

VITAL MATERIALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF ETHICS IN THE RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT *

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ABSTRACT

From Hegel to Engels, Sartre and Ruyer (Ruyer, 1933), to name only a few, materialism is viewed as a necropolis, or the metaphysics befitting such an abode; many speak of matter's crudeness, bruteness, coldness or stupidity. Science or scientism, on this view, reduces the living world to 'dead matter', 'brutish', 'mechanical, lifeless matter', thereby also stripping it of its freedom (Crocker, 1959). Materialism is often wrongly presented as 'mechanistic materialism' – with 'Death of Nature' echoes of de-humanization and hostility to the Scientific Revolution (which knew nothing of materialism!), also a powerful Christian theme in Cudworth, Clarke and beyond (Overhoff, 2000). Here I challenge this view, building on some aspects of Israel's Radical Enlightenment concept (Israel, 2001), which has been controversial but for my

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purposes is a useful claim about the dissemination of a home-grown Spinozism, sometimes reformulated as an ontology of the life sciences, an aspect Israel does not address (compare Secrétan et al., eds., 2007; Citton, 2006). First, I examine some ‘moments’ of radical Enlightenment materialism such as La Mettrie and Diderot (including his *Encyclopédie* entry “Spinosiste”), but also anonymous, clandestine texts such as *L’Âme Matérielle*, to emphasize their distinctive focus on the specific existence of organic beings. Second, I show how this ‘embodied’, non-mechanistic character of Enlightenment ‘vital materialism’ makes it different from other episodes, and perhaps more of an ethics than is usually thought (also via the figure of the materialist as ‘laughing philosopher’). Third, I reflect on what this implies for our image of the Enlightenment – no longer a Frankfurt School and/or Foucauldian vision of ‘discipline’, regimentation and order (as in Mayr, 1986) – but ‘vital’, without, conversely, being a kind of holist vitalism “at odds with the universalizing discourse of Encyclopedist materialism, with its insistence on the uniformity of nature and the universality of physical laws” (Williams, 2003): vital materialism is still materialism. Its ethics tends towards hedonism, but its most radical proponents (Diderot, La Mettrie and later Sade) disagree as to what this means.

Le mal, c’est la matière. Arbre noir, fatal fruit.
(V. Hugo, *Les Contemplations*¹)

¹ Hugo, *Les Contemplations*, § XXVI: “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre,” 1855, in Hugo, 1968, p. 373.

1 Introduction: dead matter and the opprobrium of materialism

Materialism has long had a bad reputation, on two distinct yet related grounds: that it *reduces everything to 'dead' matter*, and that it eliminates the 'higher', intellectual or spiritual parts of life, and thereby cannot but be *immoral*. This set of accusations came to a head in the period we now know as the Radical Enlightenment,² when, building on Paduan Averroist Aristotelianism (e.g. Pomponazzi), neo-Epicureanism and other partly clandestine elements, thinkers first assert themselves as materialists, boldly and confidently. I ask whether these materialists, preachers of the pleasures of the flesh and otherwise deniers of an immortal or any other transcendent source of normativity (and thus basis for reward or punishment) were as coldly mechanistic and immoral as we are often told.

It has been said that the history of philosophy is the history of idealism. This is of interest, less as a truth claim (surely dependent on all sorts of presuppositions about the nature of philosophy, among others), and more because of it what it reveals. The import of this revelation is twofold: philosophy frequently and canonically has understood itself as idealism, both because of its opprobrium against materialism, and because of the reflexive belief – inseparably systematic and historical – that from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Kant and

² I am not concerned in this paper with (a) the difference between Margaret Jacob's and Jonathan Israel's concepts of 'radical Enlightenment' or (b) the internal conceptual success and consistency of the latter (heavily debated e.g. in Secrétan et al., eds., 2007). But since Israel's concept focuses on Spinozism – which I take as more of a construct than a real relation to Spinoza (following Citton, 2006) – and since Israel gives Diderot and La Mettrie pride of place in the conclusion of his 2001, my discussion is much closer to his.

Hegel (and beyond), a philosophy is at its core a system of interlocking principles with a rational foundation. On this view, it cannot be an appeal to merely empirical, contingent properties, and still less a ‘reductionist’ explanation of the higher-level (consciousness, intentionality, action overall) in terms of the neuronal or biochemical properties of nematodes, sea slugs, macaques or orangutans. All true philosophies are then forms of idealism, while materialism is *Unphilosophie*, non-philosophy (Colletti, 1969, pp. 10, 35-36) – a position that has a Hegelian ring to it (after all, for Hegel, “Every philosophy is an idealism” [Hegel, 1971, p. 124]), but that extends beyond: Schopenhauer had declared that the “true philosophy” was in any case idealism, while materialism is the philosophy of “the subject who forgets to account” for herself.³

The opposition between idealism and materialism certainly runs deep. Plato, in the *Sophist* (246b-c), features a ‘battle of giants’ (*gigantomachia*) between the Lovers of Forms and those he calls the Sons of the Earth, his early version of the figures we might call the ‘crude materialists’. The latter come in different guises, for Plato: there are those who explain everything about our bodies and life in terms of the Earth, and thereby confuse human life with the existence of trees and stones; there are those who obsessively take apart reality into tiny atomic components and view the universe as perpetually changing.⁴ The stupidity of such thinkers is mirrored (or matched) by the purported stupidity of matter itself, a motif much belabored in early modernity: e.g., the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth speaks of

³ Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, II, 1 (“Zur idealistischen Grundansicht”), in Schopenhauer, 1977, pp. 11, 27. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ For Aristotle’s far more sophisticated presentation of and ‘debate’ with materialism see Wolfe, 2004-2005.

“stupid and senseless Matter” (Cudworth, 1731, Bk. I, chapter II, § 8, in Cudworth, 1897, p. 839).

This theme of the ‘stupidity’ of matter reaches something of a fever point in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: for Cudworth, “Mind and Intellect are a higher, more real and substantial Thing than senseless Body and Matter,” and he of course denied that “all Being and Perfection that is found in the World” could “spring up and arise out of the dark Womb of unthinking Matter” (slightly mixing metaphors, one might say: Cudworth, *op. cit.*, § 13, p. 846). The great Jansenist Pierre Nicole, who significantly influenced Locke, also wrote around the same time that one cannot conceive of “this dead and unfeeling mass we call matter” as being “an eternal being”; it is clear, Nicole continues, that “matter lacks any internal cause of its existence . . . it is ridiculous to attribute to the most vile and despicable of all beings, the greatest of perfections, which is to exist by oneself [*d’être par soi-même*]” (Nicole, 1671, in Nicole, 1714, p. 27). The Jesuit *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (first edition, 1704) does not insult matter or materialism for what it does to “perfections” such as intelligence or autonomous existence, but opts for an equally successful strategy of discrediting it – here in dictionary entry form, in the entry ‘Matériel’:

Material also means massive, gross. . . . These walls, these foundations are too *material*. This watch is not subtle, it is too *material*. One also says of a witless man, or one who is too fond of the pleasures of the senses, that he is quite *material*, he has a thick and *material* physiognomy (*Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, 1704, II, n.p.).

