

## Denis Diderot and the importance of the Encyclopédie Française

The so-called French Encyclopaedia, or even the Reasoned Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Crafts, was the result of a long, arduous and bold effort of research, writing and organisation undertaken by Diderot and D'Alembert, led by approximately 160 collaborators, between 1747 and 1772. The first year corresponds to the signing of the contract with the booksellers Le Breton, Durand, Davi and Briasson. The second one marks the edition of the last volume, the twenty-eighth, 17 of which are devoted to texts (the last ones were published in 1766) and 11 to prints (a total of 2,885 illustrated plates).

The text volumes contain, on average, 950 folio pages each, divided into two columns, totalling about 72,000 articles. Some entries are subdivided into general and particular meanings, such as, for example, the word Soul, which has not only a theological meaning, but also expressions such as "soul of plants" and "soul of animals".

Much more than that, however, because of its content, historical importance and purpose, the Encyclopedia is one of the greatest symbols of humanism and Enlightenment hope.

Of humanism because, initially, it recalls and interprets the contributions of the past: "... the purposes of an Encyclopaedia are to bring together the knowledge scattered over the surface of the earth, to expound a general system to contemporaries and to transmit it to those who will come after, in order that the efforts of preceding centuries may not have been useless labours for later centuries; that our descendants, becoming more learned, may also become more virtuous and happy, and that we may not die without having been worthy of the human race" (Diderot, entry *Encyclopaedia*). Now, "the first step to be taken in this research is to examine... the genealogy and filiation of our knowledge, the causes which must have brought it into being and the characteristics which distinguish it: in a word, to go back to the origin and formation of our ideas" (D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*). In the sequel, because it investigates and clarifies the sciences, the techniques and the arts of the time, making man the principle, the centre and the end of knowledge. Hence

the aphorism: "Man is the single term from which we must start and to which everything must return" (Diderot, *Philosophical Thoughts*).

Of the Enlightenment hope because it values reason, the new applied sciences, the enrichment of sensitivity and moral education, without ceasing to recognize the naturalness of the vital forces, which, in synthesis, and using a typical expression of the time, would lead to the desired formation of a *bel esprit*. To conclude by the prevalence of nature as much as by the need for its investigation and mastery was, in Cassirer's opinion, one of the main axes of the Enlightenment. According to him, "nature does not designate only the sphere of physical existence, the material reality in which one would have to distinguish the 'intellectual' or 'spiritual' part. The term does not refer solely to the being of things, but to the origin and foundation of truths. All those truths which are susceptible of an immanent foundation, which do not require any transcendent revelation, those which are in themselves certain and self-evident, belong to nature without prejudice to their content. For these are the truths that make our world a unique world, a cosmos resting on itself, possessing in itself its centre of gravity" (*La Philosophie des lumières*).

Still for Denis, even religion can have no other end "than the knowledge of the essential truths and the practice of the most important duties.... It is in vain to know the duties if I remain stagnant in error or ignorance of the essential truths. It is in vain to know the truths and the duties if the grace to practice them is refused me" (From the *Sufficiency of Natural Religion*). If man is the only entity capable of intellection and consciousness, then knowledge is for him both a primary need and a permanent task of research and improvement, i.e., applicable both to personal existence and to life in society.

The Encyclopedia would therefore have to concretize one of the main propositions of its organizers - that of democratizing knowledge and educating the individuals of the Third Estate. To be, consequently, educational and revolutionary. It is for no other reason that the texts highlight the ardour of a desired combat, from which the zeal of a supposed impartiality is absent. They fight against superstition, against ignorance and ready-made ideas, against social and political injustices, against the dogmas of religions, against vices. And in defence of materialism, vitalism and natural pleasures, of reason, of

scientific experimentation, of crafts and jobs, of progress, of public liberties and virtues. These antithetical values are exemplified by a clever phrase by Diderot: "If reason is a gift from heaven and the same can be said of faith, heaven has given us two incompatible and contradictory gifts". It is up to man, therefore, to make a choice, the same choice that makes the Encyclopaedia a critical and philosophical instrument, based on three faculties that, at least didactically, we can separate in the universe of consciousness: memory, reason and imagination. These columns build a system of knowledge that the alphabetical order, although simpler and more useful for consultation, cannot achieve by itself. Finally, as an auxiliary and innovative instrument, the organizers have introduced intervocabulary references.

Jacques Proust, an authority on the origins and development of the work, reminds us that "in its time, and even if its content was not what it is, the Encyclopédie would certainly have been a truly revolutionary enterprise, as much for the novelty of the conception, the magnitude of the financial and technical means at stake, the extent of the public reached, as for the research of the collaborators, the progressive and sure development of the business and the various dangers faced, not always of ideological or political order" (*Diderot et l'Encyclopédie*).

