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978-0-521-41483-8 - The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century  
France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing

Daniel Brewer

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

In a short, programmatic essay written in 1784, Immanuel Kant asks the question, “What is Enlightenment?” His answer, condensed in the motto *sapere aude*, dare to know, is that Enlightenment comes about once the individual strives courageously to free herself or himself from the enslaving condition of ignorance. As Kant’s essay suggests, this heroic struggle for liberating knowledge (Enlightenment) also characterizes the event of *the* Enlightenment, thus providing a way to understand Enlightenment in historical terms. It is tempting to believe, along with Kant, that ours is an age of Enlightenment, and that in inheriting the legacy of the past we free ourselves from what Kant calls its barbarism. This emancipation from the past means freeing ourselves from the immediacy of the event through a courageous act of cognition, the Kantian *sapere aude*. Historical understanding, then, would involve mediating the raw experience of the event and comprehending the past as such, as experience mastered by virtue of its being represented to consciousness.

Kant’s *Was ist Aufklärung* marks an important moment in the history of European Enlightenment, wherever one locates its beginnings and ends (assuming it has ended and that the present belongs to a post-Enlightenment age). I do not propose to rewrite that history here. Instead I wish to ask whether the history of Enlightenment might not be unwritable insofar as Kant’s question is unanswerable. Or rather, Enlightenment can be made into an event and its history written, but only by refusing to consider Kant’s question as a philosophical one, involving the very conditions of possibility for critical knowledge,

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if not its limits. This at least is how it has been heard by Michel Foucault. Rather than answer the question, as so many have attempted to do, Foucault situates it, maintaining that philosophy has never been able to provide an answer to “what is Enlightenment?” Indeed, he defines modern philosophy itself as “the philosophy that is attempting to answer the question raised so imprudently two centuries ago: *Was ist Aufklärung?*”<sup>1</sup>

If the problem of defining Enlightenment critically marks the limits of modern philosophy, it is because philosophy can be modern only by becoming caught in what could be called the double bind of Enlightenment. To be truly liberating, to provide knowledge of self and world, philosophy must set about to produce a critical perspective so powerful that it calls into question any critique that could be produced, including that of Enlightenment and philosophy itself. The knots of this double bind begin to tighten as the eighteenth-century Enlighteners endeavor to free themselves from the fetters of what they call ignorance, superstition, and religious dogma. They attempt to produce knowledge at its most useful, insisting above all on the arbitrary status of any way of representing knowledge. Only thus can they arrogate for themselves the right and power to judge all representations of knowledge and to decide which shall be put to use. The entire project of rationalist critique is based upon the assumption that prior knowledge can be refuted only with knowledge. Light can dispel the shadows only by revealing that tenebrous knowledge does not know enough. Consequently, to challenge the authority of established truth discourses, the Enlighteners seek to produce more powerful truths. They do not claim to know things better or truly, however, just differently. Relying on the practice of reason (not acts of faith), stressing the role of the senses in the production of knowledge (and not the “innate ideas” of the Cartesian tradition), they insist on the empirical, experiential determination of knowledge. Quite willing to accept partial, provisional knowledge, they seek above all a useful and effective way to represent the world and the human subject’s place in it.

The Enlighteners’ entire project bears witness to the

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conviction that reason cannot oppose power. It can only seek to be more powerful than what it sets itself against, which is to say that only one power can oppose another.<sup>2</sup> The Enlightenment wish to demystify all forms of knowledge by empowering knowledge in general. They reject the supposedly universal principles and timeless truths that had grounded the knowledge of a prior age, claiming that these express not the immutable essence of the divine, human or natural world, but rather the values of particular individuals or social groups. In the place of truth as a universal founding principle, the Enlightenment substitute values, which however powerful are ultimately arbitrary. Nowhere is this process more obvious than in the massive testament to Enlightenment that is the *Encyclopédie*. Hence this investigation of Enlightenment critique begins by considering the representation of knowledge in the encyclopedic text. Rephrasing Kant's question somewhat, I wish to consider not what Enlightenment is but how it represents.