Sometimes this pathos of hatred for matter can, surprisingly, alternate within the same author with a passion for its vitality: Alexander Pope, for instance, exclaimed – quite conventionally – that “There's nought in simple Matter to delight / 'Tis the fair Workmanship that takes the Sight,” so that “Where Mind is not, there Horror needs must be / For Matter formless, is Deformity,” but also, closer to the ‘vital’ materialism

discussed in this essay, insist on matter as inherently *alive*: “All matter quick, and bursting into birth.”⁵

There would be more to say about this sometimes accidental, sometimes deliberate slippage between the hatred *for matter* and the hatred *for the thinkers who ‘defend’ it* – first called ‘materialists’, in fact, by another Cambridge Platonist, Henry More, in his 1668 *Divine Dialogues*: in the cast of characters, he describes the character Hylobares as “A young, witty, and well moralised Materialist”⁶ (it seems to have been Leibniz who introduced the term into French, at least in mainstream philosophical usage, for it occurs in clandestine texts as early as the 1670s⁷) – but this is not the place, although the Radical Enlightenment was, it is worth mentioning, the context in which the term ‘materialist’ is first used by a thinker, La Mettrie, to describe himself, rather than strictly as a term of opprobrium (Bloch, 1995). Indeed, in a remarkable display of continuity despite highly diverse intellectual, theological and political contexts, this contempt for ‘crude materialism’ runs at least as far as the twentieth century, via Hegel, Engels and Sartre. Moreover, it crosses between a ‘metaphysical’ form of contempt (as in Cudworth, Nicole or the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* cited above), a more historicized form, which becomes canonical for a certain brand of Marxism, as presented notably by Engels in the late nineteenth century:

The materialism of the past century was predominantly mechanistic, because at that time . . . only the science of

⁵ Respectively, Pope, 1735, p. 345; Pope 1958, Epistle I, section VIII, p. 44.

⁶ More, 1668, pp. 5-6. It seems the character of Hylobares was inspired by More’s pupil Thomas Baines, who was Lady Anne Conway’s brother (Mintz, 1962, p. 89).

⁷ Bloch, 1995, is the basic source here, to which one can add Benítez, 1998, p. 355 (where he signals an even earlier usage of the term in French, in Friedrich Spanheim’s 1676 *L’impie convaincu*).

mechanics . . . had reached any sort of completion. . . . For the materialists of the eighteenth century, man was a machine. This exclusive application of the standards of mechanics to processes of a chemical and organic nature – in which the laws of mechanics are also valid, but are pushed into the background by other, higher laws – constitutes the specific (and at that time, inevitable) limitation of classical French materialism.⁸

and even a more scholarly form, which we shall encounter several times in this essay – and part of my aim will to be rebut its historiographical form –, in which it is deemed necessary to insist that Enlightenment materialism was necessarily a “mechanistic materialism.” Here, for example, is a description from a scholarly study of physical concepts in the *Encyclopédie*, from fifty years ago:

the strongest, most pronounced characteristic of the metaphysics we find in the materialism of the ‘encyclopédistes’, is the reduction of all forms of the motion of matter to mechanical motion, and of all changes in the universe to the merely ‘local changes’ of a permanently self-identical and unchangeable matter. It is a mechanistic materialism.⁹

I observe that this contempt (which here presents itself as merely a *constat* of historical limitations) crosses between metaphysics, history of philosophy and scholarship, also because the more strongly normative language we encountered in the seventeenth-century texts cited above somehow returns also in Marxist humanist form, e.g. in

⁸ F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (1888), in Marx & Engels, 1982, p. 278 (translation mine); in English in Marx & Engels, 1959, p. 211.

⁹ Vassails, 1951, p. 315, referring to the article “MOUVEMENT” (to which one can add the article “MATIÈRE”).

Sartre's well-known essay "Materialism and Revolution" (1946). Sartre describes materialism here as "the subjectivity of those who are ashamed of their subjectivity" (Sartre, 1990, p. 99); materialism claims to be all about reason, but within the materialist perspective, reason is "captive, governed from outside, manipulated by blind causal chains" (p. 86). Nature here is "pure externality" (p. 94), purely mechanical (pp. 89-90), in sharp contrast with the world of values and action: "a causal chain can lead me to a movement, a behavior but not ... to my grasping of my situation as a totality. It cannot ... account for revolutionary class-consciousness" (p. 120). In sum, materialism is Taylorism: "materialism, by decomposing man into rigorously defined behaviors like in Taylorism, serves the purposes of the master: it is the master who conceives of the slave as being like a machine" (pp. 127-128).

Nor is this analysis restricted to a now-vanished Hegelian Marxist tradition: a prominent work in 'enactivist' cognitive science of recent years declares boldly that "Life is not physical in the standard materialist sense of purely external structure and function ... [w]e accordingly need an expanded notion of the physical to account for the organism or living being" (Thompson, 2007, p. 238), a point of view reflecting an enduring trend in phenomenology.¹⁰ In sum, materialism is frequently portrayed as some combination of stupidity and wickedness – "dead matter," "mechanical, lifeless matter," "brutish matter" or – which is not the same, as we shall see – as evil itself, as in Hugo's verse which forms the epigraph of this essay: "evil is matter itself. Dark tree, fatal fruit," versus a varying combination of Life, Value and Freedom.

¹⁰ One thinks also of Husserl's war against positivism, his bizarre ten-year plans to refound each science on a new eidetic basis as a science of essences, his rants against laboratories and "experimental fanatics" (Husserl, 1910-1911, p. 304); cf. also the "scientistic fanaticism" of our time (ibid., p. 338).

Faced with this situation, some twentieth-century thinkers sought to introduce materialism into the history of philosophy, from Althusser onwards – and one should not confuse this more sophisticated project¹¹ with the older diktats of ‘dialectical materialism’ or the more dogmatic attempts to present, e.g. Helvétius or Diderot as heroes of a kind of class struggle in philosophy *avant la lettre* (a classic instance of which is Plekhanov, 1934). Or one can seek to historicize the practice of the history of philosophy itself, in order to detect its Kantian (and otherwise idealistic) leanings (Haakonssen, 2006). Here my aim is more limited: to call attention (historically and philosophically) to *three distinctive features* of materialism in the period and particular intellectual constellation called the Radical Enlightenment, in order to draw some conclusions about its purportedly immoral character.

2 Three features of vital materialism

First, I emphasize that matter here is *vital* rather than stupid or mechanistic – much more like Pope’s “quick, and bursting into birth,” or Diderot’s description of materialism as the most “seductive” or “alluring” philosophy (*Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature*, § LI, in Diderot, 1975-, IX, p. 84). (One might wonder, then, what Cudworth, More and others were targeting; in the English context it is of course Hobbesian materialism, which indeed possesses no particular vital emphasis, but even a generation later, the hostile reactions to Julien

¹¹ Jean-Claude Bourdin’s reading of Hegel on materialism, but also of the challenging presence of what we would now call ‘Radical Enlightenment’ materialism within Hegel’s historical presentation of philosophy, is a noteworthy attempt in this regard (Bourdin 1992).