### *Friends and foes: the battle of the editions*

In 1750, Diderot wrote and distributed the Prospectus, in which he set out the form and aims of the publishing project. Thus, when the first volume appeared in June 1751, the Encyclopedia already had two thousand subscribers. Its vicissitudes, however, were not few.

From the moment of the Prospectus, it suffered the vigorous retort of the Jesuits and their journal *Mémoires de Trevoux*. The first volume provoked debates between Diderot and Father Berthier, the editor of the Company's journal. On the other hand, Diderot's criticisms there of absolutism by divine right, in the term Political Authority, gave him the precious support of important people such as Voltaire, Malesherbes, Montesquieu and Madame de Pompadour, lover of the king and the arts, and enemy of the Jesuits. With the

publication of the second volume, however, the Encyclopaedia and its organisers found themselves caught up in the controversies aroused by the thesis of the Abbot of Prades and the persecutions that followed.

A collaborator of the Encyclopedia, Jean-Martin de Prades had brilliantly defended his doctoral thesis - *Celestial Jerusalem* - at the Sorbonne, on the subject of the foundations of belief - those who make use of natural law and reason and those who accept revelation and its mysteries. A few days later, however, the doctors of the university noticed many similarities between the arguments of the thesis and those contained in Diderot's *On the Sufficiency of Natural Religion*, D'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse* to the Encyclopaedia, and also in the entry *Certainty* in the second volume, written by Prades himself. The thesis was condemned by the Sorbonne and the Pope, and accusations of a plot with the encyclopaedists gained force, until the king's council, on 7 February 1752, ordered the undertaking to be halted for advocating "maxims which tend to destroy royal authority, to establish the spirit of independence and revolt, and, under obscure and equivocal terms, to create the foundations of error, corruption of manners, irreligion and incredulity". Prades took refuge in Berlin and, according to some, Diderot thought it best to go into hiding for a time as well, fearful of returning to prison.

It was at this point that Malesherbes' intervention became decisive for the continuity of the work. Director of the *Librairie*, the government body responsible for evaluating and supervising the kingdom's publications, Malesherbes believed in the freedom of the press, of writing and of opinion as an irreplaceable factor of material progress and cultural development. Through his influence, the council reformulated the first decision, that is, instead of suspending the initiative altogether, it opted for the suppression of the two initial volumes. For Darton W. Thomas (*Diderot, sa vie et son oeuvre*, Ed. Lafont-Ramsay, 1985), it should also be borne in mind that "the jurisprudence of the Ancien Régime was particularly jealous of property rights and this consideration for the prerogatives of subscribers clearly explains why the work was not definitively discontinued". In 1753, the third volume came out, and once again the condemnation of the royal council was instituted, soon abandoned, but without any tacit permission in return. Hence D'Alembert wrote in the third

volume: "The government seemed to wish that an enterprise of this nature should not be abandoned". And so, despite censorship and judicial interdictions (or even because of them), such was the repercussion in Europe that the number of subscriptions had risen in 1757 to four thousand two hundred, while volumes IV, V, VI and VII were being published. Sales reached not only France, but Switzerland, England, Italy and even Russia.

But it was from this moment of greater diffusion that things got complicated again. In volume VII there was an article by D'Alembert about Geneva (with the probable influence of Voltaire), whose content provoked an acid reaction from the Protestant community of the city and from Rousseau. In 1758, the book *De l'Esprit* by Helvétius, a friend of the encyclopaedists and also a patron of the enterprise, raised an even greater scandal than Prades' thesis six years earlier. Radical adherent of sensism and predecessor of what came to be behaviourism, from an educational point of view, the book was considered subversive and linked to the empiricist and materialist ideas of the Encyclopedia, which led the parliament to revoke definitively both letters of privilege and condemn the books to the stake. Subsequently, the Church included the two works in its *index librorum prohibitorum*.

D'Alembert then abandoned the project, falling out with Diderot. The manuscripts in Denis's possession were collected, but, still and always, Malesherbes managed to hide them in his own house. The Academy of Sciences accused the associated booksellers of having plundered the institution's archives by copying the existing plates on the arts and professions.

The work then continued in the shadows, with Le Breton taking on the role of prior censor of the articles, in defiance of Diderot, who resigned from the Encyclopaedia in 1764, unhappy with the situation. Over the next two years, the last ten volumes of texts came out, printed secretly (i.e., without a letter of privilege received), with an address in Neuchâtel (Switzerland).

