Introduction

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> Strictly speaking, there is only one kind of cause: the physical kind.
> Diderot, *Lettre à Landois*

In the Louvre hangs an attractive portrait of Diderot by Michel Van Loo. But how closely does it resemble the sitter? The *philosophe* writes amusingly that it is 'too young, the head too small, as pretty as a woman, coquettish, smiling, dainty'. The problem, Diderot suggests, lay largely with himself: 'whether it is because there are too many things blended together [in my face] or because the painter's eye sees it changing every instant (for the impressions of my soul succeed each other with great rapidity and they all paint themselves on my face), the artist's task becomes much more difficult than he thought it was'.[1] In a word, it is very hard to take the likeness of such a face. Yet this is the metaphorical task collectively assumed by the contributors to these *New Essays*. The founding aim of this project was to capture the most characteristic aspects of this thinker who is extraordinarily mobile, but repeatedly returns to certain beliefs and concerns.

This Introduction is designed to provide thematic 'entry points' into the chapters, which in turn open up perspectives on the oeuvre. To organise the whole, it was decided that the following headings would be used: Diderot the *philosophe*; the novels; the dialogues; the plays and dramatic theory; music, performance and aesthetics. It will be useful to say a few words on each of these in turn.

DIDEROT THE *PHILOSOPHE*

In the eighteenth century the word 'philosophe' connoted a man of ideas but also a man of action, a would-be agent of social and political change, a champion of progress. In a post-Lockean, post-Cartesian world a number of Enlightenment philosophers embraced the exciting new possibility that nothing exists in the universe except matter. In fact it is more accurate to say that it was an exciting old possibility, argued for by the Roman

philosopher–poet Lucretius (himself a follower of Epicurus), whose *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) had already had an influence in Renaissance thinking. According to Lucretius, we should not worry about the existence of the gods. To know the universe, we should understand that there is no immaterial soul and no afterlife; there are only indivisible particles of matter or 'atoms' ceaselessly combining, separating and recombining. Renewed in various ways by eighteenth-century thinkers including Diderot and d'Holbach (the *philosophe*'s friend and frequent host), this tradition opposes that other form of monism, Berkeley's idealism.[2]

We can broadly characterise Diderot's philosophical development as follows: rejecting the Christianity in which he had been raised, he moved through a version of deism into monist-materialist determinism. A key text is the *Lettre à Landois* (*Letter to Landois*) of 1756, where the *philosophe* writes: 'Look carefully, and you will see that the word "liberty" is empty of meaning; that there are not, that there cannot be, free beings; that we are only what we are allowed to be by the general order, our organisation, our upbringing and the chain of events.'[3] But he struggles with the ramifications of this axiom. Of atheistic determinism he writes (probably in 1769): 'Oh what a fine system for ingrates! It makes me wild to be entangled in a devil of a philosophy that forces the assent of my mind but which my heart cannot help denying.'[4] For Diderot worries that determinism calls the ideas of vice and virtue into question (a problem he tries to solve in the *Letter to Landois* and elsewhere). After all, what sense does it make to apportion blame or praise if no one ever truly makes a moral choice, but simply acts out of necessity? Moreover, determinism may seem to threaten to erode any optimism that, through the efforts of reformers, a better world can be brought into existence. For if everything happens because it must, there is no reason to believe that the world will improve – except thanks to blind necessity, which might instead, for all we know, cause it to worsen. Sade was to embrace the darkest implications of monist materialism, arguing that the eternal flux of matter (mysteriously guided by the aims of 'Nature') justifies violence at the service of selfishness, hedonism and the survival of the fittest. The conclusion drawn by the marquis's major libertine characters is that we should withdraw all positive connotations from 'virtue' and attach them instead to 'vice'. But it would be a distortion to present Diderot as a precursor of Sade. Admittedly in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* (*D'Alembert's Dream*) the eponymous dreamer, under the influence of a character named 'Diderot', voices the opinion that the universe is a constant, aimless flux that has produced humanity as one of an endless series of ephemeral phenomena.[5] Now, although we must beware of the author's notorious playfulness (in various texts, 'Diderot' appears but is

not necessarily Diderot's 'mouthpiece'), it is safe to assert that this position represents the mature author's settled belief.[6] Nevertheless, he clings doggedly to notions of justice and progress.[7] And to reconcile these with determinism, he experiments with concepts such as modifiability and the general good. For instance, he suggests that though we lack free will it so happens that vice is self-punishing. This entails the consequence that if we are sufficiently enlightened we will pursue virtue for the sake of our own happiness (and so selfishness and unselfishness, individual and collective interests, become indistinguishable, to the benefit of all). This idea is already tried out in the *Lettre à Landois*.[8]