Offray de La Mettrie's *Homme-Machine* insisted equally on its cold, mindless, automatic character – basically a reaction to the title rather than contents of the book, which are a hundred percent organismic, so to speak, with no reduction of organic properties to the more basic properties of inorganic matter.)

But *second*, I note that this vital character does not mean that materialism here loses its *reductionist* character. Consider a representative example, precisely from La Mettrie's *L'Homme-Machine*, as regards the soul:

The soul is just a pointless term of which we have no idea and which a good mind should only use to refer to that part of us which thinks. Given the slightest principle of movement, animate bodies will have everything they need to move, feel, think, repent and in a word, behave in the physical realm as well as the moral realm which depends on it (La Mettrie, 1987, I, p. 98).

Despite the fact that La Mettrie's book is called *Man a Machine* it does not reduce living entities to the status of inanimate machines (Thomson, 1988; Wolfe, 2012). Not only could 'machine' be used in the French of the period to mean 'body'; La Mettrie's reductionism is a reduction *to the organic*. When he speaks of watches and springs – classic mechanist analogies – he is careful to point out that the object of his analysis, the body, is a "self-winding" machine (La Mettrie, 1987, I, p. 69).¹² Notice that this kind of reduction is less focused on the ultimate

¹² Vitalism and mechanism in the period are in fact entirely syncretistic compounds, hybrids of whatever 'pure' form of these concepts might have existed. Two examples: the vitalist physician Ménéuret speaks of the "human machine" as "a harmonious *composite of various springs*, each of which is impelled by its own motion but (which) all concur in the general motion" (Ménéuret, 1765, p. 435b, emphasis mine); the anti-

nature of the space-time world and its physical components, and more on particular identities such as brain-mind or body-soul – which happen to be more ‘embodied’ or vital.

Third, that this form of materialism is vital without losing sight of its demystificatory, reductionist aims leads, in my analysis to a third distinctive feature: it displays a ‘Rabelaisian’ tendency (in the sense analysed in Bakhtin, 1984, of an impulse to reveal ‘lower’, corporeal and/or affective urges at the root of ‘higher’ socio-cultural formations) to *laugh at humanity*, particularly at social and ethical norms – a far cry from the materialism of D.M. Armstrong or David Lewis, in the twentieth century. That this form of materialism laughs at norms can also be termed its ‘Democritean’ heritage, as discussed below (with reference to the figure of Democritus as the laughing philosopher). And thereby, it is not such a stranger to ethics, although it tends to be the enemy of social stability. As La Mettrie wrote presciently, “he who chooses man as an object of study must expect to have man as an enemy” (*Discours sur le bonheur*, in La Mettrie, 1987, II, p. 269).

In other words, the excitement surrounding Radical Enlightenment materialism, even if it is not *strictly* unique to the period (one thinks of the impact of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*), is nevertheless quite distinct from materialism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where it seems to be something of an *ancilla scientiae*, a ‘valet’ of and conceptual clarifier for successful science. The materialism at issue here has an *ideological* but also an *affective* component which (a) is a *differentia specifica* of the Radical Enlightenment and (b) may, at least partly, put the lie to the enduring vision that materialism either is not an ethics, or is immoral.

materialist Abbé Lelarge de Lignac speaks of the “organic resources on which the machine draws for its [self]-preservation” (Lelarge de Lignac, 1760, I, p. 175).

One often reads that “it is impossible to reconcile ethics and materialism” (that quotation is in fact from an early, and important work on Diderot: Mornet, 1941, p. 54). Or, just as blunt but somehow more complex-sounding:

Materialism as a working philosophy, used as a tool in the scientific investigation of the material universe, is appropriate and highly effective. Intended for the objective analysis and description of the world of externals, it yields disastrous results when applied to the inner, subjective world of human nature, human thought, and human emotions (Hill, 1968, p. 90).

In a way, we are still in the paroxysms of anti-materialism that identify matter, or materialism, with radical evil. To mention another famous example, this was also the judgment of Dostoevski in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Ivan, the brother who represents science, reductionism, and the promise of the Enlightenment, is also the one who ushers in the greatest evils of all. Indeed, from Cudworth and – paradoxically, in political terms – Hegel, Engels and Sartre, to Hans Jonas and his disciple, the conservative bioethicist Leon Kass (Kass, 2002), it is rare to find a denunciation of materialism that does not blend the metaphysical (like Raymond Ruyer’s “Le matérialisme est radicalement faux, et faux sous toutes ses formes” [Ruyer, 1930, p. 42]) with the ethical.

Sometimes, faced with this verdict, well-meaning thinkers like Pierre Bayle come up with compromise or hybrid figures such as the ‘virtuous atheist’, namely Spinoza: didn’t he live an exemplary life?¹³

¹³ “Ceux qui ont eu quelques habitudes avec Spinoza, et les paysans du village où il vécut en retraite pendant quelque temps, s’accordent à dire que c’était un homme d’un bon commerce, affable, honnête, officieux, et fort réglé dans ses mœurs” (Bayle, article “Spinoza” in Bayle 1740, IV, p. 257); see also the partly analogous description of Vanini’s

Doesn't this show that it is possible to be a materialist without necessarily being immoral? This is presumably what Diderot had in mind when he reacted thus: "It would seem that libertinage is a necessary consequence of materialism, which doesn't seem to conform in my view with reason or with experience" (Diderot, *Observations sur Hemsterhuis*, in Diderot, 1994, p. 695). Materialism does not have to entail a Sadian pursuit of crimes against nature. Yet there is a problem here, since, even if it is not a *necessary* consequence, it certainly seems like a *possible* consequence (even without equating matter with fallenness and inhumanity, or materialism with "disastrous" applications to "the inner, subjective world of human nature, human thought, and human emotions," as Erita Hill claims). But to his credit, Diderot correctly identifies the real problem.

Amongst the various eighteenth-century accusations against materialism, a typical one was that it reduced man to an automaton, an accusation made by Emperor Frederick the Great himself (whose patronage of La Mettrie did not imply full agreement with his views, in any case):

The principle of fatalism [*fatalité*] has dire consequences for society; if we grant it, we must consider men to be only machines, some made for vice, some for virtue – neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy on their own, and thus unable

virtuous life and death in § 182 of the *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, in Bayle, 1737, p. 117 (also § 174, p. 111); Israel, 2001, ch. 18; more focus on Spinoza and Bayle in Dagron, 2009, 193f. Diderot's version of the virtuous atheist is presented in his late 'tale', the *Entretien avec la Maréchale de **** (Diderot, 1994, p. 929f.).

to be punished or rewarded: this eats away at morals, proper living and the foundations on which society rests.¹⁴

More precisely, the ‘automaton’ danger implied the charge of immoralism for the eighteenth century (when we worry today, or perhaps more frequently in the 1950s-1960s, about the effects of automation or the interplay between robotic labor and human labor, we do not normally think of immoralism as part of the problem). Immoralism was the real danger for apologeticists and other anti-materialists,¹⁵ for at least two reasons. First, because this was indeed an obvious consequence of the theory, as Diderot himself recognized. Second, because it was a consequence *embraced by* at least one prominent contemporary of Diderot’s: La Mettrie (to whom we can add the Marquis de Sade in the later decades of the century, unknown to Diderot; Sade actually considered La Mettrie to be one of his greatest predecessors, going so far as to compose a philosophical poem called “La Vérité,” The Truth ... and attribute its authorship to La Mettrie¹⁶). La Mettrie, in addition to claiming the term ‘materialist’ as a self-description, led, like some other contemporaries such as Radicati, a life marked by a (courageous? foolhardy?) willingness to embrace

¹⁴ Frédéric II, “Examen critique du *Système de la nature*” (1770), in Frederick II, 1985, p.393. For a similar charge see also Bergier, 1769, I, pp. 282, 458; discussion in Citton, 2006, p. 175.