### *Authors, contributions and studies*

The person who participates in the project - man of letters, doctor, mathematician, artist or craftsman - is a philosophe, in a sense both particular and engaging, as José Bermudo (*La historia de la filosofía en la Enciclopedia*) distinguishes him: "a heterodox, somewhat undisciplined, with a certain dose of irreverence, with much rebellious style, with a well-divided mixture of scepticism and passion. ... open enemy of the political and ecclesiastical powers and with the sole office of showing men that there are ideas that serve to enslave people and others that help to free them". Expressly for Diderot, what characterises a philosophe, among other things, is that he "admits nothing without proof, does not agree with misleading notions and knows how to establish limits between the certain, the probable and the doubtful" (entry Philosophy and Letter to Sophie Volland, 26/09/1762). Therefore, "other men are carried away by their passions, without actions being preceded by reflection; they are men who walk in darkness. Whereas the philosopher, even in his passions, does not act without reflection; he walks in the night, but preceded by a flame" (entry *Philosopher*).

In addition to Diderot and d'Alembert, a dozen intellectuals of great renown and many more unknown to this day participated as authors. Famous names include Voltaire (articles on literature and history), Rousseau (articles on music and that on political economy), the baron d'Holbach (texts on mineralogy, metallurgy and chemistry), Buffon (natural sciences), Quesnay and Turgot (economics), Marmontel (fine arts) and two extraordinarily prolific figures: the illustrator Louis Jacques Goussier, author of 900 boards and 70 articles on drawing and engravings, and the Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, nicknamed "the slave of the Encyclopaedia", who took charge of an astonishing 17,000 entries. A doctor by training, extremely learned, he wrote not only on medical science and techniques, but also on jurisprudence, physics and literature.

To bring this unprecedented and colossal undertaking to fruition, Diderot devoted himself to almost every task envisaged in it. Not only did he organise the system and select entries, but he also hired collaborators and researched craft trades on the spot (to write, among other things, the entry on Arts, in

defence of applied arts). He corrected and made additions to commissioned texts, plagiarised some already published (for which he was sued several times) and wrote his own articles.

During the last two centuries, however, authorship has proved to be a controversial and still not entirely resolved issue. Some of the main reasons: several entries were written by two or more authors, being altered with each contribution; when made, the indications did not follow a single or evident criterion; and through D'Alembert (Preliminary Discourse), it is also known that "among the articles without the authors' marks, there are many made by persons who did not wish to be recognised". Moreover, of the 72,000 meanings contained in the work, some 37,800 remain undetermined.

Initially, the abbots Yvon, Pestré, Prades and Mallet were in charge of everything related to the history of philosophy, and they ended up dedicating themselves to conceptual topics, such as metaphysics, logic and morals. In this way, Diderot himself took over the elaboration of history, whether by taste or necessity (Mallet, for example, died in 1755). It is also D'Alembert who mentions the fact that "the articles which have no letters at the end (i.e., the author's initials), or which have a little star (asterisk), are those of Monsieur Diderot. The first are those which belong to him as one of the authors (among them those devoted to the mechanical or applied arts, since Denis noted down the explanations provided by master craftsmen); *the second are those which he supplied as editor*".

The gradual and more secure recognition has been established by a series of investigations and works, starting with that of his friend, disciple and also encyclopedist Jacques André Naigeon, author of *Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de Denis Diderot* (reissued in Geneva by Slatkine Reprints in 1970), which restores, whenever possible, the original text, or at least its initial intentions, before the censorship action. Among other important studies on the subject we may mention, in chronological order: *The Censoring of Diderot's Encyclopédie and the Re-established Text*, by Douglas Gordon and Norman Torrey (NY, Columbia University Press, 1947); *Le Origini dell'Enciclopedia*, by Franco Venturi (Rome, Einaudi, 1946); *L'Encyclopédie et le Mouvement Encyclopediste*, by Albert Soboul (Paris, Ed. Sociales, 1962);

*Diderot et l'Encyclopédie*, by Jacques Proust (Albin Michel, Paris, 1962); *A List of Contributors to Diderot's Encyclopedia* (French Historical Studies, NY University, 1964); *Les Articles Anonymes de l'Encyclopédie*, by R. Frautschi (Revue Internationale de Philosophie, 103, 1973); *Diderot's Oeuvres Complètes* (directed by J. Fabre, H. Dieckmann, J. Proust and J. Varloot, Hermann Ed, Paris, 1975); *La Historia de la Filosofia en la Enciclopedia*, by José Bermudo (Ed. Horsori, Barcelona, 1987).

### *The collection and some characteristics of Diderot's thought*

This collection, conceived by Jacó Guinsburg and Roberto Romano, translated by Newton Cunha and published for the first time in Portuguese, deals precisely with Diderot's authorial contribution to philosophy and certain related themes.

A total of three volumes have been planned, the first of which gathers together, besides the introductory entries on philosophy, philosopher and philosophy of the Greeks, the schools of Antiquity - scepticism, cynicism, Cyrenaeanism, eclecticism, eleaticism, epicureanism, stoicism, Ionianism, Megara, Pyrrhonism - and of the Italian Renaissance (Bruno, Cardano, Campanella and Telesius).

