
H-France Review Vol. 22 (November 2022), No. 182

Caroline Warman, *The Atheist's Bible: Diderot's Éléments de physiologie*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2020. X + 428 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.95 U.S. (hb) ISBN 9781783748976; \$32.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781783748969.

Review by Shane H. Hockin, Florida State University.

Caroline Warman's *The Atheist's Bible: Diderot's Éléments de physiologie* is a solid summary of one of Diderot's final philosophical works. Warman summarizes and contextualizes the text, and gives a detailed publishing history of the *Éléments*. She presents the *Éléments* as the ultimate culmination and synthesis of Diderot's life and work, and does so convincingly. The book falls into two main parts. The first part attempts to situate Diderot's work into the philosophy and physiology of the time, and show how he incorporated that period's ideas and arguments in *Éléments*, while also debating with and intervening in them. Warman illustrates how Diderot interweaves his ideas with those before him, creating a comprehensive analysis of materialism and human existence, despite the widespread impression that the *Éléments* are fragmentary. This is the most successful part of Warman's argument. The second part questions why scholars do not widely recognize Diderot's *Éléments* and its importance, and tries to answer that inquiry by looking at its publishing history. This publishing history proves to be the most interesting and unique aspect of *The Atheist's Bible*, though it may well do too good a job of explaining why *Éléments* is not better remembered, potentially undermining Warman's main thesis. Warman's primary goal here is to explain why Diderot's *Éléments de physiologie* should be considered the quintessential atheist tract of the eighteenth century and beyond.

Part one of *The Atheist's Bible* provides the philosophical context of Diderot's *Éléments*. Chapter two (the introduction is presented as chapter one) explains why the work in question appears so fragmented, and suggests that this may have been intentional on the part of Diderot. Warman compares his work to that of Pascal and La Mettrie, and shows how Diderot's views of nature and the senses contradict Pascal's views and improve on La Mettrie's, and argues that the fragmented nature of the work mirrors that of Pascal's works. Chapter three further contextualizes Diderot's arguments by summarizing the basic principles and arguments of *Éléments de physiologie*. She notes how Diderot approaches the topics of materialism, nature and order, matter and flux, the end of life, knowledge and the senses, memory, physiology, and the pursuit of happiness. Warman then elegantly puts these views into context with many of the major writers of the time. Warman ultimately shows how Diderot evolves from Buffon's views on how the human mind imitates nature, mirrors Meslier's ideas on material movement and the creation of inanimate objects, and supports the likes of Spinoza in viewing the importance of the human senses in determining truth and reality. Chapter four gives examples of how Diderot

applied his philosophy to real life by illustrating his views on anatomy and physiology, showing how his materialism, though primitive by today's medical standards, was a leap forward in scientific understanding of the human body. By providing the context of Diderot's *Éléments de physiologie*, Warman helps the reader see how Diderot fit into the philosophical world in which he wrote, how he overlapped and where he differed from his contemporaries, and how in some cases Diderot even held advanced views of anatomy and natural science.

Part two of *The Atheist's Bible* covers the publishing history of *Éléments de physiologie*, its possible influence on the French Revolution, and how it somewhat became lost in history. In chapter five, Warman discusses Naigeon's *Adresse à l'Assemblée nationale*, Diderot's obvious influence in Naigeon's thought, and how anti-revolutionary views shape historians' perspective on this widely-discussed work. [1] She argues that "it looks as if Naigeon was using his *Adresse* to prepare the way for his multi-staged Diderot publication project," which she sees as a misstep (p. 183). Though Warman makes Diderot's influence on Naigeon's *Adresse* perfectly clear, she glosses over the context of the Revolution itself in motivating Naigeon. Maybe the French Revolution itself is just outside the scope of the chapter, but Diderot's ideas posed as a potential influence on revolutionary thought would have been an interesting discussion. Instead, Warman attempts to examine the personal motives of Naigeon, noting his blatant plagiarism of Diderot in the *Adresse*, and speculating on Naigeon's strategy here. Is Diderot present as an introduction to Naigeon's future work and possibly as a clandestine provocation toward authorities, or is Naigeon taking credit for his mentor's work? Warman is unable to draw an expedient conclusion, and the situating of Diderot in Naigeon's revolutionary *Adresse* is more successful than the discussion of why Naigeon relies so heavily on Diderot at this revolutionary moment in history. Chapter six delves into Naigeon's transition toward writing *Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de Denis Diderot*, but chapter seven is ultimately the first to expand on the main argument of Warman's book with some actual evidence--was Diderot's *Éléments* influential? This evidence is in the form of one 1794 letter showing that one bookseller presented one copy of the manuscript to the *Comité d'instruction publique*. The manuscript remained in the bookseller's lists until 1846, after which it was sold. Warman then looks at the fact this manuscript passed through the hands of the *Comité d'instruction publique*, surmising that it is unlikely many people did not see it, but admitting all the evidence is at best circumstantial. Warman's next chapters tell the stories of Dominique-Joseph Garat and Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, relatively important figures during the latter half of the French Revolution, who are shown to have both likely read and been influenced by the *Éléments*. These are fascinating bits of evidence that certainly illustrate Diderot's importance and that his *Éléments de physiologie* were at least partially available. The rest of the second part of Warman's work recounts the publishing history throughout the nineteenth century, beginning with Naigeon's *Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de Denis Diderot*. This, too, is an intriguing tale and important for understanding what happened to the *Éléments de physiologie*, and why so few people seem to know about it.