¹⁵ For some fascinating analysis of the ‘enemies of materialism’ in this period, see Chouillet, ed., 1993 and Masseau, 2000.

¹⁶ ‘La Vérité, pièce trouvée parmi les papiers de La Mettrie’ (1787), in Sade, 1986. However, La Mettrie’s medical stance makes him explicitly amoral (or, concerned with an ethics of pleasure to which the doctor can contribute knowledge of the body); Sade is more of a reverse moralist, as has been said at least since Adorno & Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In ‘La Vérité’ he speaks of ‘insulting Nature’ (Sade, 1986, p. 553). Francine Markovits has also observed that in his works on pleasure such as *L’Art de jouir*, La Mettrie, contrary to Sade, does not put forth any ‘combinatorics of pleasure’.

radicalism, entailing a particularly sharp path of flight from persecution, first from France to Holland, then from Holland to Potsdam, at the court of Frederick II – a decision which we might see as desperate, and thus understandable, but was held against him by other materialists such as Diderot, who felt that seeking shelter from a despotic ruler was a direct contradiction to their values.

Before we turn to Diderot's reaction, La Mettrie's embrace of immoralism, but also its social and political ramifications, needs to be made clearer. I will suggest, somewhat dialectically, that its hedonistic, 'swinish' brutality does not exhaust the ethical options available to the vital materialist in the Radical Enlightenment (notably, because some of these have adumbrations of either a 'sympathy' theory, and/or a Spinozist, relational ontology in which we are both cognitively and metaphysically interlinked with the rest of humanity, and thereby not solitary 'wolves' or 'swine'). Yet this brutality, in its Democritean-Rabelaisian ramifications, is *also* a constitutive materialist 'mode of access' to the ethical.

3 La Mettrie and Diderot: aporias of materialist hedonism

La Mettrie's ethics, as presented in his *Discours sur le Bonheur* or *Anti-Sénèque*, is hedonistic, including in the non-traditional sense (consonant with his overall medical materialism) that it is about us organic beings, who can be understood better by the doctor than by the traditional moralist. He thinks the only kind of happiness we can pursue is an "organic, automatic happiness" ("le bonheur organique, automatique ou naturel," La Mettrie, 1987, II, p. 244) rather than what we might call an ideological happiness. That is, he rejects what he calls the "privative happiness" of the Stoics (p. 239), which consists in

fearing nothing and desiring nothing; its chief figures, in his view, are Seneca and Descartes. Privative happiness is opposed to “organic, automatic or natural” happiness, which is natural because “our soul has nothing to do with it,” and organic because it “derives from our *organisation*” (p. 244). This happiness is automatic in the sense that it obeys the laws of operation of our ‘machine’ – which, as I have indicated above, is not to be confused with an ordinary mechanism, like a watch; but this does not make our behavior any more free, *stricto sensu*. Worse, it leads to a particular kind of determinism of our *urges*: “Wallow in filth like pigs and you will be happy like pigs” (La Mettrie, 1987, II, p. 286); of course, the subtle issue then becomes, what is the status of ‘like’ here? Is there room for what Mill was to call ‘higher pleasures’? Regardless, it was this aspect which particularly incensed his contemporaries (and delighted Sade).

La Mettrie was the object of an enormous amount of hostility, in his lifetime and up until the present. In addition to these proclamations about living like pigs, to which we can add a variety of other statements about the impossibility of really judging criminals, and the necessity of following our impulses (“these unfortunate ones . . . were driven by a fatal necessity”: “we are not criminals by following the primitive motions which govern us, any more than the Nile is criminal when it floods”¹⁷), that La Mettrie died eating (or rather pursuant to a very abundant meal of an entire “pheasant pasty filled with truffles,” as described by Voltaire to Richelieu in a letter of November 13th, 1751, two days after La Mettrie’s death), was one obvious proof that materialism was a philosophy for pigs. As late as 1969, his work was described as a “cynical appeal to gluttonery, to libation, to the complete plenitude of the belly” (Velluz, 1969, p. 112). Indeed, this hostility targeted his ethics

¹⁷ *L’Homme-Machine*, in La Mettrie, 1987, I, p. 92 ; *Système d’Epicure*, § xlvi, in *ibid.*, p. 370.

more than his materialist metaphysics even if much of the rhetoric also focused on the ‘Monsieur Machine’ motif: a French Protestant historian of French literature in the mid-nineteenth century, Sayous, described him as a “lecherous (or sleazy) metaphysician of physical pleasure” (“métaphysicien lubrique de la volupté”¹⁸); the great naturalist Réaumur called him a monster and regrets that he died “in the horizontal position” (Letter to Formey, December 3^d, 1751).

But most important for our purposes is that his fellow materialist Diderot declared that he “died as he had to die, a victim of his own intemperance and madness; he killed himself by his ignorance of his professed art.”¹⁹ Indeed, Diderot did not just express a judgment of the intemperance of his fellow materialist, as if, perhaps, he (Diderot) was the more authentic Epicurean. He also denounced La Mettrie for claiming that “man was perverse by nature,” for reassuring the evildoer (*scélérat*) that he may commit crimes, and “le corrompu” (we would probably say ‘the pervert’) that he may “pursue his vices.” It is in this sense that La Mettrie was, for Diderot, “an author lacking the first idea of the true foundations of morals, . . . whose principles would . . . ensure immortality for the evildoer” (*Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, II, 6, in Diderot, 1994, pp. 1118-1119).

Now, La Mettrie was not just some prodrome of a dark prophet of desire, like Sade (or a more Pasolinian version of the same, a spokesperson for the libidinal energies of fascism): he was also an exceptionally honest writer, at the expense of his own safety and

¹⁸ Sayous, *Histoire de la littérature française à l'étranger* (1853), cit. Leduc-Fayette, 1979, p. 108.

¹⁹ *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, II, 6, in Diderot, 1994, p. 1119 (see also the *Observations sur Hemsterhuis*, where he calls La Mettrie an “apologist of crime”). For more on La Mettrie’s death see Wolfe, 2006; for more on the Diderot – La Mettrie tension see Kaitaro, 2004.

wellbeing: in the “Discours préliminaire” he composed for the edition of his complete philosophical writings, he declared unambiguously that “the more one is a philosopher, the more one is a bad citizen” (*Discours préliminaire*, in La Mettrie, 1987, I, p. 18). Not only does this hark back to the venerable figure of Socrates; it also perfectly expresses sentiments Diderot had, and on which he wrote about in various places, albeit usually *more hidden* than La Mettrie. Diderot did describe himself as “a monster . . . enough so to coexist ill at ease [*sc.* with others], not monster enough to be exterminated” (fragment now considered to be from a letter to Grimm, 1768, in Diderot, 1955–1970, vol. 3, p. 188n.).