I would suggest that Enlightenment can be examined not only as an historical period or philosophical concept, but also as a specific representational practice. In one sense, this means quite obviously that before saying anything concerning Enlightenment as period or concept, one must read Enlightenment texts. It is not enough though to invoke the commonplace of reading without at the same time seeking through reading to displace, rephrase or even refuse established interpretive paradigms or "master narratives." Failing to do so, one risks repeating and reactivating precisely the paradigms and narratives one wishes to comprehend and contest. Accordingly, as I use it here the term Enlightenment will not refer to what intellectual historians have already described in exhaustive detail, namely, a particular set of concepts or theoretical constructs belonging to such domains as epistemology, esthetics, ethics or social theory. By Enlightenment I mean a particular mode or art of producing knowledge as a form of representation, a specific set of techniques for figuring the relation between subjects and objects, people and things, and

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finally a way of inventing a critical relation to knowledge. The story I have to tell concerns how these techniques work and what effects they produce.

Although this story will relate a liberating Enlightenment, it must also consider the latter's limits. Enlightenment critique falls victim to entrapment and self-entrapment when it claims the knowledge it represents escapes the contingency of its representation. This claim amounts to an idealism designed to overcome the materiality of representations, the stubborn resistance to a conceptualizing, theorizing, idealizing drive that representations in their materiality continuously offer. The encyclopedic text provides a prime example of the consequences of this self-entrapment. Present in the words and images of the *Encyclopédie*, the Enlighteners' representational practice permits them to believe they can master knowledge without being mastered by it. However effective this practice may be, it risks infusing Enlightenment critique with the negative potential of power. Once the Enlighteners put their newly empowered knowledge to practical ends, reordering institutions and social practices according to the light of reason, Enlightenment begins to self-destruct. Once rationalism becomes a representational practice judged in terms of its effectiveness, productivity, and power, knowledge is instrumentalized. Nature, as well as human subjects, become yet other objects of knowledge, possession, and domination.<sup>3</sup>

This at least is the argument of those who caution against taking over uncritically one of the European Enlightenment's most appealing of legacies, namely, an abiding confidence in progress, in a meliorative, teleological view of history and the human subject's place in it. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for example that in the empowerment of reason one witnesses the transformation of Enlightenment into myth, the conversion of a philosophy of reason into an ideology of rationalization and a technology of terrifying mastery.<sup>4</sup> In one of their more provocative examples, Horkheimer and Adorno present the Marquis de Sade's novel *Juliette* as one of the very emblems of Enlightenment, not a

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perverted Enlightenment gone amok, but rather pushed to its darkest and most violent limits.

The object of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique is not the eighteenth-century Enlightenment but modern culture. The question they raise is whether the most repressive, dehumanizing, and apparently irrational forms of modern thought and behavior are aberrant breaches in culture and history, or whether instead they reflect the inevitable development of rational philosophy and social practices. Their goal is not to reject Enlightenment and refuse reason, but to rid Enlightenment, if possible, of its accretion of myth, thereby restoring its authentic critical potential. What Horkheimer and Adorno do refuse is the story of a heroic and ultimately innocent Enlightenment, whose telling only mythologizes Enlightenment and mystifies precisely those values that should be able to free knowledge of mystification. Thus, while they would agree with Alfred Cobban when he refers to the "rebrutalization of contemporary life," they are far more cautious about calling for a return to what Cobban sees as the "ethical standards" of the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno do not simply bemoan nostalgically the eclipse of Enlightenment. Their attempt to comprehend the consequences of Enlightenment, and keep them at bay, highlights the difficulty encountered in mounting a critique of Enlightenment, namely, that no "outside" to reason can be invoked that reason itself has not already always constituted. One can adopt no critical position that would not be articulated in precisely rational terms.<sup>6</sup>

This other story of Enlightenment makes it increasingly difficult to believe in a mythical Enlightenment in which the critique of authority somehow remains unaffected by the problem of the authority of critique. This other story reveals what a mythologized Enlightenment covers up, namely, its own double bind, the inability to prevent the critical practice of Enlightenment from turning or being turned back upon itself. If the eighteenth-century Enlighteners sought their freedom by refusing the paradigms and principles that unshakably grounded knowledge in religious and metaphysical terms, do

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they undo in the process the foundation of knowledge in general, including that of their own epistemological systems? If they reject the universals that underpinned the ethics, esthetics, and social theory of a prior age, what of the ultimate ground of their own theoretical enterprises in such domains? In the Enlightenment's rephrasing of truth as value, is the very foundation of rational thought lost (once again as always), and can any claim to have discovered the truth not be refuted, or at least deconstructed, as exemplifying a quite Nietzschean will to power? The Enlighteners produced a powerful critical discourse, yet one it would seem that must itself be subjected to a thoroughgoing critique. How then can one undertake a contemporary critique of Enlightenment if what one encounters are the limits of critique?