The main reason that Warman presents *The Atheist's Bible* as significant is because she believes that Diderot's *Éléments de physiologie* is one of the most important and influential works of the eighteenth century, and perhaps beyond. Here her argument weakens and appears overstated, for two reasons. First, she does an excellent job of showing the unique publishing history of Diderot's work that limited its publication numbers and caused it to be viewed as fragmentary, and therefore clearly limited its readership. The fact is that, despite evidence at least one manuscript was available during the Revolution, there is none really suggesting many people likely read it, and few historical figures cite it as being particularly influential to their thinking.

In her introduction she even half-heartedly admits that people read the *Éléments* “at least to some extent in the 1790s,” seemingly implying this as a victory for Diderot (p. 13). “To some extent,” however, also implies that these people did not amount to particularly influential numbers, and the evidence in the second part of this work seems to suggest limited readership as well. The second problem is that Warman overlooks another work that, more or less, accomplished the same goals she presents for Diderot, and did it several years earlier—Baron D’Holbach’s *Système de la nature*. In his extremely influential work, D’Holbach also covers nature and order, matter and flux, the end of life, knowledge and the senses, memory, and the pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, the work was an immense bestseller, as noted in Robert Darnton’s seminal works on clandestine literature during the eighteenth century.[2] D’Holbach makes token appearances in Warman’s story, but there is virtually no analysis or comparison of D’Holbach’s work with Diderot’s, despite the acknowledgement that the two were friends and Diderot may possibly have aided the former in the writing of his influential tome. Warman does insinuate that the influence of Naigeon and Diderot in *Système de la nature* may have been such that D’Holbach does not even matter, though she admits this as speculation. That argument could run the other way, however, with Diderot being the one influenced, but such speculation is simply that—conjecture that is not particularly interesting without the evidence to back it. Ultimately, when one examines the similarities in scope and purpose of the two works, then adds on the evidence of their actual influence on materialist and atheists throughout modern history, *Système de la nature* appears a better candidate to be labeled “The Atheist’s Bible.” That is not to say that Warman is wrong—there simply does not appear to be enough evidence to make a strong argument either way.

None of this diminishes the benefits of reading this well-written analysis of Diderot’s *Éléments de physiologie*. When one breaks down Warman’s exploration of Diderot’s position in the pantheon of philosophical writers, one is left with the view that maybe this *should* have been the most influential proponent of materialism during the Enlightenment and revolutionary periods. Certainly Diderot was the more qualified natural philosopher to present this view compared to D’Holbach or Naigeon, with his overall contributions to the science and philosophy of the time eclipsing almost all his contemporaries. His *Éléments* lacked the crudeness of D’Holbach’s work, and ultimately presented the science, as understood at the time, in a more accurate and illuminating light. Diderot’s synthesis of materialism and nature certainly deserves a closer look by more scholars examining Enlightenment philosophy. Warman’s *The Atheist’s Bible* is an excellent starting point for those who attempt that venture.

NOTES

[1] It is a little surprising that Warman does not cite Jonathan Israel’s *Democratic Enlightenment*, which gives one of the most detailed analyses of Naigeon’s *Adresse* that is available. Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 74, 899-930.

[2] Robert Darnton, *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1699-1789* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), pp. 205-208; Darnton, *Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), pp. 26-69.

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ISSN 1553-9172