Why is it important that Diderot parts ways with La Mettrie? Was it just mere cowardice? Unfortunately the situation is not that simple. One fairly accepted reading is that it was a tension between reformism and radicalism. That is, Diderot was upset by the nakedness with which La Mettrie expressed their otherwise common radicalism, fueled by a cheerfully destructive materialist project? In fact, there is a socio-political dimension to La Mettrie’s hedonism, which differs markedly from the reformist or revolutionary hopes of Diderot and his fellow radical *Aufklärer*. It is important to grasp that La Mettrie was not a political revolutionary: his is a *matérialisme de cabinet*. Sometimes it could be sarcasm: “I applaud your Laws, your mores, even your Religion, almost as much as I applaud your gallows and your scaffold” (*Discours préliminaire*, in La Mettrie, 1987, I, p. 25). But other times, there is a clearly stated relativism:

Materialists may prove that Man is but a Machine, but the people will never believe it.

To which he adds a footnote:

What harm would there be, if they [*sc.* the people] did believe it? Thanks to the severity of the laws, they could be Spinozists, without society having to fear the destruction of its altars,

which is where this hardy system appears to lead (*Discours préliminaire*, in La Mettrie, 1987, I, p. 20).

Moderates like Voltaire dislike the entire package: he observed after La Mettrie's death that "There is a great deal of difference between fighting the superstitions of man and breaking the social bond and the chains of virtue" (Voltaire to Richelieu, January 27, 1752). Let me suggest that the materialist philosopher faced with the ethical is always in a space circumscribed by these two possibilities. The honour of the materialist is that she will always move towards the latter, she will always be *deflationary*, which is the analytic philosopher's word for *destructive*. Even Adorno notices this: "Der Materialismus hat prinzipiell eine demaskierende Tendenz."²⁰

So why did Diderot attack La Mettrie? Diderot's angst is that he agreed with the materialism (indeed, with the more specifically organic materialism and its frequent appeals to medicine as a source of explanations of human behavior and norms: it was not La Mettrie but Diderot who wrote, "it is quite difficult to be a good metaphysician and a good moralist, without being an anatomist, a naturalist, a physiologist and a physician"²¹) but could not stomach the ethics and especially the relativism – although in the *Encyclopédie* entry 'Locke' Diderot defends the hypothesis of thinking matter, *also by emphasizing that* even if this hypothesis turned out to be true, it would change nothing in the workings of our juridical and social institutions.²²

Diderot, too, thinks we are flesh-and-blood creatures with drives and urges, and that the 'blood that flows in our veins' (to use a popular image of the time, which both La Mettrie and Diderot employ)

²⁰ *Philosophische Terminologie* II, 1974, p. 172, cit. in Benítez, 1996, p. 307.

²¹ *Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé L'Homme*, in Diderot, 1994, p. 813..

²² Diderot, 1975- VII, pp. 714-715, as noted in Nakagawa, 1995, p. 28.

determines whether we will be a saint or a murder, a genius or a fool. When reading the manuscript *De l'homme* by the Dutch scientist (and Platonist) Franz Hemsterhuis, he wrote in the margin “Wherever I read *soul*, I replace it with *man* or *animal*”; he also gave a succinct statement of his embodied reductionism as “the action of the soul on the body is the action of one part of the body on another, and the action of the body on the soul is again that of one part of the body on another.”²³ There is an explicit Lucretian background here, notably to the discussion of ‘material soul’ in *De rerum natura*. For instance, Lucretius describes how, just as the scent of incense cannot be removed from the incense without its essence perishing, similarly the essence of the soul or mind cannot be extracted from the body without everything dissolving. They live, Lucretius says, of one life (III, 327-330). In an anonymous French work from the 1720s entitled *L'Âme Matérielle*, this is rendered in a more crisp form, closer to Diderot: “the soul is to the body as scent is to incense” (“L’âme est au corps comme l’odeur à l’encens,” Anon., 2003, p. 174).

However, Diderot allows much room for our ‘modifiability’, as he calls it: our corrigibility by institutions and overall affective environment. While he is by no means a theorist of sympathy as a defining feature of our moral psychology, like Hume or Smith, Diderot has a strongly social concept of self, more so than La Mettrie: “He who has studied himself, will have advanced in the knowledge of others, given, I think, that there is no virtue which is foreign to the wicked, nor vice foreign to the good” (*Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron*, in Diderot, 1994, p. 1103). Diderot’s vital materialism is more concerned with taking into account our ‘sentiments for others’, which brings to mind sympathy – a concept he uses, yet he almost never makes the

²³ Diderot, *Observations sur Hemsterhuis*, in Diderot, 1994, p. 734; *Éléments de physiologie*, in Diderot, 1975-, XVII, pp. 334-335.

move from an older, organic concept of ‘sympathies’²⁴, to a ‘Scottish Enlightenment’ focus on the moral psychology of sympathy.

We could say Diderot has more of a *relational* ontology, both in general and when it comes to the individual. This will prove to be an important conceptual resource for materialism as faced with the challenge of ethics, as we shall see below. But, as I suggested earlier, among the core characteristics of Radical Enlightenment materialism are also its unique brand of reductionism, which is not to be understood as a mere facilitator of scientific practice. And this uniquely corporeal reductionism is hard to separate from the darker side of the issue, which Diderot dislikes.

The Diderot – La Mettrie ‘debate’ is essentially about the key aporias of the Radical Enlightenment when it comes to ethics and materialism, but there is of course a third figure who represents something of a *terminus ad quem* or limit-case for the excesses of materialist radicalism in ethics: the Divine Marquis as Apollinaire called him: Sade. Following a now-established interpretive line that runs from Klossowski, Adorno and Bataille onto Simone de Beauvoir, Lacan, Angela Carter and Annie Le Brun, Sade can be seen as the actualization of a certain limit-possibility in the Enlightenment. In fact, Sade is a tricky character in this regard, for he effectively seeks to blend what I

²⁴ Cf. the *Encyclopédie* entry “SYMPATHIE (*Physiolog.*)” by De Jaucourt: “Il s'agit ici de cette communication qu'ont les parties du corps les unes avec les autres, qui les tient dans une dépendance, une position, une souffrance mutuelle, et qui transporte à l'une des douleurs, les maladies qui affligent l'autre. Il est vrai pourtant que cette communication produisait aussi quelquefois par le même mécanisme un transport, un enchaînement de sensations agréables. La sympathie, en physique anatomique, est donc l'harmonie, l'accord mutuel qui règne entre diverses parties du corps humain par l'entremise des nerfs, merveilleusement arrangés, et distribués pour cet effet” (Jaucourt, 1765, p. 736a). The vast majority of occurrences of the term in the *Encyclopédie* are in a medical or chemical sense.

am calling the reductionist dimension with a kind of transcendental dimension, a negative theology, as Blanchot and Klossowski pointed out in the post-war years (Blanchot, 1949/1963; Klossowski, 1947/1967).