Kant's question is clearly a modern one, if not a postmodern one. And in asking it Kant is not alone in being imprudent, since critical theory in general is also trying to answer Kant's question. By the shorthand term of critical theory, I mean a self-reflexive, self-problematizing investigation into the real as it is produced in and by symbolic representation (such as texts and images, but also all other varieties of sounds and shapes). Critical theory has brought down disciplinary boundaries, questioning the paradigms relied on to interpret the world and make sense of it, and forging different perspectives onto events and values. What is contemporary about Enlightenment, then, as a representational practice, and which is highlighted by a thriving competition in the area of critical theory (theory of the subject, language, the artwork, the text, etc.), is that the present-day practice of representing knowledge continually and inevitably also confronts the double bind of Enlightenment. The discourse of critical theory, too, must not refuse to turn its critical power upon itself so to speak, even at the risk of questioning the very foundation of theoretical discourse and adopting a skeptical or at least incredulous attitude towards the latter's power to deliver up and reveal the truth.

A good deal of the debate concerning what is called the postmodern involves what value to grant to theory's admission of its constitutive double bind. Of course, to propose judging

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this double bind in terms of value is to decide the question in advance. There are those who argue that any critical theoretical discourse must be judged instead on the basis of its capacity to reveal truths. Refusing the possibility of such revelation, in such a view, would be tantamount to embracing inescapable relativism, skepticism or nihilism. The postmodern, for its most resolute of critics, is thus an antihumanism, a foundationless pluralism, an antifoundationalism that challenges the grounds for any kind of knowledge, moral action or esthetic judgment.<sup>7</sup>

The debate concerning postmodernism will not be resolved here. I would contend though that the distinctive feature of postmodern thought is a refusal to comprehend being and truth in metaphysical terms. Instead they are events, occurring in unique, nongeneralizable encounters that make up no History but designate a “post-history.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, these events involve (an) art, and thus the crucial issue in the debate concerning the postmodern involves the place and function accorded to art. I must stress that by art I do not mean the object esthetic theory sets itself apart from in order to describe, regulate, and know. I mean rather the set of nongeneralizable techniques or working procedures for producing specific yet also unpredictable effects, only one of which may be knowledge. This definition of art not only questions the legitimacy of the domain of esthetics “proper.” It also draws attention to theoretical discourse itself as a work of art, a discursive practice that enjoys no hierarchical superiority with regard to the various other cultural practices to which it refers or with which it may be linked.

One of the most extensive attempts to extend the range of art is found in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, which bears witness to his conviction that the time has come, as he puts it, to take leave of truth. In formulating things thus, Lyotard does not clear the way for a return to error or a descent into nihilism or irrationalism. He wishes rather to break with or at least reposition the particular genre of discourse he characterizes as theoretical. “La grande affaire est maintenant pour nous de détruire la théorie.”<sup>9</sup> For Lyotard, theory is a particular genre among others, a specific way of phrasing, and thus it can be

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analyzed in pragmatic terms as an act or work of language. Underscoring the pragmatics of theoretical discourse as resulting from an artful *savoir faire* or know-how, Lyotard is quick to add that the destruction of theory cannot take place by criticizing it. “La critique est elle-même un *Moment* théorique dont on ne saurait attendre la destruction de la théorie.”<sup>10</sup> Critique cannot break the double bind. Required instead are what Lyotard calls pseudo-theories or theory-fictions. These are not a stronger instance of theory, a better “perspective,” “approach,” “system” or “method.” Rather, they work to destroy theory by doubling it parodically. Indistinguishable from theoretical discourse in terms of truth and falseness, theory-fictions unseat that master discourse by countering its claim to distinguish and separate the true from the false.<sup>11</sup> Theory-fictions do not aim to produce knowledge or *le savoir*, defined in terms of true and false. Rather they display and deploy a know-how, a *savoir faire*. This art or artful competence exceeds the criterion of true and false and works to escape entrapment by theory and the theorist. Theory-fictions delegitimize the discourse of theory by showing that it too exemplifies an art and is but a genre like many different others.