But such attempts to reconcile the blind forces of determinism with ideas of virtue and progress fail to put Diderot's philosophical anxiety to rest. Years later he dramatises his dilemma in *Jacques le fataliste* (*Jacques the Fatalist*); to the amusement of his master, the fatalistic/deterministic Jacques cannot hit on any form of (non-verbal) behaviour that might distinguish him from believers in free will (short of falling into the utmost absurdity). The master, meanwhile, continues to believe he is free simply because he *feels* he is free, as he goes about the business of everyday life.[9] This raises the question: when they contradict each other, which are we to believe – abstract truth or lived experience? Jacques or the master? In *De l'interprétation de la nature* (*The Interpretation of Nature*), Diderot expresses the belief that the science practised by mathematicians such as d'Alembert was moribund. His reasoning is that the kind of truths which it discovers can have no application in the real world: 'The region of mathematics is an abstract world, where what counts as rigorous truth absolutely loses this advantage when it is brought into our world.'[10] And he makes it clear that he is also talking about abstract philosophical truths ('la métaphysique') – a heading under which we can surely place determinism.[11] This also explains, perhaps, why Diderot never managed to write a treatise on virtue, though he wanted to: he must have felt he could not match universal principles to the ethical complexities of real life in any systematic way.[12] He was content instead to inhabit the paradox of the deterministic reformer, disbelieving in free will but campaigning tirelessly for greater freedom (freedom of thought and expression, freedom from indoctrination and oppression). Doubtless he thought of himself (to use Jacques's phrase) as 'happily born',[13] which is to say believed that he had no choice but to work towards the general good. Meanwhile, his conviction that humanity was made up of material (but modifiable) beings existing in a material world can be traced through his thinking in areas as diverse as morality, aesthetics, music, politics, poetics and theories of language and representation. He never ceased to pursue

those elusive connections between his 'devil of a philosophy', so convincing in the abstract, and the very real world in which he lived.

Chapters 1–6 of the present volume explore various aspects of Diderot the *philosophe* (understood in one or both senses). It seems certain that Diderot's interest in determinism was intensified by reading Lucretius. Speaking more generally, it is impossible to understand his thought without understanding its debt to antiquity. In Chapter 1, Russell Goulbourne guides the reader through the most important of the classical influences on Diderot. But at the same time, he shows that the *philosophe*'s passion for the ancients is at the heart of his modernity. In Chapter 2 Marian Hobson attends to the main directions of Diderot's thought as they are adumbrated in the earlier philosophical writings, and exposes several key points of divergence from Rousseau.

Diderot's desire to be a *philosophe* found an extraordinarily fortuitous outlet in the *Encyclopédie*, which he edited from 1747 to 1772 (often in the face of powerful opposition). One of Diderot's ambitions for this massive undertaking was that it should record the arts, sciences and trade technologies of modern Europe, for the benefit of his contemporaries and posterity alike. But he also aimed to use the project to 'change the general way of thinking',[14] which extended to questioning many aspects of the *ancien régime*.[15] To help counter the threat of censorship, he famously used an ingenious system of cross-references that invite the reader to draw amusing and often subversive comparisons between articles. In Chapter 3 Daniel Brewer provides an account of the *Encyclopédie*'s radical programme and its rhetorical strategies, and emphasises that Diderot saw the effective use of language as central to the undertaking's success. He also points to the enduring effect of what he describes as the *Encyclopédie*'s 'meta-critical function'.

It has often been noted that Diderot's thinking thrived on dialogue. He had many philosophical interlocutors over the years; in his later career, these included Catherine the Great of Russia, for whom he optimistically wrote texts suggesting a range of social and political reforms. But doubtless the most significant of all his interlocutors was Rousseau. A deep friendship sprang up between these two great thinkers before either had achieved real fame; but it would not survive when their social and intellectual tendencies were to pull them in divergent directions. In 1749–50, encouraged by Diderot, Rousseau wrote the epoch-making First Discourse, which contained an eloquent denunciation of intellectual and technical progress in the modern age. This jarred significantly with the ideals of the *Encyclopédie* in ways that were to become increasingly clear. In subsequent writings,

Rousseau used the concept of nature to question many of the values and ideas promoted by the *philosophes*. In Chapter 4 Angelica Goodden explores the ramifications of the complex, ambivalent relationship between Rousseau and Diderot. In doing so, she exposes the main divergences but also some persistent affinities.