4 From the libertine to the laughing philosopher: a possible ethics?

Consider the figure of the libertine. The libertine (i) borrows from proper materialist boilerplate on atoms, molecules, the electric fluid flowing within us (“pleasure is just the encounter of pleasurable atoms ... setting fire to the electric particles in our nerves,” our bodies are “electrified by libertinage”: *Histoire de Juliette*, in Sade, 1998, pp. 482, 184), (ii) suddenly turns this against nature with great vehemence (sodomy, all forms of non-reproductive sexuality), yet in the name of a kind of great abstract Nature with a capital N, a destructive nature, *mère marâtre* – and (iii) realizes that this has left no room for himself as an agent of destruction, and hence screams with pain and rage.

However (contrary to Klossowski), the operative issue in my view is not the theology of the Supreme Being in Wickedness, but rather how far the Radical Enlightenment can go on its immoralist journey or better put, how far it can take its constitutive materialism in an immoralist direction – precisely what horrified figures like Rousseau and Kant, who in that sense do belong to a ‘Moderate Enlightenment’. To be sure, Spinoza, La Mettrie, Diderot, Sade and Democritus ‘redivivus’ do not all teach us something uniform and consistent about materialism and the ethical (witness the tension even between Diderot and La Mettrie), but their example makes for a very different Enlightenment narrative from that emphasizing liberal, representative democracy, rights, republicanism and so on (see Negri’s invigorating remarks on what he calls Spinoza’s “anti-modernity,” Negri, 2004) – a

more ‘Kantian-Habermasian’ narrative which curiously seems to have become predominant in Israel’s later writings.

The question is not whether La Mettrie, Diderot or Sade is right (after Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse and current appeals to a ‘politics of affects’ [Negri, 1997; Citton and Lordon, eds., 2008], the jury is still out) but that materialism has a necessarily destructive component, or drive, or persona. It is important to notice, even if I can only mention this briefly, that this *destructive* moment, what Flaubert called “the cruelty of the anatomist” (“c’est une cruauté d’anatomiste mais on a fait des progrès dans les sciences et il y a des gens qui dissèquent un cœur comme un cadavre” – in fact an old topos: one eighteenth-century critic of Locke’s doctrine of personal identity, Matthew Prior, complained that Locke had “cut up” the soul “like an Anatomy”²⁵), is not merely a moment of stating a formula as in classical reductionism, so that our subjective qualitative experience of things is replaced with a nice, impersonal third-person statement, as in ‘Heat is the more or less violent agitation of molecules’. If it were so, this would not be negligible: it would count as a major articulation of naturalism; it would be ‘science-friendly’. But the materialist shouldn’t be content with this. If she is, then materialism will remain in the (legitimate, but restricted) role of a kind of handmaiden of science, an ideological bulldog in the fights with the enemies of science – except, and here La Mettrie’s fate is really quite telling, the materialist is always sacrificed very quickly in these conflicts where, from Cudworth, Newton, Samuel Clarke and John Ray to William Paley and John Hedley-Brooke, we are always reminded that science does not itself countenance atheism.

If the reductive and destructive moment is neither just an apology of crime nor an ontological reduction to primary qualities or otherwise

²⁵ Flaubert, 1837, in Flaubert, 1925, p. 254; Prior, *A Dialogue between Mr. John Lock and Seigneur de Montaigne*, 1721, in Prior, 1971, vol. 1, p. 622.

manageable physical entities and processes, what is it? Recall our brief allusions to the figure of Democritus, the laughing philosopher, and La Mettrie's bravado in declaring "he who chooses man as an object of study must expect to have man as an enemy" (*Discours sur le bonheur*, in La Mettrie, 1987, II, p. 269). Elsewhere I have tried to analyse this figure of the laughing philosopher as the specifically materialist approach to the ethical (Wolfe, 2007). One should bear in mind that our ability to laugh has sometimes been presented as a unique mark of the human, precisely, over and against a cold, mechanical, inhuman universe. As La Mettrie could have said to complicate matters when he was challenged, if we are just machines, what about laughter? Or: yes, we are just machines, but machines that laugh. The figure of Democritus as the laughing philosopher appears in one notable philosophical context, a letter from Spinoza to his correspondent Henry Oldenburg:

If this celebrated ancient who laughed at everything were alive today, he would undoubtedly die of laughter. For my part, these troubles neither make me laugh, nor make me cry; they incite me instead to philosophize and observe human nature better. For I do not feel that I have the right to mock nature, or even more, to complain about it, for I think that human beings, like all other beings, are just a part of Nature (letter 30, in Spinoza, 2002, p. 844).

That Spinoza wants to distinguish himself from the 'ridentes', the laughing one, is clear and a well-known point. But we should reflect on what this laughter implies: it is founded on naturalism – we are all parts of Nature – but instead of simply flowing into, say, a program for scientific investigation, it takes the form of a disturbing, destabilizing affect. Antonio Negri, a celebrated reader of Spinoza, has made much the same point in a different vocabulary: "laughter indicates the territory across which power, that is, the ontological dynamic towards the real, extends," and he contrasts this 'power' with the way the

Romantics “turned laughter into irony” (Negri, 2009, pp. 59-60, note C; translation modified).

Laughter here is not just some psychological or cultural phenomenon (nor a sign of human uniqueness). Rather, it is *reductionist laughter*. In a different letter, to the Gorcum magistrate Hugo Boxel, who was pestering Spinoza because of his (Boxel’s) firm belief in the existence of ghosts, Spinoza cites Democritus explicitly: “The authority of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates carries little weight with me. I should have been surprised if you had produced Epicurus, Democritus, Lucretius or one of the atomists . . .” (letter 56, in Spinoza, 2002, p. 903). That indicates that the difference between Spinoza and Democritus when it came to superstitions (in this example) was fairly non-existent. This reductionist laughter has political significance: Democritus served not only as a defender of the Enlightenment against all kinds of superstitions but was associated with social reform and revolutions, particularly during the French Revolution. We possess, from that period, a “Democritean hymn,” sung by the Francophile faction in Leiden to the tune of the Marseillaise, which ends on these unforgettable lines: “Strong be our link with France’s free terrain!/Democritus’s good cheer must never, never wane!”²⁶ Indeed, Democritean good cheer is also Bakhtin’s laughter that ‘lowers and materializes’ (Bakhtin, 1964, Introduction; discussion in Wolfe, 2007). Contrast this laughter from below with more ‘holistic’ praise for, literally, the top-down view (here, from the noted theoretical biologist Robert Rosen):

²⁶ Anon., *Democritische Feestzangen, bij der eerste verjaaring der Revolutie van het Jaar 1795* [n.p.], p. 37: “Steeds beloeyj' ons vast Verbond met Frankrijks vrij gebied!/Hoezeel (bis) nooit flauw' de pret in't vrolijk Democriet!” (bis), cited in Lüthy, 2000, p. 460.

