really believed that they made significant advances in moral thinking, there are no neutral theories of human nature; the encyclopedists’ vision of human nature was already moralized. By ending his book with an analysis of questions of humanity, a universal moral law, and the issue of slavery in Enlightenment thought, he pinpoints why studying the encyclopedists’ moral thinking may be valuable: their moralized conception of human nature endures in myriad and complex ways in our own moralized conception of human nature.

Reading Pujol’s work, one gets an acute sense of just how deeply immersed the encyclopedists were in the issues raised by seventeenth-century philosophers, confirming Dan Edelstein’s astute remark that “the *Encyclopédie* itself, in some respects, may be regarded as the greatest book the seventeenth century ever produced.”<sup>[4]</sup> While there is much to praise in *Morale et sciences des*

*mœurs dans l'Encyclopédie*, Edelstein's observation points to one significant shortcoming of Pujol's work: his failure to engage with almost any Anglophone scholarship on the *Encyclopédie* and the Enlightenment. Given the importance of the natural law tradition to Pujol's argument regarding morality in the *Encyclopédie*, it is surprising that he has not engaged with Edelstein's important work in this area.<sup>[5]</sup> One of Edelstein's main points is that a key Enlightenment transformation in the history of the natural law or natural rights tradition was not one of conceptual innovation but one of form. Instead of writing heavy Latin tomes destined for law faculties, many Enlightenment thinkers wrote shorter texts, such as encyclopedia articles, in the vernacular.<sup>[6]</sup> In addition to Edelstein's scholarship, such classic works as John Yolton's *Locke and French Materialism*, Richard Tuck's *Natural Rights Theories*, or Knud Haakonssen's *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* are ignored.<sup>[7]</sup> Engaging with this formidable scholarship would have strengthened Pujol's analysis and perhaps also modified some of his conclusions.

Another striking absence from the book is any sustained engagement with the encyclopedists' reflections on the non-European world. One cannot properly understand the encyclopedists' "sciences des mœurs," one of Pujol's main concerns, without considering the transformation by Enlightenment thinkers of the understanding of the place of Europeans in a culturally diverse world. Concepts such as stadal history, noble and ignoble savage, barbarian, un/civilized, civilization, and progress were central to the encyclopedists' "sciences des mœurs," but they receive little to no attention in Pujol's book. Finally, the book's three-part structure could have been reconsidered, as there is significant overlap and much repetition. For example, to properly understand the place of morality in the broader systems of knowledge in the *Encyclopédie*—the first section of Pujol's book—he had to consider the content of the articles, not only how they were classified, and so issues such as materialism, innateness, and moral freedom are raised often in the first section, and then again many times in the next two sections. Nonetheless, Pujol's erudition and clarity shine through in this book, making it a consistently illuminating read.

## NOTES

[1] Thus running counter to Jonathan Israel's argument in *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 843.

[2] Pujol draws extensively on Jacques Domenech, *L'éthique des Lumières: Les fondements de la morale dans la philosophie française du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Vrin 1989). Following eighteenth-century usage, Pujol has maintained the masculine pronouns.

[3] Hannah Dawson, "The Normativity of Nature in Pufendorf and Locke," *The Historical Journal* 63, no. 3 (2020): 528–558.

[4] Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 48.

[5] Such as Edelstein, "Is There a 'Modern' Natural Law Theory?: Notes on the History of Human Rights," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7, no. 3 (2016): 345–64 and Edelstein, *On the Spirit of Rights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[6] Dan Edelstein, “Enlightenment Rights Talk,” *The Journal of Modern History* 86, no. 3 (2014), 531.

[7] John Yolton, *Locke and French Materialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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