Diderot's desire for political reform is expressed in many texts besides the *Encyclopédie*. Of particular significance is Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (*A History of the Two Indies*), published in 1770–80. Diderot wrote many anonymous contributions for the *Histoire*, and brought to the project his cherished philosophical ideas and social concerns. In important ways he can be described as an early anti-colonialist. But as we look back to the Enlightenment, there is a risk that we misunderstand the historical and cultural horizons (which is probably to say the necessary outer limits) of the *philosophe*'s 'anti-colonialism'. Anthony Strugnell explores this issue in Chapter 5, with reference to the *Histoire* and other key texts.

Finally, the letters to 'Sophie' Volland allow us to observe Diderot moving between philosophical and amorous discourse, and to access his private thoughts on everyday events. This correspondence lasted from 1755 to the year of Diderot's death (1784) – but unfortunately not all the letters have survived. Pierre Saint-Amand explores the beautiful poignancy of the 'sweet bond' ('liaison douce') between Diderot and his mistress (Chapter 6). He also shows that the *philosophe* reflected in his correspondence on the material conditions governing the writing, sending and receiving of letters, and on the variations which love brings to our experience of time (time for philosophy, time for leisure and time claimed by the irksome business of everyday life).

NOVELS

As we read Diderot's first, licentious novel (often decried but often reprinted) we still hear a *philosophe*'s voice. In Chapter 7 Anne Deneys-Tunney shows how *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (*The Indiscreet Jewels*) engages with the major philosophical issues of the time, and does so in parodic fashion. The 'indiscreet jewels' of the title are female genitals to which a magic ring grants the power to speak about 'what they know'. This central conceit, Deneys-Tunney suggests, is used to suggest that Enlightenment discoveries about the empirical world are severely hindered by problems of 'translation'. For the modern philosopher may discover that it is difficult to decode new (or newly exposed) truths concerning sexuality and the body in his own terms. After all, the terminology inherited from philosophical tradition is not (yet?) adapted to express such truths.

Perhaps because *Les Bijoux indiscrets* was among the works that contributed to Diderot's imprisonment in the chateau of Vincennes (July–November 1749), the three fictions or novels that are best known to modern readers remained unpublished during his lifetime.[16] Of these, *Jacques le fataliste* explores the issues of fatalism and determinism while raising questions concerning the theory and practice of story-telling. In Chapter 8 Joseph Breines succinctly conveys the radical nature of this novel, or, as some prefer, this 'anti-novel'. Moreover, Breines suggests that *Jacques* involves a 'twist' on materialism, in that it explores a tension between two ideas: Jacques's conviction that at any given point in our lives we are but a 'single cause' that can have a 'single effect', and the radically opposed idea that identity is so unfixed that we can seem to be ourselves and another (as Diderot finds himself in Sterne). As for *La Religieuse*, the subject of the unhappy nun was central to Diderot's thinking about religion. (Tragically, one of his sisters went mad and died in a convent before reaching the age of thirty.) The determinist in him was fascinated by the effects of the 'unnatural' convent environment on individual behaviour; the reformer in him wanted to prevent young people being imprisoned in a system which he saw as a cause of individual suffering and a 'tomb of future generations'. *La Religieuse* has often been called a 'Richardsonian' novel. Does this mean, as has been claimed, that it is anti-conventual without being anti-Christian? In Chapter 9 I show that within this 'satire of convents' the atheistic Diderot offers a subtle but sustained critique of Christianity as such.

DIALOGUES

Some of Diderot's fictions can best be classified as framed dialogues or 'dialogues narrés'. In 1769, Diderot wrote *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, formed of three dialogues. The key motifs he uses – the 'sensitive harpsichord', the swarm of bees and the spider – have seemed to many readers to build a powerful and eloquent case for materialism. In Chapter 10 Kate E. Tunstall shows how in spite of this, the foregrounding of dreaming in *Le Rêve* places materialism in tension with radically sceptical and even with idealist traditions. It may be, then, that *Le Rêve* is one of Diderot's many heuristic (as opposed to dogmatic) texts. One thinks for instance of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, where 'Diderot' clashes with the nephew on various points of philosophy, but neither interlocutor wins an outright victory.

In the early 1770s Diderot wrote a triptych of short fictions in dialogue form. The third of these is the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (*Supplement to Bougainville's 'Voyage around the World'*). In this text, two

friends discuss unpublished extracts (written of course by Diderot) from Bougainville's famous *Voyage*; these mainly concern the explorer's trip to Tahiti. Through the *Supplément*, which may be read as a riposte to Rousseau's Second Discourse, Diderot investigates the interconnected themes of nature and civilisation, love, marriage, fidelity, social organisation, race and colonialism. In Chapter 11 Andrew Curran shows how the *Supplément* engages with Enlightenment notions of 'natural man', 'varieties' and race. He emphasises that, for Diderot, the Tahitians 'represent but one logic of the human'. Connections are also made with Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*.