No one likes to come down from the top of a tall building, from where vistas and panoramas are visible, and inspect a windowless basement. We know, intellectually, that there could be no panoramas without the basement, but emotionally, we feel no desire to look at it directly; indeed, we feel an aversion. Above all, there is no beauty; there are only dark corners and dampness and airlessness. It is sufficient to know that the building stands on it, that its supports, its pipes and plumbing are in place and functioning (Rosen, 1991, p. 39).

That the materialist laughs at human norms and values – at the fascination with “vistas and panoramas” – is different to simply reducing them to something more inert and formulaic, as became more common in the nineteenth century, e.g., Hyppolite Taine’s “vice and virtue are products just like vitriol and sugar” (Taine, 1863, I, introduction, p. xv): every complex datum emerges out of the encounter of other more basic data on which it depends (the atomistic moment), or more (in)famously, the German ‘vulgar materialist’ Carl Vogt stating that

all the properties we refer to as the activity of the soul are just functions of cerebral substance, and to put this more crudely, *thought is (more or less) to the brain what bile is to the liver and urine to the kidneys*. It is absurd to allow for an independent soul using the brain as an instrument...²⁷

or “What we call the soul is simply the set of functions of the central nervous system.”²⁸ The materialist is not (just) the anatomist of the

²⁷ Vogt, 1875, pp. 347-348 (Vogt’s 13th Inaugural Lecture at the University of Giessen in 1845). For a similar formulation to Vogt’s (thought=bile) see Cabanis, 1802, p. 151.

²⁸ “L’origine de l’homme,” *La Revue Scientifique* 12 (1877), p. 1058, cit. in Pont, 1998, p. 142.

heart or soul, à la Flaubert. That is, the radicality of reduction I am speaking of is not wholly synonymous with a kind of positivist neutrality, like the “indispensable inhumanity” recommended by the surgeon William Hunter, with respect to the value of vivisection and experimentation overall.²⁹

Thereby, materialist laughter (or laughing materialism), not being a project to find *the* bio-chemical (neuronal, hormonal, genetic, etc.) formula or explanation for behavior, consciousness, morals, etc., also does not bind us in the “blind causal chains” in which Sartre thought materialism imprisoned us (Sartre, 1990, p. 86). We may not want to be materialists about ethics, but it should be harder at this point to claim either that Enlightenment materialism was “mechanistic materialism,” or that it was incapable of dealing the inner life of thought and emotion, or that the emergence of modern science meant, as Horkheimer suggested, that “Nature lost every vestige of vital independent existence, all value of its own. It became dead matter – a heap of things” (Horkheimer, 1996, p. 359). Further, to laugh at superstition – or, less brightly, to acknowledge the limited control we have over our organic impulses – is different from literally being *blind to value*. This is different from simply claiming that materialism opens onto a Necropolis, a universe of dead matter, although we might surmise that it is a more subtle descendent of the latter view.

For instance, Raymond Ruyer, an idiosyncratic French philosopher of science of the 1940s-1960s whose influence on Deleuze means that he is being rediscovered today, suggests a thought-experiment in an article entitled ‘What is Living and What is Dead in Materialism’, which has gone rather unnoticed (it appeared in 1933...). Imagine a law court as seen through the eyes of a materialist: “The halo of meanings, essences

²⁹ On this see Steintrager, 2004, p. 64; Chamayou, 2008, p. 78.

and values,” in other words, everything relevant about the scene, vanishes, and what is left is the “functioning of a sort of complicated mechanics” whereby brains produce articulations, which in turn generate vibrations in the air, and thereby modify other nervous systems (Ruyer, 1933, p. 28). Everything takes place in the present, which is made up of strictly quantifiable events; psychological or social reality is an emanation which can always be reduced to physical processes. Basically, materialism is a strange kind of reductionism which denies the reality of social institutions, values, and of course minds. It is curious that both dialectical materialists of the old-fashioned kind (including, for present purposes, Sartre in “Materialism and Revolution”) and spiritualist thinkers such as Ruyer give such an identical portrait of materialism as a historical episode.

Historically, as I hope is clear by now, this portrait of dead materialism misses the vital character of the unique Radical Enlightenment formation we are interested in here. *Ethically*, it misses both the flesh-and-blood determinism of a La Mettrie and the more open organic vision of a Diderot, with its intimations of sympathy and affectivity. (La Mettrie himself, in his willingness to blur the boundary between animals and humans and thus to deny that we should be considered in either sanctified or secular-sanctified terms as somehow bearers of the Moral Law, can also write affectively, in one of the various ‘wild child’ stories he makes use of: “We now know that there are in Poland kind mother bears who steal newborn babies left on church doorsteps by careless wetnurses, and raise them with as much affection and kindness as if they were their own children” [*Système d’Épicure*, § xxxv, in La Mettrie, 1987, I, p. 365]). But *metaphysically*, the dead materialism accusation misses something important, in addition: the ontology of relations.

5 Materialism as an ontology of relations

The radical Benedictine monk Dom Léger-Marie Deschamps, author of a massive atheist and materialist tract that was unpublished in the eighteenth century but that Diderot saw and admired, put forth what is probably the most extensive Spinozist ontology in the Enlightenment. (Diderot wrote to Sophie Volland on August 31, 1769 speaking of Deschamps as an “apostle of materialism,” and, perhaps intimidated by the systematic character of the monk’s work, ends with a ironic twist, smirking at Deschamps’s belief that the “eternal order of Nature” could serve as a “sanction” for laws: Diderot, 1955-1970, vol IX, p. 123). In his systematic work (the word is in the title) *La Vérité ou le vrai Système* (begun 1761, resumed and completed between 1770 and his death in 1774), Deschamps put forth an independently generated Spinozist metaphysics – something he felt materialism lacked in his time – in which “everything is composed mutually and ceaselessly in the whole” (Deschamps, 1993, p. 404), “bodies are constantly incorporating one another” (p. 382), such that “an entity is nothing other than the action of other entities upon it, and reciprocally, its action upon them” (p. 345); “there is nothing that it does not contribute to composing, no composition it does not participate in” (p. 227).

As Spinoza was probably the first to see (and the deepest), the experience that we belong to a fully causal universe, that we are parts (‘modes’) in this universe and nothing more (parts of Nature, as he wrote to Oldenburg) can also be extraordinarily liberating, in comparison with the inwardness or solitude emphasized by, amongst others, thinkers in a Cartesian vein. This kind of liberation was described quite well by Derek Parfit, in a personal-confessional mode, referring to the change that came over him once he began thinking about people in a reductionist way:

Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that my existence was such a further fact [like a soul or something existing separately from one's experiences], I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others (Parfit 1985, p. 281).