The second brings together the main authors of Greece and the Renaissance: Aristotle, Bacon, Copernicus, Descartes, Galileo, Heraclitus, Hobbes, Leibniz, Locke, Malebranche, Machiavelli, Newton, Parmenides, Pythagoras, Plato, Socrates, Spinoza, Thomasius.

The latter includes some themes which, alongside the history of philosophy, seem to have been chosen by Diderot himself, since they allowed him, at the time, to express more directly political, aesthetic-cultural and religious opinions on current affairs: soul, arts, political authority, city, citizen, natural right, encyclopaedia, taste (written by four hands, with contributions from Voltaire, Montesquieu and D'Alembert), intolerance, irreligious, peace, satire.

It is worth mentioning that the main sources used by Diderot for his retrospective were Johann Jakob Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae*, published a few years earlier, in 1744, and, less frequently, Deslandes' *Histoire*



*critique de la philosophie*, which appeared in 1737. But in view of his political and cultural interests, Diderot was not shy about seizing upon and reinterpreting information in a passionate or less than impartial manner. Still according to Proust, "the exposition of the philosophical or religious systems of the ancients is but a skilful means of spreading pyrrhonism, atheism and materialism". And we can verify in the following passage a small example of the militant perspective: "Faced with this description (of the Greek schools of philosophy), a natural commentary arises: that after having studied, reflected, written and discussed a great deal, the Greek philosophers finally arrived at Pyrrhonism. Is it then true that man is condemned to learn only one thing and with great difficulty? And that it is his destiny to die without having known anything"? (Encyclopedia, *The Philosophy of the Greeks*). But this Pyrrhonism should not be understood as something absolute, but as something relative to time. Applied indiscriminately, it would be nothing but a method which he himself described as "pusillanimous and doubtful". It was necessary that the men of the century became skeptical of the political, religious, educational or professional conventions already consolidated. Denying and doubting were not only possible but indispensable attitudes for the progress of knowledge and social transformations.

For him, in the construction of knowledge - with all that is most evidently expected of the latter concept - doubt is a necessary moment of philosophical analysis. It is not intended to signify a cognitive impossibility or a point of view according to which we cannot, in fact, know what the world is like. It is rather part of the search for a clear and evident apprehension of facts and of concrete, natural phenomena in correspondence with our representations. For this reason, while congratulating Descartes for his methodical doubt, a strategy that allows him to reconstruct the chaotic edifice of philosophy, he gives the following ironic opinion about him: *Descartes despised the science that is acquired through the senses and, because he was accustomed to being totally enclosed in intellectual ideas, which, although they have some relation among them, do not possess more reality, he walked with great rigor and elegance from error to error.*

At the same time, the construction of knowledge will be better elaborated if it makes use of different ways of seeing and thinking about perceptions and the realities that make them possible. In other words, the most appropriate method for Diderot is still eclecticism. That is why we can read in the opening of his article on the subject: The eclecticist is a philosopher who, trampling on prejudice, tradition, antiquity, universal consent, authority, in a word, everything that subdues the multitude of spirits, dares to think for himself and go back to the clearest general principles, examine them, discuss them, admitting nothing but the testimony of his experience and his reason. It can be seen here that both attitudes complement each other under an inspiration that is at once empirical, realistic, scientific, and enlightening.

Finally, whatever the accusations levelled at Diderot (as a libertine, a thinker without method, a contradictor, a plagiarist or a rationalist paradoxically dominated by his passions), there is no denying that we are dealing with one of the most outstanding, eclectic and courageous intellectuals of the 18th century. And even though this is not the place for a thesis of a philosophical nature, it seems evident to me that his materialist and vitalist ideas prefigure, in numerous passages of his vast work, what Schopenhauer and Nietzsche would develop (the first of them in a more systematic way) in the subsequent century.

For the French philosopher, nature, which is one, has no reasons or justifications other than those of conserving and multiplying itself. This "being thus" of nature, blind and imperious, would correspond, in Schopenhauer's terminology, to the Will (*der Wille*). On the other hand, when Diderot states that "letting oneself be killed proves nothing, only that one is not the strongest" (*Nouvelles pensées philosophiques*), he is equally saying that there are no transcendent values, outside life. At the same time, he presents himself as a harsh critic of Christian conceptions, since, in his opinion, they curb and distort human nature, making it unhappy through the insoluble contradictions between natural being and religious duty. For this reason, "the idea that God does not exist does not make anyone tremble; one trembles rather at the fact that there is one". Now, we know that no one has been as incisive in both conceptions - that of vital values and that of the morality of resentment - as Nietzsche.