PLAYS AND DRAMATIC THEORY

As many eighteenth-century theatregoers and playwrights continued to be in thrall to neoclassicism, Diderot became the champion of a relatively new type of drama. The key texts are his plays *Le Fils naturel* (*The Natural Son*) and *Le Père de famille* (*The Father*) of 1757–8, and the theoretical discussions attached to each. The type of play recommended by Diderot became known as the *drame*. In the narrative framework that accompanies the earlier play, 'Diderot' converses with Dorval (the fictional author and hero of the supposedly autobiographical *Fils naturel*). In a dramaturgy that was to prove influential for the next 150 years, Dorval argues that henceforth playwrights should portray contemporary middle-class life, and do so using a serious tone; he insists that gesture, tableaux and broken speech can be at least as expressive as the traditional resources of comedy and tragedy. He also sets out innovative ideas concerning opera. But in spite of the programmatic implications of the *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* (*Conversations on 'The Natural Son'*), Diderot did not confine himself to writing *drames*. Late in his career (1781) he penned a comedy, the intriguingly entitled *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?* (*Is he Good? Is he Bad?*). This play's hero (Hardouin) is far from preaching any moral absolutes; instead, he experiments (some would say deviously) with the principle that the end justifies the means. The play's treatment of morality thus recalls the *dialogues narrés*, in which Diderot suggests that to pursue the general good through the messy business of everyday life is problematic but ultimately worthwhile. Diderot's interest in theatre and acting is also reflected in the *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (*Paradox on the Actor*) of 1773.

In the eighteenth century there was a backlash against Diderot's *drames* of the 1750s. One reason was their moralising tone. Diderot hoped his plays would teach the audience to admire secular virtue as he conceived it.

Such earnestness was (and of course is) open to ridicule when viewed through cynical eyes. But doubtless the *drames* also aroused such strong reactions because they had political undertones: they confidently expressed certain values and beliefs that were distinct from those of the ruling classes.[17] In Chapter 12 Carol L. Sherman shows the legacy of Diderot's *drames* in the context of Revolutionary France by focusing on Olympe de Gouges, who was concerned with the place of women within the family and that of the family within the state. In her plays, influenced by Diderot's ideas, she gives daring expression to a range of progressive themes. In Chapter 13, Derek Connon explores a late shift in Diderot's attitude to the *drame* which he had done so much to promote. Indeed, by examining the presence of Destouches and other playwrights in *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?*, Connon shows that it is 'a play by a writer who, despite his aims to make theatre a didactic school for virtue, could not resist the lure of the comic'.

MUSIC, PERFORMANCE, AESTHETICS

In 1752 Rousseau wrote an opera, *Le Devin du village* (*The Village Soothsayer*), which brought him great renown. Diderot wrote no operas, but he developed radical ideas about the genre and about music performance in general. Having raised an exceptionally moderate voice in the Querelle des Bouffons (1752–4), in which Parisians excitedly debated whether Italian or French opera was superior, he went on to develop his ideas over a number of years. His most famous dialogue of all, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, investigates the mysteries of musical genius, and, more generally, asks whether it is possible to discover intrinsic or necessary connections linking the good, the true and the beautiful (a possibility radically challenged by the nephew). In Chapter 14 Mark Darlow examines Diderot's key writings on music, including *Le Neveu*, from the perspective of the singing and speaking voice. The discussion is organised according to the following themes: the voice as index of individuality; the respective approaches to voice of the Italian and French parties during the Querelle des Bouffons; and 'the implications for development of musical theatre . . . of Diderot's consistent call for variety' (where Rousseau called for unity). In Chapter 15, Béatrice Didier reconstructs Diderot's aesthetics of the libretto. This is largely elaborated in the *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel*, in which (as noted above) Dorval proposes a range of new possibilities for opera. Didier links this aesthetics with the preceding Querelle des Bouffons, and also makes connections with the development of opera since Diderot's time.

One of Diderot's most important contributions to the realm of aesthetics is his art criticism. Diderot wrote the article 'Beau' for volume II of the *Encyclopédie*, published in 1752; here he proposes that the experience of beauty depends on the perception of 'relationships'. But his ideas on art evolved considerably after 1759, when he began to report on the annual/biennial exhibitions at the Louvre, known as the *Salons*, for the *Correspondance littéraire*. Just as he toured *ateliers* for the purposes of editing the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot became intimately acquainted over the years with artists: their techniques, their imagination and in certain cases their genius. (Those whom he saw as true artists rather than mere masters of technique included, for various reasons, Chardin, Greuze, Vernet and Falconet.) What could have been hackwork opened up radically new possibilities in art criticism.