This is what Spinoza describes as 'common notions', which make our persons – and, I might add, our minds – *common*. Common notions are conceptions of things “which are common to all” (*Ethics* II, proposition 38). There are common notions shared between bodies, and the more I ‘have’ or ‘know’ them, the more I have adequate knowledge of body, and more materialistically, the more my body has in common with other bodies, the more my mind is capable of perceiving things adequately (*ibid.*, proposition 39). The common notions allow us to step beyond the consideration of singular things and see (some of) the greater causal network beyond us: we then see how finite modes are produced by an infinite substance. If this sounds far removed from Diderot, consider this passage from an unpublished review he wrote in 1771:

the moral world is so intimately tied to the physical world that it appears both are really one and the same machine. You were an atom in this great whole, time will reduce you to an atom in this great whole. Along the way, you have undergone a variety of metamorphoses . . . most importantly, that in which you walk on two feet, the only one which is accompanied by consciousness, the only one in which you constitute, through the memory of your successive actions, an individual called

myself. Act so that this self will be honored and respected, by itself, by those who coexist with it, and by those who shall come later.³⁰

Of course, Diderot is adding here an anthropological dimension, that of the constitution of the person; but this is not foreign to Spinoza either.

6 Conclusion: on the possibility (and difficulty) of an Enlightenment materialist ethics

The materialist need not, then, restrict his or her ethical purview to “wallowing in filth like pigs” (La Mettrie) or resigning herself to her monstrosity (Diderot), if not downright applauding it (Sade). She can embrace a Spinozist ontology of relations (Morfino, 2006), which makes the “walls of [our] glass tunnels disappear” (Parfit). And in this universe of interrelation and “constant composition” (Deschamps), there is room for praise and blame of the particular ‘ratio of motion and rest’ “which is accompanied by consciousness,” the only one in which the individual constitutes, through the memory of actions “an individual called *myself*” (Diderot again).

However, a normative ethics is ruled out, of course. To return to the Diderot – La Mettrie tension for a moment, we can easily imagine that La Mettrie, by writing the *Discours sur le Bonheur* (which began life as an *Anti-Seneca* produced despite the best intentions of Maupertuis, who

³⁰ Diderot, *Dieu et l'homme* (a review of Pierre-Louis Sissous de Valmire, *Dieu et l'homme*, Amsterdam (Troyes), 1771, intended for the *Correspondance littéraire* but unpublished, in Diderot, 1975-, XX, pp. 655-656.

had secured him a contract to write a biography of Seneca in the hopes of downplaying his fellow *malouin's* bad reputation), gleefully affirms this destruction of normativity. Diderot is less cheerful:

I am convinced that, even in as badly ordered a society as ours, where the success of vice is often applauded, whereas the failure of virtue is ridiculed – I am convinced, then, that the best way for us to achieve happiness is by doing good; this is the most important and interesting work, which I shall recall with the greatest satisfaction in my final moments. It is a question I've meditated on a hundred times . . . ; I had all the data I needed; should I admit this? I never even dared take up my pen to write the first line. I said to myself: if I do not emerge victorious from this attempt, I shall become the apologist of wickedness, I will have betrayed the cause of virtue, and encouraged man towards vice. No, I do not feel up to this sublime labor; I would devote my life to it, pointlessly (*Refutation of Helvétius*, in Diderot, 1994, p. 832).

Diderot wanted to write a work of moral philosophy but abandoned the project because if it had not been (intellectually) successful, he feared that he would then become an “apologist of wickedness,” thereby betraying “the cause of virtue”; contrary to La Mettrie or Sade, he did not want to ensure “the immortality of the evildoer.”³¹ Diderot might have derived some comfort from Locke, for whom it is by no means a failure to not write moral philosophy, but instead, a positive ethical sign. Locke wrote, in his recommendations for the education of the son of his friend Lady Peterborough, that the young man should read Livy (for history), along with geography and the study of morality. But, he explained, “*I mean not the ethics of the schools,*” but rather Tully (i.e.

³¹ Diderot, *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, in Diderot, 1994, p. 832; *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, II, 6, in Diderot, 1994, p. 1119.

Cicero), Pufendorf, Aristotle and “above all the New Testament,” wherein “a man may learn how to live which is the business of ethics, and not how to define and distinguish and dispute about the names of virtue and vice.”³² Works of professional moral philosophy were the worst way to go. But Diderot did write brilliant works in which a (home-grown, constructed) Spinozism is at work, also integrating the new discoveries and conceptual shifts in the life sciences (Wolfe, 2012).

Yet if we only emphasize this openness to relations and transformation, we miss or omit the shocking component, the ‘*destructive moment*’ as I have called it. For if we seek to hygienically isolate the La Mettrie situation as a ‘mad dog’ episode of materialism, we lose sight of what is unique in the reductionism. From Lucretius, Hobbes and La Mettrie onto Cabanis, Vogt and the Churchlands, reductionism is not something the materialist keeps in a closet. And as noted, the reductionism here is corporeal, or even carnal – but qua reductionism (whether from soul to body, from free will to organic determinism, or from values and norms to medico-materialist concepts), its presence implies that the specifically vital dimension should not, conversely, be taken in the direction of a kind of holist vitalism “markedly at odds with the universalizing discourse of Encyclopedist materialism, with its insistence on the uniformity of nature and the universality of physical laws” (Williams, 2003, p. 177); vital materialism is still materialism. And in its radical dimension, it is capable of laughing at humanity (Democritus, La Mettrie). Presumably, only warm-blooded creatures with hearts, livers, brains and therefore emotions, do laugh.

³² Locke to Cary Mordaunt, 1697, first reproduced in King 1829, pp. 5-6, also cit. in Ashcraft 1991, p. 235, emphasis mine; much the same idea is present in Locke, *Thoughts Concerning Education*, § 185 and *Reasonableness of Christianity*, §§ 241-242.

Of course, not all materialists would agree with this emphasis on the *biological*, since it seems to perturb the standard identification of materialism with physicalism; some reduce all causes to physical causes, like Hobbes and d'Holbach. But, to put it briefly, what this 'biologism' allows for is a combination of the power of reductionist explanation and a recognition of the 'unpredictability' of Life – a kind of *matérialisme aléatoire*, the classical figure of which was the monster (Wolfe, 2005). Unlike, say, the teratologist Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire in the early 1800s, Diderot does not seek to demystify the ontological status of monsters by providing a quantitative analysis of their parts and the processes of generation which brought them about. Instead, he remains fascinated by their *destabilizing* potential, as wholly natural beings who are also *contra naturam*.

Radical Enlightenment materialism is more of an 'uncertain materialism' (*matérialisme aléatoire*, in the late Althusser's phrase: Althusser, 1994, 2005) than a search for laws of nature and other forms of ultimate order. Yet its destructive, destabilizing tendencies – its "demaskierende Tendenz," in Adorno's words – are not always foreign to the project we might call 'science': La Mettrie memorably calls for what we would today think of as the recognition of clinical (whether bodily and/or psychiatric) factors in judging the actions of a criminal: "It would doubtless be desirable for there to be only excellent Doctors to serve as Judges, for only they could distinguish the innocent from the guilty criminal" (*L'Homme-Machine*, in La Mettrie, 1987, I, p. 91). But doesn't this only serve as a temporary way of distinguishing between individuals, condemned to sink back into the organic 'piggishness' we saw earlier? Not if the materialist appeals to a Spinozist, relational ontology. Nor if she reflects on our existence as affective beings. Machines don't laugh, and laughter at norms is not synonymous with delectation in crime.

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