Lyotard’s restaging of theoretical discourse and his sketching out of the pragmatics of its parody testify to his belief that ours is a postmodern age, one that can no longer believe in theory, just as it is incredulous towards all “master narratives” designed to produce knowledge and thereby govern social activity and representation.<sup>12</sup> This postmodern loss of faith in the regulative power of theoretical discourse may seem fairly far removed, both historically and conceptually, from the Enlightenment. Yet whether we classify these master narratives now in disarray as belonging to literature, philosophy or science, many of them began to emerge during the eighteenth century, when Enlightenment’s epistemological goal was, as Michel Foucault puts it, to “faire tableau.” In representing knowledge, the Enlightenment also “fait récit,” telling the story (or becoming a story) about its own attempt to formulate theories capable of producing critical knowledge. Thus, the very act that constitutes the most powerfully critical aspect of Enlightenment also displays



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(or fails to conceal) its art, its reliance upon a discursive pragmatics in order to present its critical knowledge. This is the art I wish to consider, and principally through the texts of one of the French Enlightenment's most brilliant and problematic of writers, Denis Diderot.

Few of his contemporaries sensed as acutely as Diderot the conflictual nature of the relation between a theory of knowledge and its practice, and none pursued that conflict more inventively by experimenting with the art whereby knowledge is produced. Emblematic of the Enlightenment's desire to establish a powerfully theoretical position that could account for all aspects of human experience, Diderot's writing possesses a scope that is properly encyclopedic. I propose no new synthetic reading of Diderot's thought though, no overarching reordering of the Diderotian corpus. I do wish to argue that only by attending to what I shall call Diderot's art of philosophizing can one grasp most directly and intensely how he grapples with the issue of presenting critical knowledge, as it involves both the text(s) of Enlightenment and contemporary acts of interpretation.

To come to terms with that art, my own readings both rely on and question a traditional division of intellectual and disciplinary labor characterizing studies on Diderot and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in general. Intellectual historians have focused on the expository, more conceptual texts in order to describe Diderot's place in the broader context of eighteenth-century science, ethics, political theory, and esthetics. Literary interpreters on the other hand have attended to more formal, poetic issues, concerning themselves primarily with the fictional texts and describing Diderot's narrative craft in at times myopic detail. In Diderot's case, and most likely in general, this division of labor between intellectual history and literary interpretation is no longer productive. Not only does this division lead to miniaturization and fragmentation. It also perpetuates interpretive practices based implicitly on the assumption that linguistic categories such as idea and form, message and vehicle, signifier and signified, can be kept separate and distinct, something that is far from certain. In Diderot's

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case, this division between what could be called the conceptual and the poetic, or, in slightly different terms, the philosophical and the literary precludes presenting what is most powerfully pertinent in his writing, namely, his art of philosophizing. My operative assumption throughout will be that Diderot writes texts that are both literary and philosophical, texts that preclude determining in advance to which category they belong or even whether the distinction between such categories or genres can be maintained. A brief consideration of Diderot's best-known novel, *Jacques le fataliste* will make this point.

Novelistic conventions and the workings of narrative are foregrounded in *Jacques* to such a degree that it is extremely difficult to read it even as the esthetic version of a philosophical treatment of the concept of determinism. At the same time however, *Jacques* cannot be contained within the generic confines of the category of novel. This text is not simply another reworking (however innovative) of novelistic conventions, another stage in the evolution of literary form. Thus, neither intellectual nor literary history can adequately account for this text. A story above all about storytelling, *Jacques* sets up the category of fictive reader and it sets the real reader up, at least the one who desires knowledge of what the story is about and thus misses its point. As the most insightful readings of this self-reflexive text have shown, if *Jacques* is about anything it is about itself, the ways a text provides the material for a reader's desire to encounter, if not the real, then at least what can be taken to be the real. As Diderot's text also shows, this knowledge is gained only by overlooking or attempting to move somehow beyond the text's determining structures, its enabling conditions, its textuality or, as I would prefer to say, its materiality. To be sure, *Jacques* thematizes determinism as a philosophical concept. It also presents it as text, figured as "the great scroll up yonder." Finally, it stages determinism, performing it in the relation between Jacques and his master, narrator and fictive reader, and text and reader. Thus *Jacques* is about "aboutness" in a larger, self-reflexive sense, for it also stages reading as resulting from the desire for knowledge of what stories are about, a desire however that blocks grasping