The initial impulse behind the writing of the *Salons* (delegated to Diderot by Grimm) presupposes the possibility of effective ekphrasis – the verbal representation of a visual representation (typically a painting). We must remember that Grimm's/Diderot's readers would be unlikely to see the *Salon* exhibits in person (short of buying them); and the *Correspondance* was not accompanied by drawings or engravings. A lesser writer would perhaps have described the artworks on display at the Louvre without questioning whether (his) language was transparent on reality. But Diderot became fascinated by the theoretical problems raised by the practice of ekphrasis. Is ekphrasis truly possible? How effective is it? What aspects of the original (itself a 'copy' according to eighteenth-century notions of art) might be lost or gained in the writing and reading of a verbal description? Is ekphrasis capable of supplanting what it describes? The famous 'Promenade Vernet' in the 1767 *Salon*, in which Diderot imagines a 'walk' which he then reveals to be (also) the evocation of a series of paintings, foregrounds these questions in an especially intriguing fashion. Tom Baldwin offers an overview of these issues. He shows how readers have reacted to Diderot's ekphrastic (or seemingly ekphrastic) practices in widely different ways, and guides us towards a nuanced understanding of Diderot's art criticism.[18]

Diderot wrote to the sculptor Falconet: 'Posterity is the philosopher's equivalent of the religious man's afterlife.'[19] He had faith that we 'moderns' would render justice to those aspects of his thought and writing that were too radical for his age. As we approach the tricentenary of his birth (2013), it is clear that his faith was not misplaced. Denis Diderot, son of a cutler from Langres, now ranks as one of the three greatest writers of the French Enlightenment. The materialist has obtained his afterlife.

NOTES

1. See DPV, vol. XVI, pp. 82–3. All translations contained in this Introduction are mine; I also translated Chapters 6, 7 and 15. I wish to record my thanks to Philip Robinson and Mark Darlow, who kindly agreed to read a first draft of Chapter 15 and offered extremely useful advice.
2. George Berkeley (1685–1753), bishop of Cloyne from 1734, attempted to refute materialism by denying the existence of matter. See Thomas Mautner (ed.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London; Penguin, 2000), pp. 66–7.
3. See DPV, vol. IX, pp. 256–7.
4. See *Corr.*, vol. IX, p. 154.
5. See DPV, vol. XVII, pp. 135–6.
6. In *Le Rêve*, 'Diderot' famously states: 'in all matters, our true opinion is not the one in which we have never wavered, but the one to which we have most frequently returned'. See ibid., p. 113.
7. There is an important humanist tendency in Diderot's writing: unlike some determinists, he refuses to see humankind as just another animal species. One of his most memorable statements of all is to be found in the *Réfutation d'Helvétius* (*Refutation of Helvétius*), written between 1773 and 1777: 'I am human, and I must deal in human causes' ('Je suis homme, et il me faut des causes propres à l'homme'). See DPV, vol. XXIV, p. 523.
8. See DPV, vol. IX, p. 256.
9. See DPV, vol. XXIII, p. 270.
10. See DPV, vol. IX, p. 30.
11. See ibid., p. 29.
12. See Arthur M. Wilson, *Diderot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 667.
13. See DPV, vol. XXIII, p. 189.
14. See DPV, vol. VII, p. 222.
15. A survey of enduring importance is John Lough, *The 'Encyclopédie'* (London: Longman, 1971).
16. Their titles are: *Jacques le fataliste*, *La Religieuse* (*The Nun*) and *Le Neveu de Rameau* (*Rameau's Nephew*). A case might be made for categorising *Le Neveu* either as an unusual kind of novel or as a framed dialogue. But as it constitutes Diderot's most famous contribution to eighteenth-century thinking on music, for the purposes of the present volume it is discussed in Chapters 14 and 15. *Jacques* and *La Religieuse* circulated before Diderot's death in the *Correspondance littéraire* (*Literary Correspondence*), a manuscript journal edited by Diderot's close friend Friedrich Melchior Grimm until 1773 (when Jakob Heinrich Meister took over), which was distributed to a small number of extremely select readers, principally crowned heads of Europe.
17. See Wilson, *Diderot*, p. 269.
18. Diderot's reflections on art are not confined to the article 'Beau' and the pages of the *Salons*. These texts should especially be read in conjunction with the *Essais sur la peinture* of 1766 (DPV, vol. XIV, pp. 333–411).
19. See DPV, vol. XV, p. 33.